



# Penn In Hand

2020-2021



Penn in Hand Literary Magazine

**Penn State Brandywine**

**Founded in 1995**

Issue 26

Editors:

Sanem Dayi

Madeline Geunes

Brynn MacDonald

Faculty Advisors:

Dr. Maureen Fielding

Dr. Elizabeth Womack

A Note from the Penn in Hand Staff

The entire staff of Penn in Hand would like to thank everyone who submitted poems, stories, photographs and art. We may not be able to publish them all, but every piece contributes to an enriching publication for our campus.

Happy reading!

Cover Art

By: Maureen Black

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## Poetry

### Innocence

Madeline Geunes

There is nothing that I wouldn't give up  
To see through the eyes of the innocent  
To dance with fairies and yellow buttercups  
In a field where the guilty are forgiven

In a world where sins are cleansed  
Traumas and heartaches are washed away  
The next moment is not impending suspense  
And nightfall does not cloud the sun of days

No stones thrown through a glass house  
Stained blood red and midnight black  
No daughter weeps, no parent shouts  
Potential shards and walls still intact

No painful dreams dredging up the past  
Of those lost, but not forgotten  
No ghosts with countenances all aghast  
Or pre-sliced fruit gone rancid and rotten

No words of abhorrence that stick  
To the skin, burrowing to the heart  
No carpal pain for the self to inflict  
In darkened rooms of falling apart

While the ephemerality of life deafens  
The transcendence and glory of Heaven  
Welcome the sacrifice of a body free  
Your soul, finally at rest, beckons me

My mother's spirit and mine intertwine  
Physical bounds are a memory passing  
What was once water turns to wine  
In a safe haven of peace everlasting

## Dependent on you

Alexis Flores

The satisfaction of control.  
Controlling the ability to  
To do and to be what I want.  
The satisfaction of inhaling freedom  
18:  
legal  
I couldn't get enough  
the taste of tobacco, tar  
The buzz  
The satisfaction of buying a ticket to my own death.  
Cigarettes:  
My addiction  
My power  
My shame.  
The satisfaction of knowing it will kill  
I no longer have the will or  
power to say no.  
The satisfaction of what I thought was happiness  
It was just the buzz  
But it wasn't about that,  
not at all,  
it was about feeding  
my buzz  
Feeding my crave  
My crave for freedom.  
At 18 I thought I had time.  
But,  
the satisfaction of power,  
outweighed my ability to  
stop.  
My addiction  
My power  
My shame.  
My family doesn't know  
They just don't understand  
My satisfaction and  
what I will do to get it.  
The death will be slow  
But at 18,  
I had killed the innocence within me.  
I have killed my soul.  
I thought I had control.  
  
I no longer have that control.

## How to Grow

Miranda Stein

Establish your roots  
Thrive off of the earth that wants you  
That desperately needs you

You may need extra support to get going  
Those who love you will give you everything you need  
Oh, they cannot wait to see all that you will be

Feel the warmth of the rays, the sun that is like a safe embrace  
And bathe in the rain, how it cleans and reminds you to breathe  
You are growing and already amaze

Others stop by  
To see how far you are coming  
They love the new light you bring  
You are their hope, their faith in better days

Time goes on, and you keeping going strong  
You can stand on your own and you love to be free  
The breeze blows through your hair,  
Bright with color, healthy and shining, smooth to the touch

While you sing a gentle song  
Your notes are soft and sweet whispers, blending with the whistles of the birds,  
Creating one of nature's great symphonies  
You begin to have constant company

You like having them around  
Many admire you and  
Some find a home with you  
And you think  
*I want to feel like this every day*

Oh, how special it is to share this joy,  
You love watching the others find their own  
And cannot believe there is anything other than this feeling

People are so proud of how you are doing,  
How well you are growing  
If only you knew what was coming



## How to Be

Feel it approaching  
The sun goes down sooner  
And you begin to feel a bit chilled  
But oh, what does it matter  
If the season seems different

You have your friends and you have your song  
With roots that have shown you that you belong

The breeze has turned into wind  
And the bitterness dries out your hair  
It used to shine and burst with color

Wait,

Why is the song getting sadder?  
It grows more and more quiet,  
Until the joy of sound has completely vanished

This doesn't make sense  
You begin to wonder where the light has gone  
The world has gone gray  
And your strength begins to fade

You often are lost  
In the clouds and thinking,  
*Will there ever be a day different from this?*

Time blends together  
You miss your friends  
And you miss your song  
Pleading please, sky, where has it all gone?

All there is is cold,  
And the days that always seem dark

The sun peeked out at you  
But you did not see  
It left, saddened to know that this is how you've been  
The world is becoming cruel

Didn't it say it needed you?  
People wonder if your light will return

You stand stiller and stiller  
Accepting that this is what it is

But you are here  
And you will see  
There is still a time for you to feel peace

### **How to Know**

Feel the lows and cherish the highs  
The ice is thinning out

And the sun is trying again  
Telling you the clouds are leaving, it has passed  
Urging, hold tight my dear, you are nearly there,

You open your eyes, stretch out the tired limbs

Wait,

Look at your hair  
How it shines!  
Like painted glass, the brightness and color have returned

The breeze is back and you feel your smile  
Oh, how you've missed your song!  
You sing gently on your own, growing louder as each moment presses on

It all stands alone in your mind  
The realization of the beauty you possessed within  
Each second is a precious gift,  
For every bit of happiness should be cherished,  
And appreciated as though it were a present  
From the one you love most

Now, people look on, overjoyed as they watch you gleam  
Your joy is infectious, and the world is thankful for the glow

Your friends are coming around  
The birds flock to you, eager to harmonize once more  
The squirrels climb and take a seat on your shoulder  
They apologize for their departure  
They say they never want to leave again,

Oh, how that terrible time was no fun

But you know better

You think

*We needed those terrible days*

*To feel the good of the rest*

Look at you

How you have grown

How you have learned to be

And now what you know

## Too Pretty for My Own Good?

Nicholas Peart

It's dark.  
Similar to an abyss  
Where the absence of anything means everything.  
Not a single noise or sight,  
Just black.  
This resembled a world before creation—  
No one, nothing.  
The unknown darkness had a peacefulness to it,  
A world of nothing as opposed to the turmoil in the world of somethings.  
Time and space seemed non-existent,  
Was this world and space truly existent?

The peace is suddenly interrupted by a quiet droning sound,  
Again, and again, and again and again and again.  
The noise begins to get louder  
And Louder.  
And Louder.  
AND LOUDER!  
AND LOUDER!  
AND LOUDER!

Here it is!

All of the nothing begins...  
Forming into something.  
Noises.  
Things.  
So much.  
Disturbing all of the nothing.  
CHAOS CHAOS !  
CHAOS!  
And STOP!

Open now are the eyes of the Universe....  
All of the nothing begins to turn into something...  
Slowly it appears at once.

BEEP BEEP BEEP!  
BANG!

I slapped my alarm and got out of bed.  
The droning is now replaced by my groggy moaning,  
Here we go.  
I slip my slippers on and drag myself to the bathroom,  
Brush my teeth, use the bathroom and head back to my room.  
What do I have to do now?  
AHHH my favorite part of course...fashion!  
I pick up my brush and hold it like a microphone,  
Flashing Lights by Kanye West playing in my head.

Suddenly I went from my underwear to a bedazzled suit.  
My room becomes a futuristic metropolis, lights flashing.  
My *Back to The Future* DeLorean sits shiny as a flute.  
Here I am in the middle of all of this, life passing.

I'm suddenly swirling around in this utopian Neo-Tokyo metropolis.  
Scenes flashing by my eyes of celebrities, models, shows...FASHION!

The instrumental still strummed in my head then a flash of inspiration hit me,  
And I decided to give it a go and make my own verse!

Fashion models and fancy things  
Fashion, jewelry and flashy things  
Fashion, makes the world go round  
Fashion, LA, SoHo and Downtown  
Fashion, Fendi, Louis, Prada  
Fashion, I know I don't need it but I gotta  
Find it, buy it, style it, fashion  
She can't love me but I love her, fashion  
Wife says I'm distant and don't love her, fashion  
Fashion they say that there's more to do  
But I don't do fashion I am fashion

BOOM!  
OWWW!  
I stubbed my toe!

Reality strikes and I'm transported back,  
All it takes is music for me to run off track.  
I chuckle as I pick out my clothes,  
Grabbing everything I could find with wrinkles and folds.  
I gravitated toward my leather jacket,  
Yellow with a silver reflective skeleton silhouette.  
It weighed about the equivalent of a sack of bricks,  
But it spoke to me so—I'm gonna wear it anyway.

Well hopefully  
My way of dress will impress  
People I see and the girl named Jess.  
I know it's a date but other girls can notice me  
I love feminine attention nothing more nothing less.  
I'm the prettiest guy in the world so everyone one should love me!  
I gotta nice smile, and my aura is so lovely,  
My hair is very wavy and my skin is free of stress,  
No one can compare to me, I'm the farthest thing from ugly!  
Met her at the mall and I know she likes me  
I mean how couldn't she, she's caught up by my allure.  
Apart from that I'm a wonder to sightsee,  
I know what you're thinking, Nick is just so mature.

Went out to dinner and we had a great time  
When another girl walked past and she was on my mind.  
I excused myself, knowing I would commit a crime  
Jogging through my head for a pickup line I could find.

I said "Excuse me miss, oh my gosh you look great!"  
She said, "Thank you darling, but I have a man."  
"Pshhhh don't worry he won't know about our date",  
BANG! I got hit in the head with a frying pan.

Well back to the abyss, I had gotten knocked out,  
BEEP BEEP BEEP, I'm just gonna clock out.

through the looking glass

Brynn MacDonald

between us

a translucent windowpane

flawless and good

from a bird's eye

i see you

i see my loveliest reveries

i see delicate curls and young blue eyes

i see what will be

what has been

and what is mine and right

i see a lavender smile and clean sheets

i see comfort in chaos

i see glory in dark chances

and i raise my palm to the glass

and i beg you to see me

you see you

you see your selfish daydreams

you see a devilish jaw and a delicious smile

you see what will be

what has been  
and what is no one's and just so  
you see a cherry tongue and sweaty chest  
you see libido in a sheer reflection  
you see glory in counting them off and leaving  
and you turn to do just that  
but not before you freshen and flash your great whites,  
leaving me, deceiving me

you see your feet in front of you  
i see your back as you shrink in the distance  
and somehow it was always this way

and it occurred to me  
that you never saw me

*me-*

once.



## The Princess

Jamie Andrews

As a young girl, I was always told life would be like a fairytale,

“You are a princess”

I was told to kiss frogs to find my prince,  
To wish on a star for my dreams to come true,  
Fairy godmothers granting your wildest dreams,  
Going to the ball,  
Then living happily ever after.

But as I get older, you begin to realize.  
Happily ever after doesn't actually happen,  
At least not like what the stories or movies tell you.  
Frogs don't turn into princes,  
Wishing on a shooting star does nothing but waste time,  
No man is going to slay the dragon and rescue you from the tower.

It's up to the princess to save herself.

She must work hard,  
Be her own savior and slay the dragon.  
Mother was right, she is a princess.  
But real princesses save themselves.

