

**Aquila Review**

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*Texas A&M University-Texarkana*

## 2023 *Aquila Review*

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## Contents

Fitting in ( <i>Poetry</i> )	DAVID ATWOOD	05
Charles Perrault's "The Fairy" —A Translation ( <i>Fiction</i> )	HOLLIS THOMPSON	06
Turned Out Early with a Peg Leg ( <i>Poetry</i> )	BENNETT SEWELL	09
<i>Breaks</i> ( <i>Drama</i> )	SARAH GARRISON	13
The Choice ( <i>Drama</i> )	BRANDON PETTEY	19
<i>Enough Is Enough</i>	BRANDON PETTEY	21
"Bartleby, the Scrivener": An Unraveling" ( <i>Nonfiction</i> )	AUDEY ENGLISH	27
Out of Wedlock ( <i>Poetry</i> )	SANDRA WASSILIE	30
Rebecca ( <i>Drama</i> )	HAILEY FREEMAN	31
Social Responsibility: Impact on Prevention of Domestic Violence ( <i>Nonfiction</i> )	KIMBERLY ROBINSON	33
On the Way to the San Francisco Opera ( <i>Poetry</i> )	SANDRA WASSILIE	39
Noise ( <i>Poetry</i> )	DAVID ATWOOD	40
Blue Moon ( <i>Poetry</i> )	SUSAN HELENE	41
Flight at Dusk ( <i>Poetry</i> )	SANDRA WASSILIE	42
On a Theme from the Magnificat ( <i>Drama</i> )	HOLLIS THOMPSON	43
<i>The Christmas Letters</i> ( <i>Drama</i> )	CALEB DAN GAMMONS	53
Human over Avatar ( <i>Fiction</i> )	MIRACLE JONES	60
<i>Skin Condition</i> ( <i>Drama</i> )	PAGE PETRUCKA	66
Learning to Live Again ( <i>Fiction</i> )	LARA MARTIN	74
<i>Gnoming Viral</i> ( <i>Drama</i> )	JORDAN HIGH	78
Excerpts from <i>The Steel Ball Quietly</i> <i>Clatters</i> ( <i>Fiction</i> )	ELIEL JOSUE ANDRADE LEAL	83
Cooley Farm ( <i>Fiction</i> )	JASON CLAYTON	90
Along the Creek ( <i>Poetry</i> )	SWETHA AMIT	106
Black Ghazal I ( <i>Poetry</i> )	THOMAS KNEELAND	107
Nature's Phases ( <i>Poetry</i> )	SWETHA AMIT	108

Summer Haiku ( <i>Poetry</i> )	CASEY PURIFOY	109
mt. rainier & Black men are the same ( <i>Poetry</i> )	THOMAS KNEELAND	110
Savoring Tulips ( <i>Poetry</i> )	SWETHA AMIT	111
The Grove ( <i>Poetry</i> )	SUSAN HELENE	112
The Creative Syntax of Edgar Allan Poe ( <i>Nonfiction</i> )	CHLOE FINCHER	113
Going Down? ( <i>Fiction</i> )	SUSAN HELENE	116
sermon on the jagged mount ( <i>Poetry</i> )	THOMAS KNEELAND	118
A Vindication of Vanilla ( <i>Poetry</i> )	HOLLIS THOMPSON	119
Rhyme Theory ( <i>Poetic Essay</i> )	J. LAMSON MEYER	121
Stop the Clock: Reconceptualizing Time and Trauma in the Short Story ( <i>Nonfiction</i> )	BRANDON PETTEY	124
The Old Man and the Seat ( <i>Fiction</i> )	JOSHUA ZEITLER	128
Holiday Board-um ( <i>Drama</i> )	PAGE PETRUCKA	130
The Dragon with No Flame ( <i>Art, Fiction</i> )	THOMAS TYE-CORNELIUS	139
<u>About the Contributors</u>		179

## **Fitting in**

*David Atwood*

*I hear my bones. I hear them growing.*  
Joaquin the Spaniard said as he spread  
too long for the beds in Basque, then  
too large for the chaise lounge of France.

Too tall for the doors of Europe,  
too colossal for the being he became.  
Too high for a Queen who commanded he bare,  
taller than all who paid for his display.

He grew forever closer to heaven  
but never could grow beyond  
the torture in the bends of his joints,  
or the strain of the stretch of his spine.

Summers grew the Oak trunks broad  
and tall along the Altzo Azpi valley  
until his family tree wanted to see  
if the Giant had outgrown his grave.

When they reached into earth  
and dug up his bones  
for the first time the world found  
Joaquin fit perfectly in the ground.

## **Charles Perrault's "The Fairy"—A Translation**

*Hollis Thompson*

*Life and death are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruit. — Proverbs 18.21*

Once, there was a widow who had two daughters. The firstborn, Fanchon, was so much like her mother in personality and appearance that you could easily mistake the daughter for the mother. Those two were always so mean and arrogant that no one could stand living under the same roof with them. The younger one, Véronique, was the very image of her father. You could see his gentleness and kindness living on in her. This made her one of the most beautiful young women you could ever have seen.

This mother loved her eldest daughter like a vain person loves their reflection, and, at the same time, she couldn't stand her younger daughter. She made Véronique work all day like a slave, and, when evening came, she wouldn't even let her eat in the same room as her and Fanchon.