## An American Soldier

Andrew Ballerino

As you stand there, bombs exploding, the sound of bullets going past you, you are calm.  
Not the calm feeling of home on a warm night with your friends talking.  
The calm feeling knowing that this very moment might be your last.  
You ponder in your mind on how you got there.  
You think to the time as a child playing Army with your neighborhood friends.  
You remember saying that you will one day be an American soldier.  
It is but a dream. Though quickly turned into a nightmare.  
You raised your hand. Repeated the oath. Swore to defend until the end.  
Off you go. To train with the best. How quickly you soon beat the rest.  
You graduate from basic a trained machine. You finally made it.  
Acting like you are in a new job, you try to impress your superiors.  
Up and ready before everyone else. Ready to be the best.  
Orders come down; you are going to a faraway town.  
With one last goodbye, you leave your family to go and fight.  
15 hours later you step off the plane into a foreign land.  
To look around is useless. All around is sand.  
You are piled into a bus to your home for the next nine months.  
The neighboring country to the north is the final destination.  
You prepared day after day ready to fight.  
Soon to realize that it's all about the wait.  
In the distance you hear the explosions. Every day it gets closer.  
The sirens sound but fall on deaf ears. You become numb to the sound.  
Instead, you hear the whispers of family back home.  
You can hear your parents in the other room laughing.  
Hear your wife tell you the good news.  
It's but a whisper in the ear.  
You awake to a loud explosion.  
In the distance you hear cries for help.  
Your mind racing a mile a minute.  
Quickly grabbing your weapon, you rush out to see.  
The sounds stop. All around are soldiers running, shooting, praying.  
The platoon sergeant is yelling at you, though you stare.  
All the sudden you feel a sharp pain and hit the ground.  
Your hand moves to the pain. Quickly to realize you have been maimed.  
Your cry for help falls on deafened ears.  
The sounds start to disappear. The feeling of pain starts to fade.  
A warm feeling comes across your face.  
Dazed, you look up to see a familiar face.  
One of beauty and bliss.  
Upon you is the face of your wife. She says that it is okay now.  
You are home and away from the pain.  
To look around you see a calming light, beautiful colors everywhere.  
The sound of birds outside singing fills the air.

From the other room are the sounds of a crying baby.  
Your wife takes your hand and guides you.  
Among you is a newborn baby. So tiny and pure.  
A smile fills your face as a knock is heard at the door.  
Your wife goes to answer and from the other room you see a man in uniform.  
The sudden sound of crying erupts through the house.  
The feeling of sadness fills the air.  
You walk over to see the man consoling her.  
The calm feeling fills you.  
Softly, everything fades to black.

## The Life of Korede

Dallas D. Barber

Korede exists through the ground.  
She was born with a special gene.  
Though she chose not to be crowned.

She catches others spellbound.  
Her visions are not seen  
Korede exists through the ground.

Nabantu, she can be found.  
Not one can say she is mean.  
Though she chose not to be crowned.

Plants and Vines, skin kissed; browned.  
Her Forests, her Gardens, so green!  
Korede exists through the ground.

She lost her mother on the battleground.  
Her brother, a king? or she a queen?  
Though she chose not to be crowned.

A princess with vitiligo, and blind eyes profound.  
Mother Earth at only a teen.  
Korede exists through the ground.  
Though she chose not to be crown

## YOU GOT THIS

Grace Farina

I yawn and gaze around on my Saturday morning waiting to fuel up for my big game.  
Dad cooking eggs, toast, and bacon to chef's perfection.  
Mom making her morning cup of joe, the black coffee's bitterness staining my nose.  
brother letting my dog outside, sister laughing at her phone.

I run up the stairs pulling my hair back into a slick ponytail,  
staring at myself in the mirror, repeating over and over again my affirmations,  
"You got this,"  
preparing myself for basketball.

*Brinng. Brinng. Brinng.*

I hear my mom's mumbles. Then weeps. Immediately bad energy filled my soul.  
I walk downstairs to a broken family; every single person in tears,  
including my father.

You don't know anguish until you see a grown man cry,  
let alone *my* father. Sorrow filled me head to toe,  
all I could do was join in on the cries,  
almost like a carol.

Nobody tells you that when your fourteen you'll experience loss  
and that it won't be the same kind of loss from the boy who broke your heart,  
but from the man that abruptly passed away due to heart complications,  
who was your best friend and uncle in one.

Six years later I look into the mirror, feeling your presence.  
"You got this" I say, preparing myself for the real world.  
I can almost hear you repeat my words "You got this"  
I smile, "I know."

## A Mother's Love

Maureen Black

On most nights, my mom makes us tea.  
I see her make her way to the kitchen,  
with today's last effort,  
her feet dragging a half of a second behind her.  
She glides behind the island to collect the ingredients,  
making sure to pick up the "pure" honey,  
not "that fake kind in the plastic bear".  
One swift move from the sink to the stove and the water begins to simmer.  
While waiting, mom lights the candle to her right with  
a quick strike of a match.  
Mahogany Teakwood, her favorite.  
Mom then does what moms do,  
and finds something to critique.  
The table wasn't wiped right, nor the stove,  
and the drainboard dishes weren't packed away.  
She checks her phone and scrolls endlessly,  
as if she's looking for something in particular.  
Into the Facebook hole once again,  
Her thumb a loop.  
The kettle whistles slightly and  
she is right there to take it off the flame.  
It looks as if her brow relaxes as she satisfyingly pours the water.  
Mom then suddenly plops a teabag of choice in each mug.  
Checking Facebook again  
while steeping and preparing each cup.  
She serves the tea directly to the others in the living room.  
Where her love is presented in a mug with honey and lemon,  
light with sugar,  
just as sweet as her touch.

## vivaldi's four seasons

Erin Hoban

daisies blossom in of the window boxes of the corner store  
and the sun shines down as the citizens strut with pride down the city street  
a woman walks down in polka dot dress and pearly shoes and  
her copper-red hair flows like a waterfall down her shoulders  
with her perfect curls bouncing as she glides through crowds  
a man buys his morning dark roast coffee and  
is dressed to the nines in a button-down and trousers with cascading dark hair  
the man and woman stumble upon one another as they intersect the other's path  
and they meet time after time until the man finally brought her a coffee  
they visit the park nearby with green grass and trees aplenty  
and when you sit at the right angle the breeze hits the back of your neck  
they bring their dogs and they discuss their nine to five lives  
and their hopes and dreams for the future  
they can only hope to one day find a forever love

the sun shines bright but no breeze is to be felt  
more flowers and in bloom and green grass and gleaming water fountains  
the man and the woman have been acquainted for a few months but  
they have learned a lifetime about each other  
they have dinner together after work  
they take walks through the streets and eat terrible pastries  
they take long drives to the ocean  
blasting music with their windows down  
they come home and sit on the roof of their apartment  
with bulb lights lazily hung overhead  
the dark brick on the side of the building crawled upwards and onto the roof  
they lay on blankets with ice cream and cheap wine  
the stars shine in a summer sky  
the sky had never been clearer than that night

the trees in the park transform into orange glows of life and  
the leaves dance from the branches  
and scatter the sidewalks  
the sun hides behind the clouds in the bluebird sky  
the man visits the woman at work and drops off her steaming coffee  
and warm pumpkin bread with a note on the napkin  
people scurry the city streets with their long coats and scarves  
the air feels crisp and refreshing in the early morning run  
people return to their homes to their pets  
and blankets  
and blankets  
and blankets  
and blankets

the man and the woman watch scary movies  
and take evening naps  
in that time between work and dinner  
the apple cinnamon candle's aroma consumes the scent of the air  
the pumpkin they bought together sits on the counter next to their spiffy kettle  
roaming free in a city without a care

the air only grows colder as the couple grows older  
they spend their time making time for their lives together  
they spend their december dancing to christmas jazz  
and decorating each other's apartments with tinsel and evergreen  
they bake the most terrible tasting pies but that was not the point  
they decide to just buy one from the bakery  
the man and the woman glance at lights thrown on houses  
they watch those terribly cliché hallmark tales while  
eating pizza from the local shop on their block  
snow falls as night falls  
every day  
their dogs like the snow  
people fill the streets and going about their days  
the man and the woman spend the holidays side-by-side  
and ring in the new year with those dollar store party poppers  
and visit each other's families  
fireplaces and honest conversations  
are at the center point of their lives

last year seems so far away  
but flowers bloom again  
and coffee never smells as good as it does now



## Short Story/ Fiction

### My World

Van Nguyen

2020-2021 school year

“Daddy, Daddy, get up, Get up! You’re gonna be on the news today.”

John replies in an exhausted tone, “Hey, calm down pumpkin. I still have fifteen more minutes.”

“But I want you to take me to school on your way there! Please, Daddy, please?”

“Alright Pumpkin,” He replies laughing. “Let me get up here. I’ll meet you downstairs. You can watch cartoons while I get ready.”

“Thank you, Daddy,” Bailey responds with a big smile across her face, then runs downstairs.

John gets up and goes about his morning routine, takes a shower and gets changed. He heads downstairs where he sees his daughter sitting in his favorite chair watching the news.

*“Johnathan Clarkson will be the first man to travel at light speed. He will be making the trip to Mars and back in only 30 minutes. This is a historic moment...”*

“What would you like for breakfast Pumpkin?”

“Ice Cream!” she responds without hesitation and a big smile.

John laughs and says, “Alright you know what, I’ll think about it. But you need real breakfast food. How about I make you some fresh waffles?”

“Yes Please!”

“Done deal!”

John makes three waffles, one for him, Bailey, and Danielle.

“Alright Pumpkin come grab your plate. Breakfast is served.” he says confidently.

Bailey comes running over and grabs her favorite plate, a small purple plate that she made in her art class and holds it up to her dad. John slaps one big waffle on the plate and puts one scoop of ice cream on top.

“Don’t tell your mother,” he says holding his finger up to his lips.

Bailey looks at him and giggles then runs over to the table. He then grabs another plate and puts another waffle on top and adds some butter and syrup. He grabs a glass of orange juice, some utensils and walks over to his bedroom where Danielle is still lying down.

“Good morning honey.” He says quietly, walking into the room.

“Hey babe,” she responds, yawning.

“I made you some waffles before I head out.”

“Thank you honey. You didn’t give Bailey ice cream, right?”

“Of course not! That would be extremely irresponsible of me as a parent. Ice Cream in the morning, you gotta be crazy,” he responds sarcastically.

“Okay, just had to make sure. She’s already got enough energy as it is.”

“Yes, yes, I’m well aware of that,” he says laughing.

Danielle holds her hand up to John’s face. “I’m going to miss you dear.”

“Aww don’t say that I won’t be gone for that long. It’s a round trip I’ll be back in no time.”

“I know but you’re literally going to be off world. You’ve never been so far away. And

there's a huge risk behind all this who knows what could happen.”

“Hey don’t worry. Everything is going to be okay. I’ll always come back for you. You didn’t drop your ring down the shower drain, did you?”

“No, I didn’t. You’re the one that took one this morning.” she replies with a grin.

“No, I made sure of it,” he responds laughing. He gives her a kiss. “I gotta be heading out now. I told Bailey I would drive her to school on my way to work. I’ll be sure to call you once I get to Mars and back. Sounds good?”

“Yes, honey thank you.” she says, giving him another kiss.

John gets up and right as he’s about to walk out he meets Bailey in the doorway.

“Dad, it’s time to go. I don’t want to be late.”

“Alright sweetie, I’m ready to go.” “Bye momma.”

“Bye honey. Have a fun day at school.”

John grabs his keys off the key rack and walks out to the car. He pulls the car out of the garage and Bailey hops in the backseat. They pull out of the driveway and start on their way to school.

“Do you think you can see me from space?” Bailey asks curiously.

“Well yes and no dear. I won’t be able to see you directly but when I’m up there I will be able to see the entire world, all the stars and mars too. So, in a way I will be seeing you because everything and everyone is on the planet and I know the general area of where you’ll be. So, know that I’ll be looking down on you.” John responds.

“How long will you be gone for?”

“The actual trip should be around an hour long. Fifteen minutes there, I’ll spend some time in Mars’ orbit, then fifteen minutes back. I should be home by the end of the day. It depends how many interviews I need to get and if the agency wants to hold me longer.”

“On the news it said you were the first man to go lightspeed. Is that how fast you’ll be going?”

“That’s absolutely correct! They did some tests with robots to see if the technology actually worked and now, they’re sending me up there.”

“Could anything happen to you.”

“Well to be completely honest we’re not sure; however, the tests worked without incident, so we’re confident that everything will be okay. Nothing to worry about little one. I have full faith that things will go great.”

“Will I be able to go to space someday?”

“Absolutely dear. With this test it will pave the way for deep space exploration for all people. The future has never looked brighter. Your generation is going to be one of explorers. You’ll be able to go on even greater adventures that I could have only dreamed of,” he says while patting her on the head with a smile on his face.

“I can go to Pluto?” she asks.

“Farther!”

“New stars?”

“Yes! You’ll be able to explore the galaxy. Like Star Wars. We don’t have lightsabers yet though.”

“I’ll invent one.”

“That’s my girl,” he says, smiling.

They arrive at school and Bailey hops out of the car. “Goodbye daddy. I’ll see you tonight.”

“Goodbye sweetie! I’ll take a picture of the Earth for you!”

They wave to each other as John drives off. He makes his way to the NASA headquarters to begin pre-flight preparations. The shuttle had to be built in space because in order to achieve lightspeed the craft must be in a vacuum. So, he first needs to take a rocket up to the Von Braun Space Station. From there he will enter the shuttle and begin orbiting the Earth in order to get a proper trajectory to Mars.

“Clarkson to mission control, are we good for launch?”

“Yessir, all systems are green for go.”

As the countdown begins people around the world are tuned in to watch history unfold. Bailey is in her classroom watching the news with the rest of her class.

“3...2...1... Launch.”

The shuttle instantly disappears as it heads off in the direction towards Mars.

“Mission control, all systems are good. I will continue communication once I reach Mars’ orbit. Clarkson signing out.”

Communication won’t send while traveling at light speed. Now it’s just me.

The world watches in awe as the shuttle disappears. Bailey sits in her class as excited as can be. Danielle sits at home watching the news praying that he comes home safely.

I never thought this is where I would end up. Being the first man to travel at lightspeed. Take that Einstein. He thinks to himself jokingly.

John thinks to himself.

*I don’t feel any different. I kind of thought this would change me in a way, at least mentally. I don’t feel any physical changes either. I’m just kind of in awe that this is actually happening. Who would’ve thought humanity could achieve something like this? This has been my dream for so long. I always wanted to explore the galaxy. And while this technically isn’t the galaxy it’s surely one small but big step in that direction. The universe is now at our fingertips. And people thought the world was big. They have no idea. How could we just stay in one place for the rest of our lives. People now are so closed minded to the infinite possibilities, the infinite opportunities the universe holds. We are so small in the grand scheme of the universe, but we are also so big. To think we all came from the same material we are all made of carbon. We all came from the same star. It’s ironic to think about we are nothing but also everything. It really puts humanity into perspective. It’s beautiful but lonely at the same time. The infinite vastness, you could get lost. Geez I wish Bailey were here to experience all this. I bet she would barely be able to contain all her excitement. I haven’t even been gone for long and I already miss her and Danielle. They are my world. My universe revolves around them. I’d always find my way back.*

He arrives in Mars’ orbit and radios down to a base on the surface. “Mars Colony Six, this is Commander Clarkson. Do you read me?”

“Yes, Commander Clarkson, loud and clear.”

John has a deep sigh of relief. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out his cell phone to take a picture of the red planet.

“Bailey is gonna love this!” he says to himself.

Back on Earth everyone is celebrating this monumental achievement. Bailey jumped

out of her seat clapping and laughing ecstatically. Danielle also has a deep sigh of relief and excitement. After a few minutes in orbit John realigns himself into a trajectory back towards Earth. He radios down to Mars to inform them about his journey back.

“Mars Colony Six, this is Commander Clarkson. All systems are ready for lightspeed jump. Are we good to go?”

“Mars Colony Six to Commander Clarkson, you are going for a lightspeed jump. See you on the other side, sir.”

As Earth comes into view, he revs the engines up and he takes off. Everyone around the world holds their breath as he makes his way back.

Halfway through the trip the “check engine” light starts blinking and a noise starts buzzing inside the shuttle.

“The engine is overheating. I’m going to have to exit lightspeed and coast the rest of the way.”

He goes to flip a switch to turn off the engine but before he gets to it, he gets thrown back into his seat. The shuttle speeds up and jumps into an indescribable space.

“What’s happening?” he says, starting to panic.

He looks outside the window to see the space outside the shuttle looks like a kaleidoscope, shifting shapes and colors creating vivid yet indescribable images. It looks like something out of a psychedelic trip. The clock in his shuttle appears to have stopped. All the systems on the shuttle have turned off and he has begun to drift in this colorful geometric void. Panic sets in.

*This place, what is it? Am I going to be stuck here? How are they going to find me? How am I going to get out? Oh no. Bailey, Danielle. What're they gonna do? No, I can't be stuck here. I promised them I'd come back. They'd never be able to find me. I'm not even in space anymore. I need to get out.*

He starts trying to revive the shuttle. He scrambles turning off and on every system he knows. He resets the engine and as soon as he bypasses the compressor he is flung back. The shuttle jumps back into reality. He gets up, looks out the window and sees the Earth in all of its glory right in front of him. Breathing heavily, he leans back in his chair and quietly meditates trying to process what he just saw and thought. He radios into mission control to inform them about his return.

“Commander Clarkson? Is that you?”

“Yes, yes, It’s me! Am I cleared for docking?”

“Yes Sir! There will be a team to assist you at the entrance.”

Once he reaches the entrance of the bigger and more improved Von Braun Station. He is met by the head of the agency but not the one he remembers.

“Commander Clarkson, are you alright sir?”

“Yes I am. Who are you? How long was I gone for?”

“I’m Director Ethan Richards. We lost contact with you ten years ago sir. You vanished from our radars. We thought we lost you sir.”

“No. It couldn’t have been that long. It felt like ten minutes... Where’s my family? Are they alright? I want to see them!”

“Yes sir. Your daughter is here on the station with us. She’s one of our chief engineers. She was made aware of your return and she's on her way now.”

Out of the corner of his eye, John sees Bailey running down the stairs. He runs over to meet her. They meet each other with open arms.

“Oh my god Bailey! I never thought I would see you again,” he says with tears in his eyes. “You’ve grown so much!” he adds with a subtle laugh.

“I knew you’d find your way back dad! I was doing research into the anomaly and we found that you went into the 4th dimension. But we had no idea to locate you or if you survived.”

“I told you I’d always find my way back! My little girl, all grown up. I love you so much Pumpkin.”

## The Story of Us...

Andrew Ballerino

2020-2021 school year

Every love story seems to always have a happy ending. When growing up we all see the Disney movies where the prince finds his princess and live happily ever after. Though, in reality, it's far from that. This one is sort of a love story. The story of two people who came together and fought against all odds to try and find their happily ever after.

The day was like any other. I woke up, ate breakfast, got dressed and went to work. Most people look at a 17-year-old and ask "Why aren't you in school? It's November and you are working while other teenagers are in school." To which I reply, "Times are tough, and I need the money," and they usually accept it and walk away. Today, however, there was something out of the norm. While working the register at a small convenience store, I worked at in a nicer part of town, I saw a girl I went to school with a few years ago. She was beautiful. From what I could remember, she was always the cliché nerd growing up. Book worm, not very social, stayed under the radar kind of girl. She was with a couple friends, probably on their lunch from school. I was almost sure she was a year younger, but she changed from the last I saw. She walked with a sense of pride. Had a smile on her face almost the entire time from laughing and joking with her friends. They got what they wanted and started to walk to the register to which I, being the smooth young man that I am, tripped over a bunch of wires that were sticking out and fumbled a bit walking to the register myself. I regained my stance and welcomed the group. "Did you find everything you were looking for today?" I could barely look either of them in the eye as I felt the blood flowing through my face and could only imagine how red it was from the recent embarrassing moment. "I think we did, Fumbles." My official new nickname from the one girl. The two started laughing, while the one was giggling but telling the others to stop. I could feel my soul rising out of my body as I looked in shame. They paid for their snacks and left, still laughing. The girl, whose name I couldn't remember to save me, looked back with the most beautiful smile. I finished my shift and went home to start the next day over again. I kept thinking about that smile. It reminded me of the beauty my mother had before she passed. It's been two years since she passed on and there's not a day that goes by that I don't think about her. Now it's just me and my dad. He isn't good company whenever he is around. Guess it's a good thing he hardly ever is. That night was the first night since my mother passed away that I didn't feel alone and scared. Almost like that smile was sent from her. The next day, like every other, was the same. Woke up, ate breakfast, got dressed and went to work. Though today I felt more energized. Felt like I really got a good night's sleep. As I open the front door, I saw a sight that could make the most hardened of soul's shatter in an instant. There on the front door was an eviction notice for our house.

I starred at the letter for what felt like forever. I felt the slow drop of a tear coming down my cheek. In that short time, I could feel all every emotion running through me. I didn't even know how to feel. Mostly, I just felt empty. I staggered my way to work as my mind constantly spined around and hearing all the memories of my mom in that house. Without even realizing it, I was crossing the street when I heard a loud honk and brakes being applied and a voice saying "What's the matter with you kid?! I almost hit you! Get the hell out of the street!" I felt a sudden urge of adrenaline and felt my body shaking as I starred at the driver. At the moment in time all I felt was anger. Without thinking I pounded on the hood of the car. "Watch where you are driving!" I yelled out. I kept starring at the driver wishing he would get out. As he looked into

my eyes, it's almost as if he saw something inside of me that was pure evil. "It's cool. Everything is alright. I apologize for scaring you. Just be more vigilant when crossing the street." he exclaimed as he backed the car up a little and started to drive off. I hadn't even noticed that several people were watching. I had a sense they were all nervous. I snapped out of it and quickly walked to work. After clocking in I made my way to the front. It was eerily quiet in the store. It was mid-morning but usually by then it is a little crowded. I took it as a good thing. My mind was still focused on that letter. About an hour into work, which seemed like a full shift, I heard a familiar voice. Looking up from the ground, which I became very fond of today, I saw a face that brought me out of my trance. It was the girl with the beautiful smile. She was by herself today. I looked in awe as she walked through the store. It was like a breath of fresh air and light coming into my world in that instance. As if all my troubles and worries went away and all that laid before me was bliss. As she walked towards the counter, I noticed a smile on her face. She seemed as if nothing could worry her. Nothing made her feel sad. Just a happy person in a world of sadness and decay. Something inside of me was pushing to talk to her. Find out things about her. My mind saw images of us smiling together, children running around, a beautiful house. It was the perfect moments in an imperfect world. As she walked towards the counter with surprisingly only a couple items, there were so many things I wanted to say to her. "I loved your smile yesterday! The simple things in life are the ones that you don't expect! You are the most beautiful woman I ever laid my eyes on!" My mind kept running around with different lines to say to her. She made it to the counter, put her items on, smiled and asked how I was doing. "I like to go to the movies." came rolling out of my mouth as I felt the blood rushing through my face in sheer embarrassment. She started to chuckle but had a sense of warmth behind it. Not something of awkward feelings or a creepy vibe. Innocence in the form of a person. "I also enjoy going to the movies. I am a huge fan of horror movies! Oh, I shouldn't have said that." Her smile quickly turned to a slight frown and a look of unsettledness flushed her. With a look of joy and excitement I quickly brought the mood around. "Horror movies are my all-time favorite! The one with the guy that goes around at night" and before I could finish, she blurted out "And stalks lonely people as if he is hunting the most dangerous game!" Absolutely blown away that she has seen and loves the same movie that I probably watched a thousand times. "I'm Sophia. I think we used to go to school together during middle school and early high school." It finally all came back to me. "I'm Derek. We did. It feels like it was many years ago." The entire time I felt myself smiling. Feeling a sense of true happiness. We must have talked for about five minutes before she had to leave. "Why don't you give me a call sometime and we can go to the movies." She took the pen that was hooked onto my work shirt and wrote down her number. I couldn't believe it. The girl of my dreams was asking to hang out sometime! "Thank you! I'll definitely call, and we can go see that new movie that's coming out!" I didn't even know if there was anything playing. I was just too excited! A couple days went by and I finally got the courage to call her and ask her out. It rang a couple of times then I heard a male's voice "Hello?". It was an older man's voice and I guessed it was her father. "Hello. I'm calling to see if Sophia is available?" My voice was shaky and broke at one point. "Just a minute." He must have put his hand on the phone as he called for her as it sounded muffled. "There's a young man on the phone asking for you." I felt the temptation of hanging up. I didn't want her to get into trouble over me. "Hello?" Her soft voice came through the phone as images of her face came to the forefront of my mind. "Hi! It's Derek! I finally had a moment to call and wanted to see if I could take you up on that offer for the movies." "Hi Derek! Yeah, definitely! I would love that!" It was almost like this couldn't be true. I still thought it was a perfect dream and I was about to wake up back into