One of the tasks that poor Véronique had to do twice a day was to go, lugging a huge bucket, and fetch water from a massive well that was two miles from their house. One day, when she was at the well, she saw a poor woman coming towards her. The woman came up to Véronique and begged her for a drink of water.

"Of course, Madame!" the young woman said, and she immediately threw the bucket into the well and drew it up filled with water. She then lifted the heavy bucket to the woman's mouth so that she could drink more easily.

After she had a drink, the woman told her, "You are so beautiful, so good, and so kind that I can't stop myself from giving you a gift."

You see, this was not really a poor woman; she was actually a Fairy who had taken on that form in order to test how far the kindness of this young woman would go.

"I grant you this gift," the Fairy went on. "With every word that you say, a flower or a precious stone will come out of your mouth."

As soon as Véronique made it back home, her mother scolded her for taking so long at the well.

"I beg your pardon, Mother," said poor Véronique. "I'm sorry that I stayed so long."

And, with these words, two roses, two pearls, and two large diamonds fell out of her mouth.

“What is wrong with my eyes?” exclaimed the mother, totally astonished. “I thought I just saw pearls and diamonds fall out of your mouth! What just happened, my daughter?” (This was the first time she had ever called Véronique her daughter.)

Poor Véronique, naively thinking that maybe now her mother was finally going to love her, told her everything that happened before she arrived home . . . but not without spilling a torrent of diamonds.

*I really need to send Fanchon there so that the same thing will happen to her,* the mother thought.

“Come here, Fanchon,” she called. “Do you see what falls from the mouth of your sister when she speaks? Wouldn’t it be great for you to have the same gift? All you have to do is go draw water out of the well, and, when a poor woman asks you for a drink, respectfully give her one.”

“Fine. If you make me, I’ll go have a look around the well,” the jerk responded.

“And I want you back here,” the mother said, “within the hour.”

Fanchon went, but she grumbled under her breath the whole way there like she did whenever her mother asked her to do something. She took the prettiest silver bottle that they had in the house. As soon as Fanchon arrived at the well, she saw a lady in a most magnificent dress come out of the woods. She asked Fanchon for a drink of water. This was the same fairy who had appeared to her sister, but she had now taken on the demeanor and clothing of a princess in order to see how far the cruelty of this young woman would go.

“Is that why I came here?” sneered this arrogant jerk. “To give you a drink? Oh, sure! I only brought this silver bottle for the express purpose of giving a drink to the poor lady! Get lost!”

“You are not very kind,” the Fairy chided her without any trace of anger. “Very well! Since you are so unkind, I grant you this gift: with every word that you say, a snake or toad will come out of your mouth.”

As soon as Fanchon got home and her mother laid eyes on her, she called, “Well, how did it go, my daughter?”

“Oh, how it went, Mother!” the jerk responded, and two vipers and two toads fell out.

“Heaven defend us!” exclaimed the mother. “What am I seeing? This is all your sister’s fault, and I’ll make her pay!”

She immediately ran to find Véronique and batter her. Poor Véronique fled and went into the nearby forest for protection.

The son of the king, who was on his way back home from hunting, ran into Véronique. She was very beautiful in his eyes, and he asked her why she was crying all alone.

“Oh, *Monsieur*! My mother drove me out of my home.”

The prince, who saw five or six pearls and as many diamonds fall out of her mouth, asked her to tell him where they came from, and she told him the entire story.

The prince fell in love, and he considered Véronique’s gift to be more valuable than any dowry a person could give. He took Véronique to the palace of the king, his father, and married her. As for her sister, she became so hateful that her own mother drove her out of their house and, since the jerk could not find another person who wanted to take her in, she went out to die in a corner of the woods.

Perrault’s Moral:

Diamonds and coins  
Can do much for one’s status,  
Yet gentle words have even more power  
And are the greatest gift.  
Integrity takes work.  
It takes a little kindness,  
But, sooner or later, it will pay back those who have it,  
And, most of the time, the reward comes  
When you least think it will.

Translator’s Moral:

The ones who speak cruel words  
Will find they curse themselves,  
But the words of kind people  
Will bless the ones who speak.



## **Turned Out Early with a Peg Leg**

*Bennett Sewell*

I'll never forget as long as I live,  
as I looked at the empty space beneath the sheet,  
my good doctor said to me,  
his hand holding my medical chart  
standing tall by my bedside,  
his eyes locked to mine,  
his white coat so clean, his rumpled scrubs beneath so green,  
he said with a voice confident and concerned,  
"Joe, all went well. My staff and I have done what we needed to do.  
The healing is up to you."  
He then turned to my mother and said, ever so softly,  
"Only time will tell."  
But I heard him as well; only time will tell what? What?  
A fright from a dark night jumped into my throat to join the others and began to  
swell.

Looking, looking, looking for someone, anyone to tell me why.  
To be able to say goodbye without a cry.  
To find something, anything beautiful and proud to take its place  
for another day, a different race.

My mother said to me, her hand on my shoulder,  
standing tall by my side as I needed her to be  
in our kitchen that smelled so good, as did she,  
of a glass of cold milk with cream on top  
and a crispy chicken leg waiting for me,  
her eyes on my fright  
with a voice soft and yet so strong,  
"Son, I know, I know. There is so much hurt and worry that you carry now, but it  
will fade with time. There is not now, and never will be, blame or shame.  
Eagles fly high and wide and build fine nests to share on wings, not legs.  
Rabbits hop faster on two than turtles crawl on four,  
and millipedes on so many are oh-so slow.  
Your father and I are so proud of you.  
You can find your place and make your mark on any world of your choosing  
on one leg or two. It's up to you."