my nightmare. "I'll pick you up at around 5 tonight?" I thought that if she is driving, I'll definitely pick up the movie tickets, pop, and candy. "That sounds great! I'll be outside then! Can't wait to see you!" We hung up and an instant burst of energy flew through me as I shouted out loud! I quickly got ready for our date. Made sure to put a little bit of cologne on so not to destroy her nostrils. 5 o'clock rolled around and almost on the stroke of 5 she pulled up to my house. Jumping from the steps, I quickly got into the car. We looked at each other and smiled. The night went by faster than I realized. Before we knew it, it was 10:30! I didn't want it to end. "So, would you like to get together again sometime?" After asking her, it was almost as if the breath was taken out of me, waiting for a response. "I don't know. You did seem a little scared at that one scene! I don't know if I can cover your eyes through all horror movies!" She laughed while smiling at me. "Of course we can get together again sometime silly!" The skies opened up, angels sang, and the whole world stopped in that moment. "Tonight was the best time I had in a very long time. Thank you." All I could do was smile at her while saying that. Stepping out of the car, I looked back one more time and waved as she drove away. Almost skipping up the steps to the door, I didn't believe anything could bring me down from the clouds. Though sometimes while in the clouds, it gets dark and frightening. I reached for the handle but before I could open it, my father pulled it open as if the door was as light as air. "Get in here, now!" He screamed at me with pure rage in his eyes. "What in the world are you doing? Out there prancing around with some girl?! You have a responsibility to maintain, son! This house is all we have, and you think it's okay to just spend all your money on some girl?!" He went on for several minutes. My mind was completely empty as he continued on his rampage. Something in me finally just broke. "I'm your son! I'm 17 and I don't have a life. No school. A job that I loathe, and you think it's okay for me to live like this?! Screw you and this house! When mom died, this house and everything in it died too!" His expression and complete silence said enough. I instantly regret everything and ran upstairs. That feeling of anger just now turned to sadness and fear. I could hear my dad fumbling around a bit throughout the house. I saw the hallways light turn off from under my door and a moment later heard a soft knock on the door. "Yes?" I softly said staring at the ceiling. The door opened softly as my dad just stood in the doorway. A few seconds go by and I didn't sense any movement or sound. I looked over towards the door and noticed something in his hand. I couldn't quite make out what it was right away. I sat up and that's when he raised his arm. I turned the light from my lamp on to shed a little light into the room. I noticed a glimmer of light coming from a metal object that was pointed at me. "I'm sorry son. Just know that I will always love you." My dad's voice was shaky and filled with sorrow. A sudden burst of adrenaline hit me as I shot up and rushed towards him. The last thing I remember was suddenly seeing Sophia and me in the car driving while laughing at stupid jokes. I never felt anything. Almost like it was instant.

Told you it was a sort of love story. I found my princess, fell in love instantly, though we didn't have a happy ever after. I roam the house still, as if I am cursed. The only good thing about it is I sometimes see Sophia drive over. Almost as if she senses a part of me and wonders. I will forever hold the image of her smile close to me.



## Like Real People Do

Miranda Stein

2020-2021 school year

What do you do when your head wants you whisked away to the clouds, but all your body knows is your feet firm on the ground? Ellie sighs before taking a sip of her drink, eyes closed so as to avoid seeing the faces of the others. Yet the avoidance could only go on for so long before she has to face what was in front of her. The basement is dark and dank, but the music was blaring and the who-knows-how-old lights are still effective in creating the peak party atmosphere, and people are living it up in State College, Pennsylvania. Tucked away in the corner, back against the wall, jealousy swirls and snarls from her chest down to her toes. Of course she knows it isn't fair, but part of her hates to see everyone *living*, taking advantage of their youth and setting the stage for stories they would tell for years to come. Maybe their stories aren't her favorite genre, but they would be stories nonetheless, and she wishes she could live as they do instead of just existing.

With some muttering under her breath, Ellie decides to simply cut her losses and go home to the familiarity of her own room, her own space to be by herself. Besides, it's safer that way. There is no looming apprehension, none of the habitual anxiety that thrives in these situations. With the early 2000s hits blaring and flashes of blue, green, and red guiding her tense body through the throng of people, Ellie has one goal in mind: just get out without making contact with anybody.

Her one-track mind does not consider that in order to achieve this goal, Ellie has to look up from the ground as she walks. If she had taken this into account, maybe she wouldn't have bumped straight into a shoulder and lost her footing. With a swoop in her stomach and a flash of panic, she tries to gain balance before hands shoot out to her waist to steady her. The swoop in her stomach turns to ice in her chest.

"Woah, sorry! I didn't even see you there. My bad," The shoulder says. After what is definitely too long, Ellie forces herself to look up and see that the shoulder is in fact an entire person. An entire person with stupid wavy brown hair and dark eyes that have no business being so alluring yet kind at the same time. He's wearing dark jeans and a burgundy striped shirt that looks straight out of a magazine, even on his thinner frame. It's ridiculous. His hands are warm and foreign on her, and she feels the usual chills whenever contact happens. Her brain immediately begins to chant warnings at her, yelling at her to get the hell out.

"Comes with the curse of being short. I can only take it a day at a time. Plus, I wasn't looking where I was going. Sorry," She responds, trying not to squirm. God, was this guy ever going to let go? Sensing her discomfort, said keeper quickly relinquishes his hold. He then lets out a boyish laugh after realizing what she said, and sends down a smile.

"Eh, short works for you. What's your name?"

"Leaving," Ellie says simply as she begins making her exit once more. He follows.

"Oh wow, were your parents fighting or something when they made the decision?" He teases, and while she rolls her eyes, Ellie mentally gives him a few points for the wit. Finally, she reaches the top of the basement steps and can see the doorway to get out and begin the journey back to her place. She can hear the pounding of footsteps behind her, and know that this boy had

not yet given up. Out of the corner of her eye, Ellie can see him stuffing his hands into his pockets before he speaks again to introduce himself, “I’m Johnny.”

“Good for you. Look, I’m sorry about bumping into you, but I don’t think you’re entitled to any financial compensation for any injury I may have caused. Can you just please leave me alone?” Ellie asks.

“Well, I might have injured you and I don’t have the money to pay for any hospital bills. Or insurance in general. Anyway, it was a solid head to shoulder collision and I don’t mean to brag, but they’re pretty hard core. How do I know you won’t pass out in two seconds because you’re concussed?”

“One can only hope I do,” Ellie retorts wryly, which only seems to widen this Johnny’s smile before he sobers, putting his hand on her arm to stop her in the entry way. She flinches minutely and he pulls back like he’s been burned, but looks at her curiously.

“Seriously though, are you okay?”

“I’m fine. Just want to get home.”

“I get that, but let me get you somewhere more quiet for a few minutes so you can cool down before you leave.”

Ellie’s deadpan stare in response gives the guy an opportunity to think about what he just said, and he immediately widens his eyes and shakes his head rapidly. “Oh, that came out *so* not the way I meant. I-I just mean that you seem a bit... frazzled and I wouldn’t feel right letting you go like this, especially when it’s already so late. I swear, no funny business.”

Ellie pauses and peers up at him. His face is soft and open, and the kind eyes continue looking at her in a way that makes her chest a bit tight. Ugh. She immediately averts her own, and can feel the heat building in her face. One part of her--the part that’s usually in control-- is ready to make the move to leave, but another hesitates and runs through the list she’s created in her mind. He hasn’t made any serious passes, and none of the times he’s touched her have proven to be dangerous or anything like that. She knows where the exits are and if she’s being honest, he doesn’t really seem like the type to try anything more than what he’s said—anyone who says “funny business” unironically probably isn’t the super smooth one who pulls a different girl every night. Maybe...maybe going somewhere to get herself more together would be good. She’ll just sit close to the door and keep her distance. Looking back up at Johnny, Ellie sees that his eyes never left her face, watching her process his proposition. Finally, she sighs before giving a nod.

“Okay?” He asks, unsure.

“Yeah,” She responds, voice quiet.

“Cool. And hey, think of it this way, you’re doing me a favor. I would’ve been up all night wondering if you got back safe,” he says so genuinely, so easily, that it made Ellie falter. He gives her a small smile before turning and leading her back through the entry way and to a set of stairs, this time going up. Pushing down the bubbling fear, Ellie follows him wordlessly. She notices the drop in residual volume, and is surprised to see a relatively clear room when Johnny opens a door and turns on a light. He sits on the full bed, leaving plenty of room for her, but offers a desk chair as well. Ellie makes a move for the chair and Johnny nods, as if he was expecting that decision. As she sits down, Ellie looks around some more. She notices some band posters and pictures of him and assumed friends and family adorning the cream walls. His cologne is noticeable, but doesn’t overwhelm her senses. It’s actually kind of nice, and it makes the room feel more inviting. Despite that thought, Ellie takes in a shaky breath and runs her hands over her thighs, back and forth in an effort to quell the nervous energy making her legs

bob up and down. She gets herself sorted after a few moments, and Johnny clears his throat softly before making the attempt to talk.

“I’m uh, sorry if I made you uncomfortable downstairs. I’m sort of a touchy guy by nature but I forget that not everybody else is. I didn’t mean to freak you out in any way,” He apologizes, voice and expression so sincere it shocks Ellie. As soon as that thought enters her head though, she realizes that all he has done is be genuine since they bumped into each other. Maybe she should stop being so surprised by it.

“Not your fault. I’m just weird about that stuff,” she says in a rougher way than intended.

“You’re not weird if something makes you uncomfortable,” He immediately protests.

Ellie shrugs to show her disagreement, but doesn’t reply verbally.

“Is it something in particular, or do you just not like it in general? Actually, you don’t have to answer that. Sorry. We’re supposed to be letting you calm down. I’m just gonna shut up now and let you do that. Do you want to be alone? Maybe you do, I mean you probably do, considering the entirety of our interactions thus far have been you wanting to leave. Yeah, this was a mistake. I’m an idiot. I’m just going to go and you can hang up here until you’re good and I can walk you home, if you want. Or I can just call you a ride. It’s up to you,” Johnny rambles as he stands. A huff of laughter escapes Ellie, and she finds herself endeared, and honestly, a bit comforted by his own nervous energy. It’s cute. *He’s* cute.

Oh God.

The boy stops and gapes at the noise, and Ellie feels herself blushing at his gaze, nervous for an entirely new reason.