The stump has closed and hardened, but my eyes remain open and soft.  
A random pain on a step, an occasional tear in between.  
And a persistent fret. What did the doctor mean when he said only time will tell?  
I try not to dwell on how it used to be, but sometimes I do.  
To wish for what was and what is no longer to be.  
Running as one with a friendly wind,  
every breath big and bold, every stride long and strong,  
riding my favorite song on a smile  
or running in a misting rain, my face to the sky, in love with life,  
feeling every tiny drop of it.

Looking, looking, looking for someone, anyone to tell me why,  
To be able to say goodbye without a cry.  
To find something, anything beautiful and proud to take its place  
for another day, a different race,

My teacher said to me, her hand holding a piece of chalk,  
standing tall beside her desk,  
her red marking pencil stuck in the bun of her gray hair,  
her brown eyes behind her rimless bifocals locked on what she saw in me,  
with a voice of certainty and reason,  
“Mr. Smith, don’t you fear.  
You can add faster than a cash register,  
you look longer and see more than most,  
and you listen longer and hear more than most.  
Your love of the spoken and written word is loud.  
Ideas point and pave the way for what legs carry.  
On one leg or two, it’s up to you.”

Looking, looking, looking for someone, anyone to tell me why.  
To be able to say goodbye without a cry.  
To find something, anything beautiful and proud to take its place  
for another day, a different race.

The salesman said to me with his hand outstretched to mine,  
standing tall on the floor of the department store,  
his shoes shined and trousers pressed,  
a fresh starched shirt each and every day,  
with his eyes on what I needed and a smile in his voice,  
“Young man, always keep two smiles in your pocket.

If they come, one for them and one for you.  
If they don't come, you still have yours,  
but be assured they will, today or tomorrow,  
looking for the good that you do.  
On one leg or two, it's up to you."

Looking, looking, looking for someone, anyone to tell me why.  
To be able to say goodbye without a cry.  
To find something, anything beautiful and proud to take its place  
for another day, a different race.

The old man said to me,  
his palms face down on the table,  
sitting slightly bent forward in his favorite chair,  
he, one of three, a wholly trinity if there ever was one,  
with their glasses, hearing aids, absent teeth, walking sticks, and fixed opinions,  
opining on the past, present, and future with varying degrees of allegiance to the  
truth, connecting and sharing, an early morning fixture in the corner of the coffee  
shop as their time leaked out beneath the back door, with his eyes on me, a  
neighborhood kid that he had known since I crawled out through an open front  
door seeking and rolled down six front steps screaming,  
with his voice as from above,  
"Joe, if you want advice from us, will you give it to others when they ask?  
I said, "Yessir, I will."  
There was a moment of silence,  
and he said, "Roll it big and don't look back."  
The next old man placed his left hand in the palm of his right hand  
and said, "Lean to your good side. Take care of both."  
The next old man raised his hands as far as he could  
and said, "Sing to those whom you love and who love you.  
We all sing and sob in the same choir.  
You are not alone."

There was another moment of silence, and then the waitress,  
with her calico apron and comfortable shoes, poured another round of coffee  
as she had been doing from a time before I was born  
with her eyes on the task at hand, the receiving cup,  
and said with her voice brimming with confidence born of love,

“Always be good to your dog. Make sure he gets his exercise and takes medicine even though he doesn’t like it. And give him a bone to chew on every once in a while.”

There was another moment of silence and then the first old man said,

“Joe, do *you* understand?”

I’ll never forget as long as I live.

I stood as tall as I could and said,

“Yessir, on one leg or two, I *do*.”

## **Breaks**

*Sarah Garrison*

### Characters

ALEX, 12, a shy boy suffering abuse

AMANDA, 13, a tomboyish girl always ready for the next adventure

BILLY, 13, an ambitious young boy and leader of the pack

### Time and Place

The action takes place in the 1960s in a backyard found in a poor neighborhood.

*(Lights rise on a sunny afternoon in ALEX's backyard. ALEX, AMANDA, and BILLY are playing on a tire formation. BILLY jumps off the tires.)*

BILLY: What do you guys say? Let's do something else. I'm bored of playing this game.

AMANDA: "You guys?" I'm clearly a girl, Billy.

BILLY: It's just a figure of speech. Anyway, if you're such a girl why don't you go get your fingernails painted instead of hanging out with us boys?

AMANDA: Oh please. I don't need fingernail paint to beat you in a fight, but it sure would make me look better.

ALEX: Guys, please, don't fight! Billy, we can play something different, but please quit picking on Amanda. You know what they say when you pick on girls anyway. They say you like them. So is that it? You like Amanda? That's it! I knew it! You're always messing with her.

BILLY: I do not! And if you ever say that again, I'll punch you in the face! I mean it. I only like pretty girls. You'd know if I was flirting. I always pull the smooth moves on the ladies. Besides, if I can do something, I damn well better do it.

AMANDA: Boys, boys. Let's not get our panties in a twist—that's another figure of speech—over who likes me and who doesn't. How about I show you guys a

AMANDA (CONT.): surprise my dad got for us!

*(SHE pulls out a set of three Nerf guns from behind the tires.)*

Seems like you guys want to fight. How about a nice little gunfight to settle our differences? Just like in the westerns. Besides, it's a beautiful day and you know what they say: "A summer breeze is a sigh from the sky."

BILLY: Okay, Amanda. Enough with the poetry. I'm tired of hearing about your old movies and fancy-suit dad. Let me see one of those guns.

*(HE takes a gun and shoots ALEX in the leg.)*

These are awesome!

ALEX: Hey! Give me one of those! You're going down now, Billy!

*(ALEX grabs a gun. HE and BILLY start shooting at each other. AMANDA joins in. After a beat, THEY tire out and put down the guns.)*

AMANDA: Well, that was exhausting. You guys must have shot these guns before. I could barely keep up.

*(A beat passes as THEY catch their breaths.)*

Now what do we do?

BILLY: Well, since I'm clearly a better shooter than Alex, how about we do something else? Something like . . .

*(HE looks around.)*

Oh! Something like this!

*(HE gathers up some ropes attached to a tire.)*

ALEX: No. My dad said we can't put up the tire swing until he's home, and that's not for three days. He's on a call in San Francisco. I don't want to put it up without him. He might get really mad, you guys . . . even if we do it right.

BILLY: No, he won't! He'll be proud! Come on! I'll grab the rope. Amanda, you climb the tree, and Alex, you help me tie the rope onto the tire and balance it.

ALEX: Guys, I really don't think we should.

AMANDA: Oh, come on, Alex! Don't be a spoilsport. My dad says, "One should always chase opportunity." I'm not sure about you, Alex, but I've learned that you've gotta take risks sometimes. I don't mean to be pushy like Billy, but I really think you should think about it. Wouldn't it be awesome to put your swing up yourself? It could be a story you tell when you're old. Look at me: "I'm old Alex. I put up that tire swing back in my day with my old buddies Amanda and, oh, what was that bastard's name . . . ?"

BILLY: Hey! Not funny, Amanda. Come on, Alex! She's right. Let's put it up. What's the worst that could really happen?

ALEX: Okay . . .

*(AMANDA begins to climb the tree. BILLY gathers the items THEY need from around the yard and unties the ropes from the tire. ALEX watches nervously.)*

BILLY: Alex! Why aren't you helping?

ALEX: Because you guys don't understand how mad my dad can get. I'm scared that if he comes home and things are messed up . . .

BILLY: Messed up? You think we're gonna mess this up? It's just hanging a tire swing, for Christ's sake. I think we can manage. Don't you go droning on about your dad. We all know he beats your ass. Just for one time you should stick up to that old lug.

ALEX: You don't understand, Billy! My parents aren't all hugs and rainbows and participation trophies like yours! I wish you guys would just listen! My dad said not to, and I'm going to listen to him. Otherwise, he's—like you said—he's gonna beat my ass!

AMANDA: Well, what if we took the blame? What if we said we snuck over here during the night and put it up?

ALEX: I don't think that'll go over with him. I'm telling you, he gets mad over nothing. Just the other night, my mom was making dinner: ham and green beans. My dad came barreling through the door and started yelling at her that the green beans weren't the right brand. He said he wanted the Kroger brand, not some cheap crap. He started screaming. She started screaming. And that was just about green beans! He's just mean, you guys.

BILLY: Now, Alex. Please. Toughen up and be a man. Your dad isn't gonna be here for *three more days*. That's enough time to put it up and take it back down. That's it! We can put it up today and take it down tomorrow night! Your dad will never know.

ALEX: Okay. I guess that would be all right . . . but we have to make sure it's taken down before he gets home.

AMANDA: What about your mom, Alex? Won't she tell your dad?

ALEX: Don't worry about her. She won't do anything to make my dad upset. She's scared of him, too. She sticks up for me, but I know she's scared. She sleeps with a knife on the night table. Just in case. Besides, my dad doesn't smack her around like he does me. I think he still loves her somewhere.

BILLY: Okay, then. Let's put the damn thing up.

*(BILLY crosses to the materials and rifles through them. HE hands ALEX the ropes and AMANDA the tire.)*

AMANDA: I thought I was climbing the tree?

ALEX: It's okay, Amanda. I'll climb the tree. I've been climbing this tree since I can remember. One time, when I was about seven, my dad told me that we were going to build a treehouse up there. Do you know how long I looked forward to that? I thought about that treehouse before I'd go to bed. It helped me drown out the yelling my dad and mom were doing. I'd just sit in my room and picture this tree. I guess the tire swing is good enough, but I'm still waiting on that treehouse. One day, you guys! We'll build that treehouse and just hang out in this tree forever.

*(A beat passes while THEY imagine the treehouse.)*



BILLY: Well, I'm gonna need a good, steady hand to help me balance the tire. Amanda, you don't mind, do you?

AMANDA: I guess not, but I get to go on the swing first once it's put up. After all, ladies first.

*(ALEX begins to climb the tree. BILLY grabs a long rope and tosses it around a branch.)*

BILLY: Okay, perfect. Now we need you to tie a good knot around the tree branch, Alex. Can you do that?

ALEX: I think so. Boy Scouts, remember?

BILLY: Oh, yeah. They did teach us all those fancy knots. I can't believe you remember all that. All I remember is that camping trip we went on—the one where it never stopped raining. I swore to God that night that I'd never be a Boy Scout. Matter of fact, I swore I'd never go camping again! I love being outdoors, but that camping was too much for me. I've got faith in you, though, Alex.

AMANDA: Hurry up!