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“So, are parties not your thing?”

Ellie and Johnny are walking down a busy street, lit up with cars going both directions and storefronts that remain open late into the night. She’s still a bit stunned at the fact that she’s with him as he escorts her back to her apartment across campus from his place. He offered to call her a ride, but Ellie wasn’t in the place to ride home alone with another stranger. Plus, she needed some air. And okay, fine. She wanted to spend some more time with Johnny. He just seemed... different. He was safe, and Ellie could relax for once. Sue her. Realizing she was lost in her thoughts, the girl tunes back in and replays his question in her mind.

“Huh? Oh, not really, I guess. Why?”

“You just looked pretty eager to get out even before we ran into each other. And I’ve seen you at other ones. You talk to people and all, but it kind of looks like you would rather be doing literally anything else.”

“I mean, it’s not my idea of a great time, but my friends seem to enjoy it and I don’t want to miss out on the experience. Besides-wait, did you just say you’ve seen me before?” Ellie says before fully processing Johnny’s statement. She looks at him in confusion and he returns her glance with a small smile and a tilt of his head as if *she’s* the one who just said something odd.

“Yeah, I did. We’ve been at the last like, five parties at the same time. You always have your back to a corner and act as if you’re the secret service or something. Your head looks like it’s on a constant swivel. I’ve never seen someone so concentrated on literally everything going on in a room at once.”

Ellie is speechless at the fact that someone she has never spoken to before noticed so much about her. Her mouth opened and closed like a floundering fish, but Johnny speaks again. He does a lot of that, Ellie notices.

“All I’m saying is if you really are that on guard, maybe just skip them. Nothing actually important happens anyway. It’s just stupid stuff that can sometimes be funny.”

Ellie looks down as he talks, and before her brain can stop her, she admits “I don’t want to be, but I’m just on guard everywhere. I want to live like how everyone else does, but I don’t think I’ll ever actually get to.” Her eyes widen at her own statement, and she dares a glance upwards to see Johnny’s reaction. He raises a brow as if he knows she didn’t mean to be so candid, before shrugging.

“Maybe how everyone else lives just isn’t your way. That’s fine. I definitely don’t live like how everyone else does either. We just do what we can, how we can,” He replies, as if it’s the simplest thing in the world.

“Well, everyone else’s way seems better. They have fun and aren’t all cold and boring.”

“Just because it’s different doesn’t mean it’s better. So, you don’t like parties. That’s fine. And I get the feeling you’re not cold and boring. You definitely know how to have a good time. It’s just not in a sweaty basement with a bunch of randos packed like sardines. I bet you like, go cliff diving and jump out of planes,” Johnny said, the grin on his face evident in his voice. For the second time that night, Ellie laughs.

“You don’t even know me,” She exclaims, smiling up at him. He shrugs, telling her he just has a sixth sense about these kinds of things, and he can tell that she goes crazy when she wants. Ellie scoffs jokingly before revealing that yeah, she would take a dive off a cliff over peeling her friends’ heads off of toilet bowl rims and having to listen to truly atrocious remixes of the already remixed “Pursuit of Happiness.” Johnny nudges her in mock indignation over her judgement, playing along as if said song is the zenith of musical composition. The conversation is easy and casual, until Johnny gets a pensive look on his face, and slows his walking. Ellie stops and turns, facing him with a raised brow. Within seconds, she knows what’s on his mind.

“You still want to know about me being anti-contact,” She states and Johnny looks apologetic as he nods. She sighs and prepares the simplified explanation.

“It’s not that I don’t like it, it’s just a *thing* for me, even the basics. I need to know when it’s coming, and what exactly ‘it’ is. And I just need to feel alright with the person. I know it’s weird, but that’s how it’s been since I was a kid, and I think it’s how I’ll always be. It’s like I said, I’m on guard with everything, and that makes me a difficult person to be around.”

Ellie explains, voice devoid of any emotion. It’s frustrating as hell, and it breaks her heart sometimes, but she is resigned to the fact that this is who she is. She’s also resigned to the fact that this is when most people bolt, because honestly, who would want this when you can be around someone who can let loose and be comfortable? Johnny’s face pulls down in a mixture of sadness before lowering his head to make direct eye contact with Ellie. His voice is firm, and he is serious when he speaks next.

“It’s not weird. And I don’t think you’re a difficult person to be around. It’s like *I* said, we do what we can, how we can.”

Ellie’s mouth drops open and he simply faces forward and keeps walking. When he notices that she hasn’t moved, he reminds her that she “kinda has to lead, since I don’t know where I’m going.”

She hurries to catch up with him, and just like that, he brings up next semester and they continue on like nothing is out of the ordinary. After a while of just walking and talking, Ellie looks around to gauge where they are. The pair is at the last streetlight before her place, and a great big part of her is sad to think that this is almost over, and that maybe this would be the last time she will see Johnny. The night had felt so long, but now, it’s like every minute is a second. It was

just getting to be enjoyable, and she doesn't want it to be over. For the first time in who knows how long, Ellie feels like she is living. She is living something that would be a great story one day. Eventually, they arrive, and before Ellie pulls out her keys to unlock the door, she turns.

"Thank you, for walking me back. And catching me back at the party. And well, tonight in general. I'm uh, not good at this. But I was wondering if you'd like to... you know, hang out again sometime. Somewhere that doesn't have me questioning what's on my shoes," she blurts, before wincing at her own words.

There are streetlights everywhere, but in that moment, Johnny's face might have been the brightest thing Ellie has ever seen.

"Yeah, I'd like that. Besides, I gotta check on you to make sure my shoulder didn't cause permanent brain damage."

Ellie feels like she's floating.

## An Irish Goodbye

Maureen Black

2020-2021 school year

I've been to war, but not like this. We moved here for a better life, for my dad to have a job, for my mum to try her hand at one as well, for my brother, John, and me to see a dentist, and for my sister, Maeve, to get a proper education. We moved here to survive, but little did we know that it would be the death of us all. First, let me introduce myself. My name is Cillian Kane, I'm 26 years old and my family was the most notorious mob family in Philadelphia. I'm the son of Ava Murray and Liam Kane, a common farmer turned head of the Philadelphia Irish mafia. Now, before I tell you anything, I know what you're going to say: "the Italians ran the city." And it's true, they did, but we ran them.

I was born in County Mayo on the west coast of Ireland and moved to Dublin when I was five. We lived a simple life as farmers before Da got the job offer. He was sitting at the bar after a long day's work when a tall man, named Mulligan, dressed in grey slacks and a flat cap offered him a driving job. I guess you could say this is where it all began. I didn't see him much after we moved. The farming schedule was consistent, 5am-5pm, but this job had him by the throat, literally. He would get up and leave all hours of the day and night, oftentimes spending the weekend with "his uncle in Cork". Not only was there a change in his hours but in his behavior as well. Da was a quiet man, always calm no matter the situation. He listened, and I don't mean listened like you and me. He listened to every word and every change in tone. He listened to your accent and pace, like how your speech sped up when nervous or excited. Most of all he listened to pitch. He taught me that you can tell a person's true feelings by the pitch of their voice. That calm and modest man turned into his complete opposite in Dublin. He traded in his boots for shined leather shoes, custom made, and wore black suits instead of tweed coats. He became loud, authoritative and demanding of his family. Now feared by the men he once sat next to in Mass, Da became a holy man in an unholy, devilish life. He never discussed his day and slept with one eye open and a gun in his nightstand. He became Liam Kane.

We moved to Philadelphia when I was 18. Da said that America was the land of endless opportunity and we could even go to university, or college as the Americans called it. Mum didn't like the idea at first, she didn't want to leave Aunt Clare, but Da talked her into it. He said that we wouldn't be safe here, a revolution was coming and his boss, Mulligan, could get us citizenship and a house. The plane ride was longer than a drive from Mayo to Dublin and Da and I were the only ones who stayed awake. America was very different from Ireland. The people were different. Faces of many colors and words of other tongues filled the city. The houses were bigger, roofs were flat and there was always traffic. South Philadelphia was split into "streets" or neighborhoods. My family and I lived on 2nd Street, the Irish Catholic part, which actually consisted of multiple streets, from Front to 4th. The Italians occupied 18th Street, Cambodians on 7th and Africans and Protestant Irish took 30th. You held true to your street and protected your own. One day when I first moved here, Mum sent me to the Italian Market to buy fresh vegetables for dinner. A fight broke out between the Irish and Italians and I was snuck. Hit in the face, just for being an Irishman. We moved into a war between neighbors within a war between countries.

You could say it was bound to happen, that a new American citizen of prime fighting age would be the first to get drafted, not to mention, Cillian does mean "war" in Gaelic. I wasn't surprised because a few lads from the neighborhood were drafted too. My brother was lucky -

he wasn't drafted out of exception for college students. Looking back, I wish I went to college instead of finding a job. They called it "Nam", but Hell would have been more fitting. Young men, as young as 18, were faced with death and violence the second their boots touched the Asian soil. It was clear that the flame of life in their eyes burnt out just within a few weeks. I spent all of 3 years in makeshift camps and canvas tents devising a strategy of attack each week. Three years of black smoke, tall grass, muddied faces and seeing the bodies of my brothers carried out on stretchers.

I remember the day I got the letter. The smog was thick and the air wet. I was in the mess hall eating the best MRE money could buy (the one with "chili mac"), when my sergeant placed his hand on my right shoulder. "Son, I'm sorry" he said, "it's your mother, she's passed". The pains of war were nothing compared to this, the news struck my heart harder than an M16. How could this happen? She wasn't sick anymore, she was in "remission" when I left. I couldn't stay here, I had to go home. I had to be with Da, with Maeve and John. Poor John was probably a mess. He was always the "mummy's boy". He took care of her the most when she was first diagnosed. He even shaved his head so she wouldn't feel alone. I had to go home, but they didn't send soldiers home for family deaths, there were deaths on the battlefield every day. There were only two reasons they sent soldiers home, for death and injury. So, I did the only thing I could do, I reached for the whiskey, bit down on my shirt, held the gun to my leg and pulled the trigger.

I know. Call me crazy, insane, emotional, and impulsive. Call me anything you want, but you weren't there. You weren't in the war or 8,693 miles away from your family. You would've done the same thing if you were told that you couldn't leave for your own Mother's funeral, and the whiskey helped with the courage to do so. I wondered if she was alone when drawing her last breath. I was in Vietnam, Maeve was most likely in school, Da was probably working and John had just decided to leave. In the time I was away, John graduated from Temple University with a degree in Political Science. He said he wanted to use his education to help his fellow countrymen gain their independence from British Rule. He lived with Aunt Clare, my mum's sister, in Dublin. So, obviously she wasn't with her either. I hoped she wasn't alone.

I was the only soldier on my flight home, but I didn't mind. I just kept thinking about my family and seeing my Da at the gate when I landed. I remember wondering if he was still working for Mulligan or went back to Ireland with John. But he wasn't there to get me; he sent *his* driver. Apparently Da was working on the docks as a longshoreman, but that pay doesn't get you a personal chauffeur. I figured it out before he told me. Hell, I could've guessed it on the plane. Da was in charge now, ever since Mulligan was killed outside of his church. Da said that the Irish worked the docks, smuggling everything from cars and drugs to guns and people. The biggest job they had was exporting guns on cargo ships to the IRA in Ireland. They were the middle-man and without them, there would be nothing. "So, Da it's all yours now?" I asked. "No Cillian, it's all ours".