*(ALEX reaches the branch with the rope. HE climbs out onto the branch and grabs the rope. HE slips a little.)*

BILLY: Don't fall!

AMANDA: Careful, Alex! Please!

ALEX: You guys. Stop worrying. I've got this. The worst I could do is fall, and that wouldn't even hurt! I'm only about seven feet off the ground. What do you think, Billy? That wouldn't even break my leg. Even if I did break my leg, that wouldn't be all bad. I'd get to stay in bed all day doing nothing. Not even school. Maybe my dad would even give me a break with all the yelling and cussing, you know? I could use it, you know. A break.

*(HE knots the rope onto the tree branch.)*

Okay! The knot's tied. Take care of the tire, you guys!

*(AMANDA and BILLY lift the tire up and tie the rope around the top. The rope holds the weight for a beat and then snaps. The branch moves in response, and ALEX falls. Instead of hitting the ground, HE gets caught in the rope around his arms throat. HE cries out as his neck snaps back, and HE falls unconscious.)*

AMANDA AND BILLY: Alex!

*(Lights fade out as ALEX, still caught in the rope, swings slowly back and forth under the branch.)*

# **The Choice**

*Brandon Pettey*

## Character

BILL, sixty-five-year-old male widower and alcoholic

## Time and Place

The bar of a local Chili's restaurant.

BILL: Hey, Steve, looks like we're back where it all began. First, you bought me a shot. Then I had to buy you and everyone else a round. Couldn't let you outdo me. You remember that you bet me I wouldn't get that blonde's phone number? How'd that turn out for you? Of course, I didn't call her because I love my wife. But I proved that I still got it. I think when it was all said and done we both went home wasted and broke. I don't know who was angrier, your wife or mine.

Now you're the only one that gets in trouble. I sure do miss Anna, and I would pay all the money in the world to get her back. But at least now I'm a free man. Nobody to gripe at me for having a little fun. Nobody constantly calling my phone asking me where I am saying that they're worried. Of course Rob says he loves me and wants to help, but he's grown and has his own stuff to take care of. Yup. I'm riding solo. Except I still have you! Well, tonight is on me. Your money is no good tonight, and I don't want to hear another damned word about it. You hear me?

Sure would be nice if this town had some real bars. It's hard to have any fun getting kicked out of a Chili's. Last time I got picked up the guy next to me in the cell asked what I was in for, as always. Real big guy. Arms like tree trunks. I told him loitering at Chili's and then being drunk in public. He laughed in my face. He's lucky I didn't want a new charge, or I would have put him on his ass. Don't look at me like that. The bigger they are, the harder they fall.

Listen, man. We need to talk. I went to the doctor last week. They ran their tests and charged me an arm and a leg. The nurse calls me a couple days later and says the doctor needs to talk to me in person. You know they just wanted to charge for another office visit. Anyway, the egghead doctor comes in and tells me that we

BILL (CONT.): need to have a serious conversation. He says that I have to stop drinking if I want to live. My liver and kidneys are failing.

I figure he's full of it. Dad drank until the day he died, and it didn't seem to slow him down. Well, I felt like I had to tell Rob, and he wants me to get my act together and move in with him. I have to quit drinking. That means we probably won't be seeing each other much anymore.

It's all really pretty dumb. I've lived an entire life. Got married. Raised a kid. Worked a job. Now they're telling me what to do? Now they're telling me how to live my life? What gives them the right? I'm going to go along to get along . . . play the game. We'll still sneak in a night of fun here and there, maybe. Life has to be worth living, doesn't it? Let's quit talking about it. What are we drinking?

# **Enough Is Enough**

Brandon Pettey

## Characters

HOANG, 20, male Vietnamese exchange student Poli Sci major

MADISON, 18, female undeclared major

PAALAVI, 19, female English major

KENDAL, 21, female Sociology major

## Time and Place

The play takes place in a large but run-down rental house shared by several college students. All of the action takes place in the kitchen as they gather together on a Sunday morning to discuss their weekend activities and current events.

*(KENDAL stands at the stove cooking. SHE is using a spatula to move scrambled eggs around in a frying pan. KENDAL is wearing a t-shirt, shorts, socks, and a bathrobe. SHE has earbuds in her ears. KENDAL sings along to the music and dances as SHE cooks for herself and her roommates on some burners that are obviously outdated. Sunlight fills the room through a window with a shade that is halfway open. As KENDAL continues to cook, PAALAVI shuffles into the room wearing a Malcolm X shirt, pajama pants, and a bathrobe. SHE sits at the kitchen table, seems to ignore the gnome sitting on the table, and rests her head down on the table. PAALAVI begins speaking to KENDAL without lifting her head off the table.)*

PAALAVI: It is 8:30 in the morning and the weekend, you *jerk*!

KENDAL: Good morning to you, too. I trust that you slept well last night. Are you ready for some breakfast? I have eggs, toast, and bacon. Also, why is there a gnome in the middle of the kitchen table? It says that he's solar powered and lights up.

PAALAVI: The word is *brunch*. As a house, we chose to have Sunday brunch, not breakfast. Brunch is an amalgam of breakfast and lunch. That means it's not supposed to happen until at least like 10:30.

KENDAL: Well, this is my week to cook. I'm in a hurry to get downtown, so this week we're having breakfast instead of brunch. And again, I really need to know the story behind the gnome.

*(PAALAVI sighs in exasperation and sits up, obviously annoyed.)*

PAALAVI: Gnome Chomsky was at a soiree that I attended last night. At first, everything was nice and peaceful. Then some sports-ball dudes went too hard on the keg, got drunk, and began disrespecting Mr. Chomsky in ways that we do not need to discuss in detail. The only moral choice for me to make was to liberate him to safety. Why are you going downtown?

KENDAL: I asked for a story about the gnome, and I got one. That's on me.

*(Beat.)*

You didn't hear about the arrests? It probably happened a couple blocks from where you were.

PAALAVI: No, obviously not. What arrests?

KENDAL: The police went around to a lot of the camps for the unhoused and arrested a bunch of people if they could find something on them. Supposedly, undocumented people are on their way to being deported. Everyone else was told that they had to go or they would be taken in, too. In my Contemporary Social Problems class, we learned that the government has been doing this since the '80s. Business owners say that unhoused people in the area mess with their sales, so the cops come in and take them away.

PAALAVI: Well, forget breakfast. We need to get down there now.

KENDAL: But I made all this food.

PAALAVI: Turn the stove off and put a cover on everything. If we're lucky, the other housemates will leave us a little for when we get back.

*(KENDAL puts a cover on all the food and turns off the stove. KENDAL and PAALAVI begin gathering their things and head toward a side door. THEY are met by HOANG who comes in wearing running clothes.)*

HOANG: Where are you guys going? You don't want to go out there.

PAALAVI: We're going downtown to protest for the unhoused people who were unjustly arrested for minding their own business. You should come with us. As a poli-sci major, it's kind of your responsibility.

HOANG: Oh, you're telling me what my social responsibility is now? Thank you. That saves me a lot of work. I may be a political science major, but I'm also an immigrant and a person of color trying to become a citizen. I'm not going to get arrested and mess that all up.

*(HOANG crosses SR from the door and sits at the kitchen table. KENDAL and PAALAVI move back to the table and sit down.)*

PAALAVI: I just thought that you would want to join us and help make a difference. I thought you were like us. You know, I thought you cared about helping other people.

HOANG: Again, Paalavi gets to decide who cares and who is making a difference. I do care about helping other people. I can't make much of a difference from inside a jail cell. You get arrested and your parents or friends come bail you out. I get arrested and I could be gone for good. Do you understand that, Paalavi? Maybe I want to make a difference in a way that isn't really just about getting on the news or getting good shots for Instagram and Twitter. What is it that you're always saying to the rich white kids? Check your privilege.

PAALAVI: Oh. You think my family and friends just have money laying around that they could just throw my way, no problem. Since bail for black people in this country is always so reasonable.

*(MADISON storms into the kitchen from SL and takes the final seat at the table.)*

MADISON: What could we possibly be yelling about this early in the morning?

KENDAL: It's almost 11:00. That's not early. I was supposed to be downtown early for the protest, but that's not going to happen. They won't stop arguing about who is the better revolutionary.

MADISON: And why do we need a revolution?

PAALAVI: Virulent income inequality and unfair policing tactics. A bunch of unhoused individuals were rounded up and arrested in the middle of the night.

MADISON: Some of my friends were talking about that online this morning. I saw it right after you *rudely* woke me up. They said that the homeless peo—

HOANG, KENDAL, AND PAALAVI: Unhoused!

MADISON: They said that the *unhoused* people all had drugs and that some were here illegally. My dad always says that if people do the crime, they should be prepared to do the time.

HOANG: Weren't you arrested just last semester for having a little something you weren't supposed to, and didn't your dad get his lawyer friend to work some white-people magic and make it all go away?

MADISON: That's completely different. I got arrested for something that never should have been illegal in the first place.

PAALAVI: You mean like trying to find somewhere safe to sleep at night?

KENDAL: I don't think that anyone is saying that we want to live in a lawless wasteland where nobody works and everyone does whatever they want. However, often when there's a raid, if someone won't claim something as theirs, everyone goes down. That's not fair.

MADISON: My dad says that people can work, have a place to stay, and live a clean life if they want to. People are just too lazy or just too picky. Sometimes, you have to start from the bottom.

PAALAVI: More rich-white-guy wisdom. Love it. Love everything about it. Does your dad have a podcast? I would love to subscribe.

*(PAALAVI stands and walks across the kitchen. SHE remains facing the group but with some distance.)*

KENDAL: Madison, have you noticed that you're the only one in the house that doesn't have a job? Your parents pay all your bills.



MADISON: So I should apologize and keep my mouth shut because I come from a family that's well-off? I don't think so.

PAALAVI: Nobody is saying that. What we are saying is that if you don't have experience with something, you should listen to people who have been through it before running off at the mouth. You also shouldn't judge people for just fighting for what they believe in.

HOANG: That certainly makes a lot of sense to me.

MADISON: Fine. Go to your little protest. I'm going to stay back here and count my vast riches.

PAALAVI: Does that mean that you're coming with us, Hoang?

HOANG: Did you not hear anything that I said a few minutes ago?

MADISON: All I know is that I can't wait for this semester to be over. I love you guys, but we need some distance. And I need a vacation. Mom and Dad are taking me on a cruise if I pass all my classes. Summer makes being lazy a noble calling.

KENDAL: Sounds about right. If you can't agree on something, just pick up your toys and go home . . . or on a cruise. That approach certainly works wonders for our political system.

MADISON: Careful, Kendal. We wouldn't want you to fall off your high horse there.