It was the end of 1971 and the mobs ran the city, especially the Irish. Shipping arsenal to the IRA gave every Irishman on 2nd Street a happy Christmas. It also gave Da the money to pay for Maeve's wedding in February. Hell, he could have paid for 3 Valentine's Day weddings. John even flew in from Dublin to spend the holiday as a family. He also brought a girl. The family was bigger than ever, me, Da, John and his girl, and Maeve and her fiancé, Tony. Yet we were still missing Mum. John left a chair for her at the end of the table with her shoes underneath. It was hard, but we got through it together. We celebrated the new year together too, before John returned to Ireland. Philadelphia has an enormous celebration every

year and this was the first we celebrated together, as a family. 1972, a new year with new beginnings and a new life away from the war.

Things were going great. Plans were being made for Maeve's wedding and Da was bringing in a lot of money for us and the neighborhood. John said that tensions were high in Ireland and a civil rights march was happening soon. Because of this, everyone in Ireland wanted a gun for protection and, of course, we were the first ones to ship them out. I became Da's second in command, his right-hand man. For once, the universe was right and still.

30 January, 1972, a day of great anger and sadness for my family and the Irish people. The Bloody Sunday massacre took place on this day during The Troubles in Ireland. British soldiers fired into a crowd of people, wounding 26 unarmed civilian protesters and killing 14, including John. All of those shot were Catholics, causing a war between us and the Protestants. Da, Maeve and I watched the coverage on the news and they didn't even say his name. John was the good one, the mummy's boy, he never did wrong or got in trouble. He even got a college degree just to help his compatriots gain their rightful liberty. But at least he was with Mum.

His funeral was within a week from Maeve's wedding. How do you even plan a funeral for your little brother? It's no secret that John was the quiet one. He was like how Da used to be: quiet and calm. John hated attention, so we decided to keep the funeral small and I made sure the flowers were green and gray to match the fields and sky back in Mayo. Da and I even decided to wear these same flowers as our boutonnieres for the wedding, in hopes to make it feel like he was there alongside Maeve, like the rest of us.

Maeve was entirely devastated and Da tried his best to lighten her mood. He wore a tie that Maeve made for him when she was a girl. It was a drawing of our farm with two stick-figures of them holding hands. She made sure to draw his cap and her pink dress too. This gave her a much-needed laugh and allowed for some excitement. Tony was excited too. He was jittery like a child waiting to sit on Santa's lap. He was a good man and loyal to our family. Maeve looked absolutely gorgeous walking down the aisle. I couldn't believe that my baby sister was the first to marry. For the first time since Mayo, Da was a quiet man once again, intently listening to every word Maeve said. He never said a single word unless she asked him to. Da cried at the ceremony and laughed at the reception. Let's be honest, we all look forward to the reception. It served as a distraction for us and the fellow Irishmen who lost their brethren to The Troubles as well. A good, old fashioned Irish wedding with a proper open bar and barrels of Guinness and whiskey. There was live music, drinking and dancing like the wars and tragedy ceased to exist. The night was one I'd never forget, and that still holds true. Once again, the universe was still and right. But I knew this wouldn't last, for we know what happened the last time it was still. And, to my unwanted validation, I was right. I couldn't find Tony for a quick chat about the dessert and when I walked into the back room of the house in search of my new brother-in-law, there was a body, dead, on the floor. But it wasn't Tony. Da was dead.

If Tony hadn't gone to the bathroom, I would've never found Da. The reception was at Maeve's house on Front Street and she would've found him the next morning, cold and purple. This was all too much. First Mum, then John, and now Da, who's next? Me? Maeve? Not only were we at war with Vietnam, war with the neighbors, war with the protestants, I was at war with myself and this life. With Da dead, I immediately became the new head of the Irish mob. I couldn't do it anymore; I couldn't put Maeve and her new husband and new life at risk. I knew what had to be done, we had to get out, and I decided that I would do whatever



it takes to protect what's left of my family. As the weeks went by, I formed a plan, a plan to escape and disappear, to protect Maeve.

I told no one about the plan, not my driver, not the second in command, not even Maeve. But I couldn't leave her to wonder if I'm dead or what happened to me. I couldn't bring more tragedy into her life. So, I wrote her a note, telling her that I'm going back home, to Mayo, to lay low and I'll write her as soon as possible. I obviously couldn't mail the letter, because what if it landed in the wrong hands. I walked over the letter bright and early the next morning, but Maeve wasn't home. Tony answered the door and invited me in for tea and bagels. I figured it wouldn't hurt to wait for my sister to return, so I took him up on the offer. We had a nice chat about the family and the wars. I told him to stay out of the life my Da brought me into and to work hard to support Maeve. I could trust Tony, like I said he was a good man, always loyal to us. "I'm getting out," I said, "leaving for good". His face was shocked, almost frozen in disbelief. "You're serious, aren't you?" replied Tony. I nodded. "I'm sorry Cillian", he said. I replied, "For what? It's not your fault I'm leaving". "I'm sorry" he said once again.

I began to feel warm; it wasn't cold out anymore. Did the heat come on? Was the tea too hot? Nobody tells you that it feels warm, it's always cold in death. But, when you're covered in a blanket of your own blood, it's warmer than the sheep's wool from the farm. It was dreadfully comforting. I wish someone would have told me about the warmth. I wish someone would have told me about Tony too, that he was the great nephew of Luca Alessi, the Philadelphian "Godfather" of the Italian mafia. I wish he wouldn't have said "I'm sorry", but he was always a good man, who had empathy. Nobody tells you that when you're dying, you see a kaleidoscope of memories all at once. You see your life at 5 years old in County Mayo. You see the move to

Dublin and Philadelphia at 18. You see the wars, the deaths and tragedies, the weddings, the birthdays and fortunes. Nobody tells you that you hear the sounds of your life like a thousand-piece orchestra in the pit of a theatre. You hear the sheep and the soft rain in the morning and the whispers of your schoolmates sharing a beer you stole from Da's stash. You hear the gunshots and screams, the tears and bagpipes at your little brother's funeral. You hear the laughter and the music at your baby sister's wedding. Nobody tells you that by dying at 26 years old, you'll never get married like Maeve or have kids like your parents. You'll never go back to college to finish your degree, like John. And as I'm lying here, in front of my killer, my sister's own husband, I realize that nobody tells you how quick it is. How life flashes by in the blink of an eye when facing death,  
and how quickly

the sun,

the flame

of life,

sets.

## Creative Nonfiction

### Pop's Tuesday

Maureen Black

2020-2021 school year

Tuesday, the second day of the week that most people have no feeling or opinion on. It's not as gloomy as a Monday and certainly not as alive as a Friday, it's just Tuesday. Well, this day came to be my absolute favorite day of the week. The reason being that Tuesday is the day of half priced movie tickets. Ever since I can remember, Tuesday was the one day of the week that I looked forward to the most. School ended at 2:27pm and being only a mere city block away from my elementary school, the daily commute was at most a five-minute walk. The bell would ring and I'd push my way to the front of the line so that I could run home and wait for the call. Being the smallest in my entire class, I somehow managed to push around even the bigger kids. At exactly three o'clock the phone would ring and I could hear the Charlie Brown muffled conversation as my grandfather asked my parents' permission to take me to the movies. They never said "No".

My grandfather, Pop-pop, as we called him, would load all of his seven grandchildren in the seats of his light grey Ford Escape. I was always the first to get picked up because I lived the closest. I wasn't allowed in the front seat, because that was strictly for the oldest, but I always got first "dibs" on the jackets. Pop kept a pile of old hoodies and zip-ups in the trunk because it was so cold in the theatre. The 2XL jackets were so big on my third-grade body, I was practically swimming in them. Standing outside underneath the fluorescent yellow "United Artist Theatres" sign on Columbus Boulevard, the feeling became more real with the anticipation to see the movie growing bigger. As we entered through the heavy glass doors, the smell of melted artificial butter fills the atmosphere alongside a yearning for cherry coke and the burning desire for the lights to dim and the movie to begin.

As a kid you watch PG rated movies with an uplifting, joyous soundtrack and an extremely colorful visual display. At such a young age, a child's mind is absorbing the world around them every second. The movies, books, and music we are exposed to as a child contribute to our development. This unknowing contribution forms a vision not present to the senses, called an "imagination". As we age, many of us tend to lose our imagination because we've now seen how malevolent the universe can be. We lose sight of our dreams and become adapted to a more realistic view on life. However, this wasn't the case for Pop. A man in his morals, but a pure child at heart. He fully immersed himself into whatever movie we were seeing that day, yes even the Disney Princess movies. Sometimes I think he was more excited for the movie than we all were.

This imagination and appreciation for film was how we made our strongest bond. Our relationship with film is nothing short of pure love, awe and amazement, reflecting our relationships with each other. In watching a movie of any genre, the erratic behavior of our uncontrolled imaginations left our thoughts and feelings all over the place. The shared thirst for adventure kept our complete and undivided attention from the moment the lights dimmed, with every thought and every emotion being experienced to the fullest. But movies aren't just solely entertainment for us. Within each film, the experience of another life, another adventure and another memory with each other instill in us the feeling of home. I cherish the qualities of film because it has created a lifelong bond with my family, especially Pop, that will last forever. The

call, the packed car rides, the jackets, the artificially buttered popcorn, the cherry coke with little ice, and sitting next to Pop for the movie are what I value most.

Well, you see, Pop was an old man after all and he was diagnosed with dementia a few years back. He fell ill and deteriorated rather quickly. It wasn't long before he was unable to drive to the movies, or even make it through one without needing medication or a change. We tried to take him as much as possible before it became too much. Each of the seven grandkids stopped coming along, one by one, starting with the eldest and working its way down. A couple months went by, maybe even a year, and Tuesdays became like every other day as us seven turned from children to adults. We now have full time jobs, our own houses and schooling to take priority over the movies. Their imaginations were abandoned in this so-called "adulthood", but mine never left. I never understood how quickly they could turn so cold and realistic when Pop showed us life through imagination and pyrotechnic color.

January 1st, 2020 the gates of hell seemed to open, and no this was not a movie. I was the only one of the seven grandchildren to visit Pop regularly. Imagine the heartbreak I felt when he couldn't understand why I wasn't allowed to come over and watch a movie during the pandemic. Imagine the heartbreak he felt when the last grandchild stopped visiting. Well, he quickly began to fail while quarantined and took a stroke in early August. Pop ultimately passed away on August 23, 2020. His child-like heart never caught up to his brain, even at 84 years old. It's now October, so the jackets are packed away, the light grey Ford Escape was sold and the last of the movie tickets are expired. All of the seven grandchildren are "grown up" and living out our own separate lives. We haven't been to the movies all together in years and we certainly cannot go now due to the coronavirus. But there will come a day when the theatres will fully open and it will be safe to go again. And when that day comes, you bet your dollar that we'll all be there, together, on a Tuesday.

## Drama

### The Hidden Traitor

Lianna Shumaker

2020-2021 school year

#### ACT I SCENE 1

##### *The Cast*

**LADY HAO** - 19-year-old with long, jet black hair, hazel eyes, and pale skin; engaged to the elder brother

**ELDER BROTHER** - 24-year-old, with short, flowy black hair, and deep brown eyes

**YOUNGER PRINCE** - 17-year-old with shoulder-length black hair, and narrow, brown eyes

**MERCENARY** - 23-year-old with short, dark brown hair and brown eyes

**MERCENARIES** - varying ages, working with the mercenary (flat characters)

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*(A balcony in the palace, in eastern China, in the evening. On the balcony stands a young lady, by the name of **LADY HAO**, looking over the river that runs through the palace with a gentle breeze rustling her jet-black hair, a one-piece silk red garment trailing slightly behind her. It is a seemingly peaceful night, only the slight rustling of leaves can be heard. **LADY HAO** begins to walk down an empty corridor but a faint shadow of light is painted on the floor from the last room of the hallway from a candle.)*

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**YOUNGER PRINCE:** It *must* be done in three days' time. My father plans on crowning my elder brother prince by sundown on the third day.