*(PAALAVI laughs but tries to hide it.)*

KENDAL: I was just raised to believe that if I can do better, I have a responsibility to do it.

PAALAVI: That's how we were all raised, Kendal. The problem is that everyone believes they have *the* way to do it better . . . to live better. Everyone's talking and nobody's listening.

MADISON: Said the woman that's been talking for the last hour.

HOANG: It's been a lot longer than that.

*(KENDAL, MADISON, and HOANG laugh.)*

PAALAVI: Very funny. Has anyone actually talked to anyone who was there last night? Have you read any actual witness reports?

MADISON: No. Have you?

PAALAVI: We're not going to figure out what happened or what we should do about it sitting around here arguing. Why don't we go down there and just try and learn what actually happened first? Then we can decide if we want to protest or fight the system from within the system or whatever. I'm tired of doing a lot of talking but no acting. Hoang, if it looks like things are going bad, we'll *all* leave. Immediately! Mads, this ought to be a good opportunity for you to get some perspective. Who knows? Maybe Kendal and I are completely blowing it out of proportion.

HOANG: I guess that'll be okay. I'm bringing all my paperwork with me, though.

MADISON: Fine. I'll go.

KENDAL: I'm in, but a friend of mine who's already down there went live, and we missed it. He labeled it urgent, so we'd better listen.

*(KENDAL places her phone in the middle of the table and hits play. A clearly frightened man's voice emanates from the phone.)*

RECORDING: If you aren't already downtown, do not come down here! *Please* don't come down here! We showed up to protest the arrests of the unhoused people. It didn't take long for people to show up supporting the police who made the arrests. Somebody threw a punch. I don't know which side they were on. It really doesn't matter. More people started fighting. People got arrested and pepper-sprayed. Like always. Something bad happens. We fight about it. Nothing gets solved! Anyway, they're telling everyone to go home. That's what I'm going to do. I'm tired of this. I'm just so tired of this.

KENDAL: We all are.

*(Blackout.)*

## **“Bartleby, the Scrivener”: An Unraveling**

*Audey English*

“Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street” by Herman Melville exhibits a masterful attention to detail in a story that, on its surface, reads as tedious and maybe even monotonous. This level of detail speaks to Melville’s artistry; he uses a methodical skill in narration to catapult a fixation in minutia toward an evocative style of contemplation. However, the story’s structural integrity comes into question when critically examining the plot. Why delay important information for character development or fixate upon gratuitous events before meeting the title character? Strong arguments may be made in defense of Melville’s choices in character development and structural composition instead of dispelling them as digressive.

To say the exposition is discursive is beyond uncharitable. The introduction, preceding Bartleby’s entrance, delivers important information establishing characters like Turkey and Nippers and provides significant character development for the narrator himself (i.e., the attorney). The attorney immediately divulges his “more than ordinary contact” with past scriveners, “an interesting set of men” whose entire biographies would amount to just “a few passages” in the life of Bartleby (Melville 1). Describing the number of scriveners employed by the attorney as more than ordinary leaves room for speculation. What prompted the turnover, and might it have something to do with the attorney’s character? Before introducing Bartleby, Melville makes the attorney’s sentiments about the scrivener clear by claiming that a world without an honest biography for Bartleby is an “irreparable loss for literature” (1). While the narrator’s intrigue toward Bartleby may initially come across as nebulous, the intensity of his intrigue foreshadows the narrator’s eventual bizarre interest in Bartleby.

Further into the exposition, Melville spends a questionable amount of time introducing the attorney’s existing scriveners, Turkey, and Nippers. Turkey is described as “strange . . . reckless . . . noisy” with an “inflamed, flurried, flighty recklessness” about him (Melville 2). The narrator also points out Turkey’s tendency to scatter ink blots carelessly over documents. Specifically around twelve o’clock, his fellow scrivener Nippers is noted for his ambition along with his indigestion. The narrator suggests that the indigestion results in “occasional nervous testiness and grinning irritability” that is responsible for Nippers’s grinding his teeth (3). Despite Turkey and Nipper’s faults and misfortunes, the

narrator acknowledges that they are at least sufficient for law-copying. While they do not play a large role in the interaction between the narrator and Bartleby, the narrator's impressions of Turkey and Nippers exposes much of his own character; he is extremely observant and shows a peculiar interest in the people around him. This peculiarity of observation leads the reader to question the integrity of the narrator (an important questioning for understanding future events).

Sanford Pinsker of Johns Hopkins University Press defends the lengthy descriptions of Turkey and Nippers as "necessary pre-conditions of a world in which Bartleby will become an unsettling intruder" (18). Unlike the attorney's experience with Bartleby, Pinsker can decipher "a 'logical' explanation and/or convenient rationale" from the behavior of Turkey and Nippers (19). Without the exposition developing the narrator's relationships with Turkey and Nippers, there would be less of an understanding of who the attorney is and what he is able to tolerate from his scriveners. Understanding the attorney's disposition accelerates the unsettling environment Bartleby creates. Without the early exposition emphasizing the attorney's peculiar lens of observation, his response to future events could read as less eccentric and more disjointed. Having a rather established sense of who the narrator is, the introduction of Bartleby's character works as a catalyst for allowing the attorney's characterization to expand or, in other words, unravel.