**MERCENARY:** How do you want me to kill him?

*(**LADY HAO** stops when she hears these words, a foot away from the doorway. The younger prince says something that is inaudible to the audience and **LADY HAO**)*

**MERCENARY:** Isn't that a little ruthless? Even though he is in line for the throne he is still your brother.

**YOUNGER PRINCE:** My *half-brother*. He was never considered a brother to me. The only reason he is being crowned is because his mother is my father's first wife. Even growing up, he was the favored child in my father's eyes; he always saw my older brother as the wiser one, but now I am going to make my father regret he ever chose my older brother over me. I cannot live in my brother's shadow for the rest of my life.

**MERCENARY:** What will we do if somebody finds out about our plan? You could be imprisoned for the rest of your life.

**YOUNGER PRINCE** (*laughs*): First, I have no intention of anyone finding out and if they do the blame will rest on your shoulders. Should anyone find out, they shall be executed immediately.

(*LADY HAO gasps, and covers her mouth with her hand, her back against the wall*)

**MERCENARY:** Did you hear that?

(*The scraping of chairs can be heard and the door creaks open but LADY HAO is not seen*)

**MERCENARY** (*uncertainly*): Do you think it could have just been the wind or something?

**YOUNGER PRINCE** (*snaps*): Have you ever heard the wind gasp? Find whomever that was. If that person tells my father or my brother this whole plan would be in ruins and I will put the blame on you.

(*The MERCENARY slowly closes the door*)

(*LADY HAO slips quietly down the corridor, glad to be out of that close call and runs into the ELDER BROTHER*)

**ELDER BROTHER** (*concerned*): What happened? Are you okay? You look like you just had a meeting with death.

**LADY HAO** (*panicked, out of breath*): It's... your younger brother... plot to kill...

**ELDER BROTHER:** Slow down for a moment. Explain from the beginning because I only caught fragments of what you just said. I'm sure everything's okay.

**LADY HAO:** He is going to kill you.

(*The ELDER BROTHER is now alert and places his hands on LADY HAO'S shoulders*)

**ELDER BROTHER:** (*shocked*) Who is?

**LADY HAO:** A mercenary. Your younger brother hired a mercenary to kill you, and it's going to happen soon. He wants to steal the throne from you.

**ELDER BROTHER:** When and how did you hear this?

**LADY HAO:** Just now. I happened to pass the room they were talking in as I was going to meet you. You won't make it to the third sundown if his plan works.

ACT I  
SCENE 2

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*(Unnamed corridor in the palace. The **YOUNGER PRINCE** and **MERCENARY** enter the stage (corridor) and are talking amongst each other in barely audible voice. Three days have passed and the sun is just about to set. The **YOUNGER PRINCE** wears a fine, green silk robe with a purple sash and the **MERCENARY** is wearing an all-black outfit)*

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**YOUNGER PRINCE:** Do you understand my instructions? Do *not* hesitate to kill anyone if they get in the way or hear about this plan. Nobody besides us can know about this plan or I could possibly be executed for treason. By sundown this evening my older brother will be dead.

**MERCENARY:** I understand

*(**MERCENARY** bows to the **YOUNGER PRINCE** and exits; the **YOUNGER PRINCE** exits on the other side)*

*(The **ELDER BROTHER** and **LADY HAO** enter the stage, talking to one another)*

**ELDER BROTHER:** I am going to be crowned by sundown, so my younger brother has to put his plan into action soon; he might have started it already. My father would think it to be ridiculous if I tell him my brother's plan but I cannot let him win.

**LADY HAO:** But your safety should be the top priority.

**ELDER BROTHER:** I know, but first we must figure out when my younger brother plans-

*(This line is cut off after multiple footsteps can be heard approaching the corridor, they are in. The **ELDER BROTHER** and **LADY HAO** quickly enter an empty room adjacent)*

**MERCENARY:** Does everyone understand his instructions? This *needs* to occur by sundown because our families' lives are on the line.

*(**LADY HAO** stares at the **ELDER BROTHER** with worried eyes, he appears to be thinking)*

**MERCENARY:** We need to find him now. Search every corridor in the palace. Make sure no room is left unscathed.

**ELDER BROTHER** (*whispers*): Follow me. I know a shortcut that will get us out of this room without alerting them.

**LADY HAO** (*Pulled along by the ELDER BROTHER*): How could your own brother actually want to kill you just for the throne.

**ELDER BROTHER**: I guess he feels as though he's been in my shadow. I mean, my father always chose me to attend meetings that held any significance with other provinces. But I would have never thought he would be capable of killing me.

**LADY HAO** (*stuttering, lip trembling*): What... What if his plan works?

**ELDER BROTHER** (*softly*): There is always a possibility, but do not think like that. Stay positive. I'm the one who dragged you into this whole mess and I promise you that I will do anything to protect you, even if it means my own life. It's my fault you are in danger so I plan on keeping you safe.

*(LADY HAO smiles softly at these words as they continue to race through the palace, nearing the courtyard at the palace's gates. Loud footsteps can be heard approaching them)*

**LADY HAO**: Where is your younger brother? What if we both die? Then your brother would just get to live a happy life as emperor and in the end, he would have gotten what he wanted.

**ELDER BROTHER**: I have no intention of letting him succeed.

**MERCENARY**: I hear footsteps. Come over here now.

*(They are now in the courtyard)*

**ELDER BROTHER**: Run!

**YOUNGER PRINCE** (*overseeing the action unfolding in the courtyard*): Finally, my brother's time has come to an end.

**ELDER BROTHER** (*Draws a sword from his robe. They are now surrounded by the MERCENARY and his accomplices*): I promise I'll protect you until the end!

**LADY HAO** (*Stares intently into the ELDER BROTHER'S eyes*): That's what I'm afraid of. Promise me, if I don't make it, you'll still live your life to the fullest and fall in love again. Just remember that I will always love you, no matter what happens today.

**MERCENARY** (*commands*): Attack now. Make sure both of them don't live to see another day.

**YOUNGER PRINCE** (*to LADY HAO*): It really is such a shame that I had to order them to kill you, but since you are helping my older brother, it must be done. After all, it is my brother's fault you were dragged into this mess. I intended to only have my brother killed.

**LADY HAO** (*watching as the ELDER BROTHER protects her, with much determination replies*): How could you do this to your own brother?! He never did anything to deserve this, you're just a power-hungry, pathetic excuse for a human being.

**YOUNGER PRINCE**: Why do I always get asked that question? My older brother has always overshadowed me throughout my whole life, but now it is time for my brother to be the weak, helpless one. (*to the MERCENARIES*) Why haven't you killed them yet? Is it so hard to kill two people; One, who is defenseless. It is practically 20 against one.

**MERCENARY** (*bows to the YOUNGER PRINCE*): I am sorry sir. Your brother is more skilled than we expected at combat.

**YOUNGER PRINCE** (*enraged*): Are you so pathetic that you cannot follow this simple task I gave you. Give me your bow, I will do it myself if I have too. I'm tired of my father never paying attention to me, all of his attention on the *golden* prince.

*(He notches an arrow and aims it at his older brother but LADY HAO pushes herself in the ELDER BROTHER'S place, and the arrow pierces her chest. Blood begins to emerge as she falls to the ground)*

**ELDER BROTHER** (*vehement, staring at dull, half-open eyes of LADY HAO*): Why? Why me? Why her? Let's have a fight, just you and me, unless you're going to hide behind mercenaries like the coward you are.

**YOUNGER PRINCE** (*unsheathes his sword*): Fine, but you know even if you win, you'll still be killed.

*(Their swords clash and the ELDER BROTHER quickly gains the upper hand)*

**ELDER BROTHER** (*snarls, sword at YOUNGER PRINCE'S neck*): You do realize with even the slightest slip of my hand you will be dead.

**YOUNGER PRINCE** (*fear creeping into his words*): Like you could actually kill your own brother. You don't have the courage to.

**ELDER BROTHER** (*drives his sword into the YOUNGER PRINCE'S throat*): Now you know what it feels like to die. Never underestimate what I am capable of. You tried to take everything from me.

*(The MERCENARY'S sword pierces the ELDER BROTHER'S chest, and a stunned look crosses his face as both of them collapse on the ground)*



**YOUNGER PRINCE** (*rasps*): I told you that you'll be killed. You *alone* brought this upon yourself and Lady Hao.

**ELDER BROTHER** (*coughing*): At least when I die, I'll actually have some people who mourn me, whereas you will only be remembered as the insane coward who murdered innocent people. You may have succeeded in killing me but your plan has still failed after all of your efforts because you will not live to be crowned

*(The **YOUNGER PRINCE'S** eyes slowly become listless and his body becomes completely limp. The **ELDER BROTHER'S** last breath is uttered, and he remains motionless on the ground, with his eyes dull and empty. A steady pool of blood becomes more prominent, surrounding the **ELDER BROTHER.**)*

## Artwork

### A Glimmer of Hope by Maureen Black



A striking dove mid-flight: the dove was drawn with a 2B pencil, cut out and glued onto a watercolor (wet on wet) background, and topped off with a black acrylic background.

Faceless Woman with Umbrella by Madison Swenson



A monochrome drawing picturing a faceless woman wearing a dress and hat and holding an umbrella.



A Butterfly Painting by Amaya Moss



A turquoise butterfly with black details mid-flight on a blue/gray background.

I Sea You by Madeline Geunes



An acrylic painting on canvas of a patterned pastel blue, pink, and purple seahorse making eye contact with a stark dark eye.



Royal French Bulldog by Samantha Nalencz



An acrylic painting on paper of an adorably pensive all-white French Bulldog dressed in a pink, gold, and white royal garment and white ruff.

Banksy/Andy Warhol Layout Combination by Adriana Hernandez



A Banksy/Andy Warhol layout combination and digital study featuring a child holding a flare, a black playful dog looking up at its owner, and a pensive man in round specs.



Cezanne Still Life Copy by Amaya Walls



A still life acrylic painting on paper of a vase and pears that are mostly green in color and in various stages of ripeness.

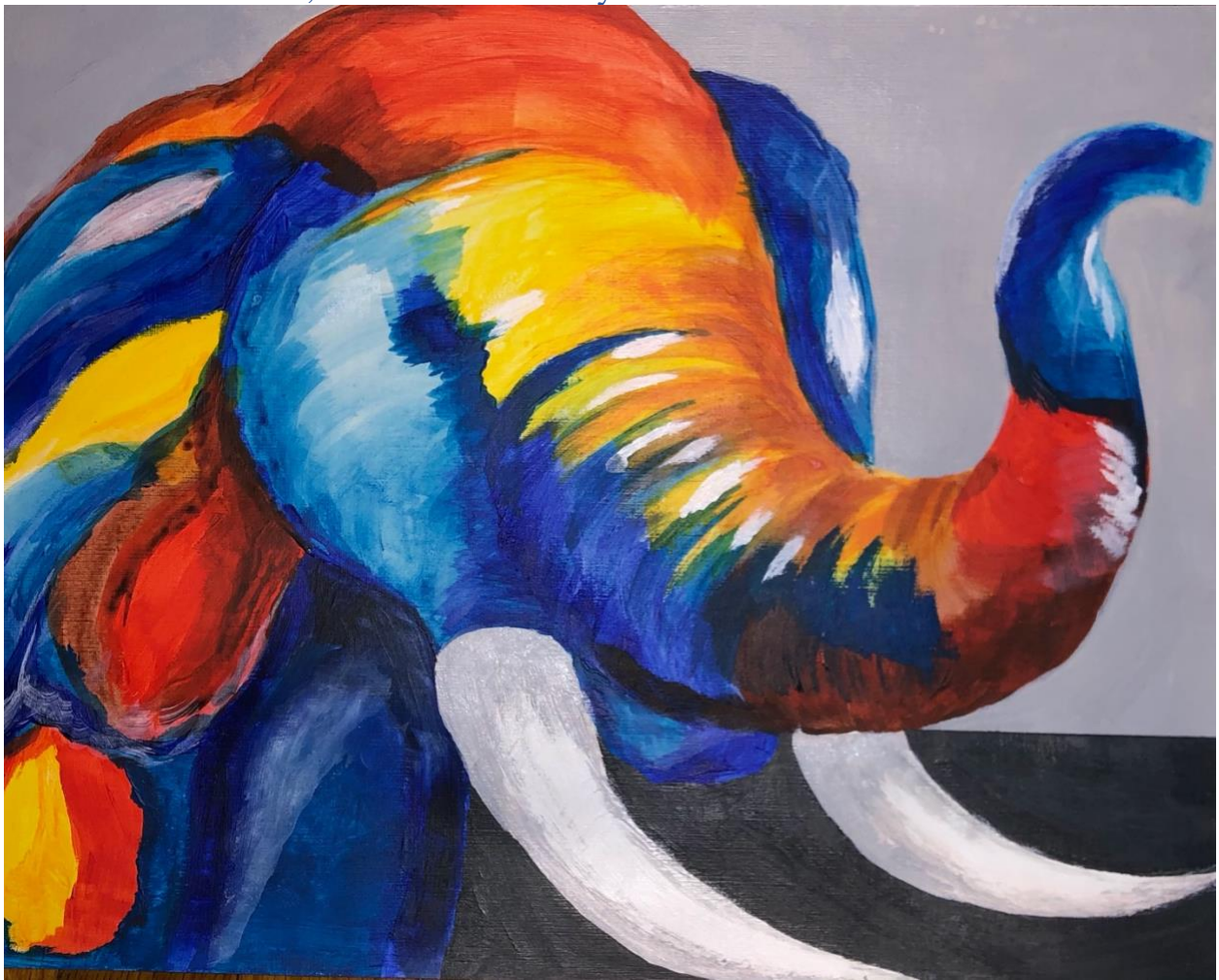


Winter Moon by Nivia McNeil



An acrylic painting on paper of a bright white full moon shining down on a picturesque and snowy winter scene of towering evergreen trees.

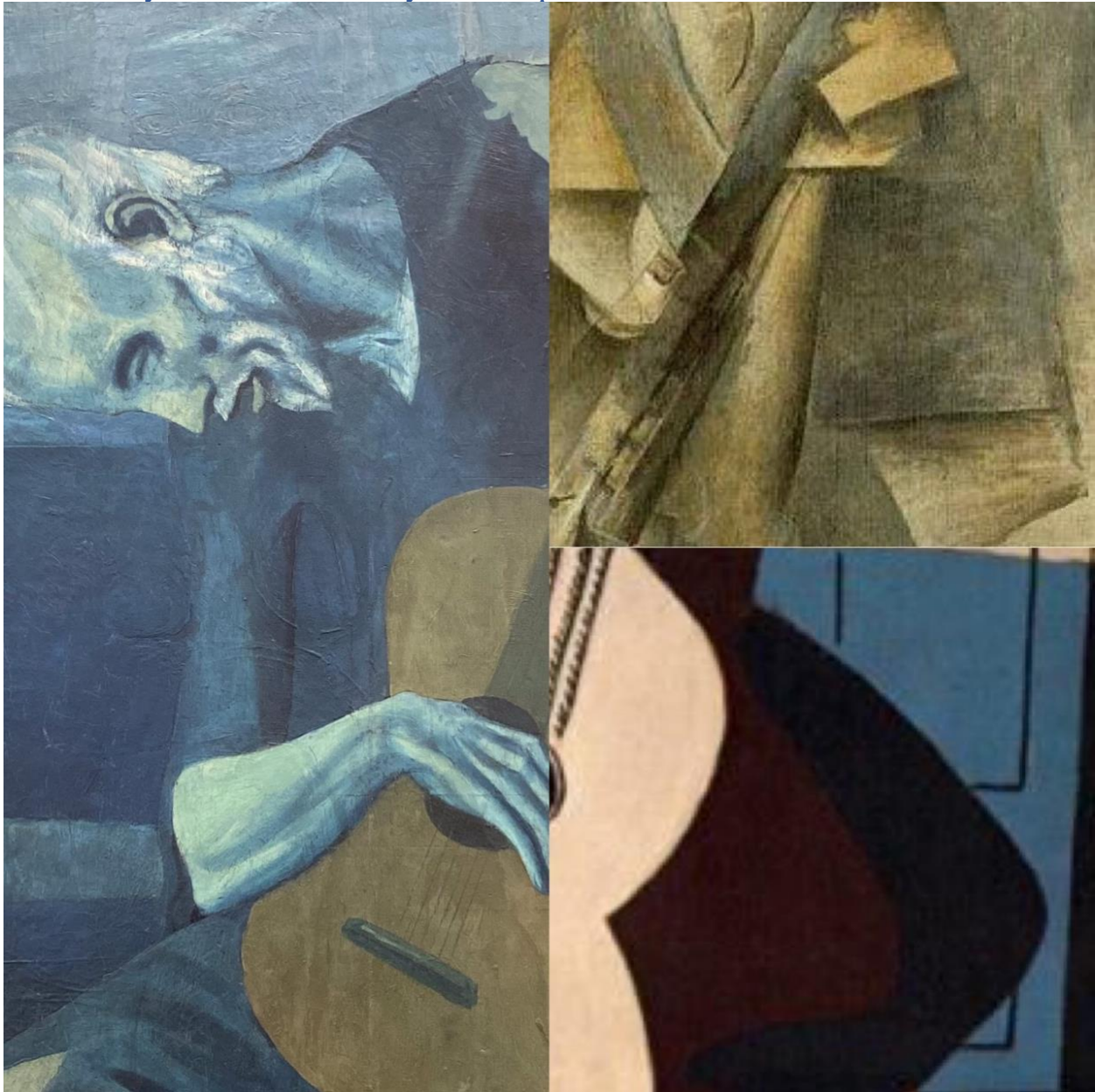
Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue by Adriana Hernandez



An acrylic painting on paper of a delightful royal blue, firetruck red, and burnt yellow elephant with long white tusks lifting its trunk in greeting.



Picasso Layout Combination by Dominique Joint



A Picasso layout combination and digital study featuring an older musician hunched over his guitar in three different segments.

Old Master Layout Combination by Andrew Persaud



An old master layout combination and digital study featuring pink, orange, and purple segments of people looking off into space.



Banksy Layout Combination by Chelsea Carfrey



A Banksy Layout combination and digital study featuring electric blue hues of a child catching ashes with his tongue and a man with a stethoscope.



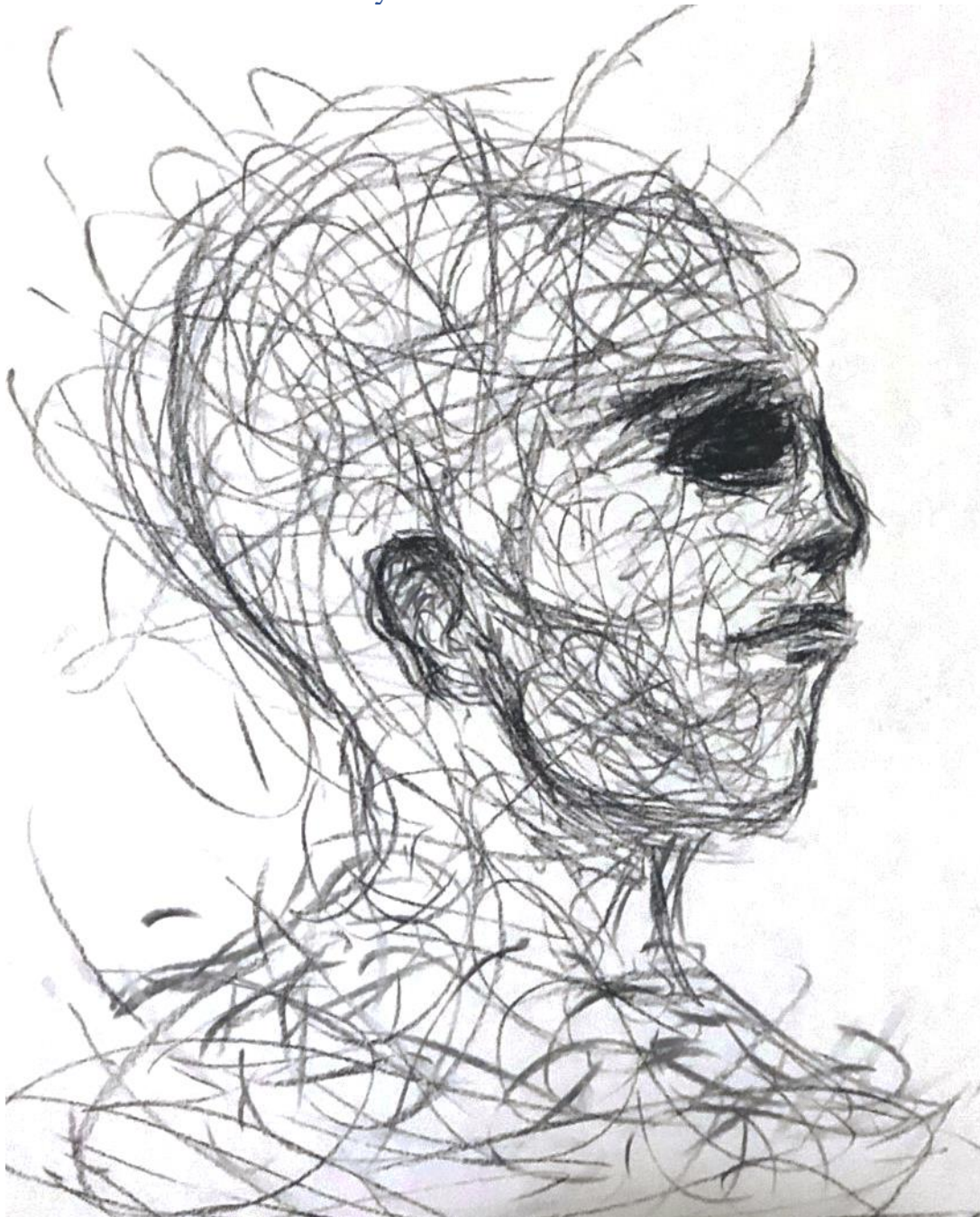
Old Master Layout Combination by Isabella Nauss



An old master layout combination and digital study featuring hands in various positions with hues of monochrome colors, magenta, and sunflower yellow.



Portrait After Adam Rich by Rahil Adam



A portrait after Adam Reich with a monochrome color scheme that features a series of abstract line work depicting a face and blacked-out eyes.



Banksy/Pollock Layout Combination by Erin Hoban



A Banksy/Pollock Layout Combination and digital study featuring a little girl in a dress reaching out for a red heart-shaped balloon and Pollock-style abstract lines.



Who's Afraid of Orange, Green and Purple by Megan Briggs



An acrylic painting on paper of two blood orange, shamrock green, and purple faces and geometric shapes.

Giorgio Morandi-Like Study by Nicolaas Weggelaar



A still life acrylic painting on paper that depicts a pitcher and cylindrical, rounded, and rectangular objects of mostly primary colors with a muted background.



Medusa Manga by Lily Guo



An acrylic painting on canvas of a Japanese comic book and graphic novel (manga) inspired Medusa with venomous snakes for hair and stinging tentacles.



## Thank You

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