Until the end of the story, little to nothing is known of Bartleby, besides his actions relative to the attorney. His enigmatic presence coupled with a wearisome dialogue is meant to test the reader's patience as much as the attorney's. "*I would prefer not to*" (emphasis added) becomes the cudgel Melville uses to beat the reader's sensibilities; it acts like an inescapable mantra, and the attorney's inaction becomes more intolerable with each repetition. Initially, Bartleby's resistance confuses and disorients the attorney. He understands that any other man would "thrust him ignominiously" from his presence and that "there [is] something about Bartleby that not only strangely disarm[s]" him but "in a wonderful manner touche[s] and disconcert[s]" him (Melville 8).

The attorney acknowledges the significance of his own inaction by expressing his fascination as being wrapped in confusion. As Bartleby becomes increasingly oppositional, the attorney reaches further into infatuation by portraying him as honest, disciplined, and steady. Some readers may interpret the attorney's interest in Bartleby as possessive or even sensual when the attorney feels his "most precious papers safe in his hands" and struggles to avoid "falling into sudden spasmodic passions with him" (Melville 12).

The reader's uncertainty as to whose actions are more bewildering, Bartleby's or the attorney's, is by design. George Rishmawi, writing for the *Bethlehem University Journal*, describes how slowly "the encounters between the lawyer and his clerk begin to reveal the lawyer's character" as he shuffles between affection and frustration to "rationalize Bartleby's irrational character" (15). The attorney eventually settles into disarray and abandons his chambers to escape Bartleby's unrelenting presence. In examining the nature of Bartleby's character, Pinsker provides a psychoanalysis suggesting that Bartleby "suffers from psychosis" and posits that deciding whether he is "psychotic is simply beside the point" when Bartleby's "impact on the lawyer remains the crucial matter" (22). Bartleby is not a character who needs development or understanding. The purpose of his haunting presence is to bring "the lawyer's half-ridden vulnerabilities into bold relief" because it is the attorney's character development in which Melville is ultimately interested (21).

Whatever critique disregards the story's exposition or Bartleby's lack of character development as grounds for claiming this short story is poorly constructed is mistaken. Arguably, the least effective part of the story is the last paragraph, which attempts (and fails) to provide motivation for Bartleby's character. Ideally, the story would end with the attorney's last visit with Bartleby in prison before his death. The extant unnecessary conclusion does little to illuminate Bartleby's motivations other than opening further speculation as to whether his existence might be allegorical as well as physical. The need to explain Bartleby's motivations is shortsighted and ultimately minimizes the enigma he brings to the story.

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## **Out of Wedlock**

*Sandra Wassilie*

*~ To Lori*

I was sent away cowed  
into consent, lying about my leaving  
to employer siblings friends.  
I traveled the dark on a Greyhound bus  
to live among strangers  
in a far town, lying about my origins  
cut off from family  
lying to he who loved me  
so frightened I was  
of what they could do to him  
comforted by you until  
giving you life, I cut you off  
to live among strangers  
lying that you ever existed.

## **Rebecca**

*Hailey Freeman*

### Character

REBECCA, mid-20s, DANNY's wife

### Time and Place

At night in her house in the present.

REBECCA: Who is she? Was the one before not enough?

Is that baby yours? Yes.

Did you fuck her? Yes. Were you safe? No.

How can you look at me and say that couldn't be your fucking son?

I'm done with you, Danny. You embarrassed me with that woman before. That goddamn nutjob you met . . . where? At work? The one with those two boys?

We have sons together, Danny. We were supposed to have a life together. You told me that's what you wanted when you married me.

That woman from work, the waitresses . . . I've known about all of them, and I've covered for you each time. You know, Eric told me about the one you talked to when you took the boys out. In front of our kids? Really?

He lied? Our son wouldn't lie about that. He can barely read an analog clock, you jackass!

You think I won't walk out with the two of them? With no money and no job, huh? That doesn't matter. I'd rather be anywhere than here with you. I'll get a job somewhere . . . anywhere away from you. I don't care if I have to scrub toilets for ten hours a day just to feed the boys—or even myself—if it means I don't have to see your face anymore. Here's your ring. Take it back. I don't want it! Take it!

REBECCA (CONT.): You think I'm upset about the *baby*!? The truth is you fucked another woman, and this isn't even the first time! How many times are you going to tell me that you've changed? How many more times are you going to make me look stupid when it comes out that Danny can't keep his dick out of the local scenery? Do you not care about how it makes me look? How it makes our family look? I want you gone. Get your shit together and get out of this house in the next thirty minutes before I call my brother.

Not another goddamn word to me. You will *not* say a word to the boys. I'll tell Eric you've gone on a work trip. Richie is too young to even remember you. You're not going to call this house. You're not going to send birthday cards . . . if you even remember when they were born. You are, for all intents and purposes, a memory to Eric and a sperm donor for Richie. Those children were the only good thing you ever gave me in the entire seven years we've been married. You may always be their father, Danny, but you were nothing but a monster to me.

Get. Your. Shit. I'm serious about you calling or having any contact with us. I *will* call the police and get a restraining order. We'll figure out anything related to custody on a later date, but you . . . you're not setting foot around me or these children for months.



## **Social Responsibility: Impact on Prevention of Domestic Violence**

*Kimberly Robinson*

As a result of making members of this society aware of the recognizable physical signs and psychological symptoms of abuse, people can decrease the risk of individuals' becoming victims of intimate partner violence by promoting social responsibility throughout the world or within their communities. According to . "What's in a Name? Family Violence Involving Older Adults," domestic violence is the physical assault or psychological abuse of companions of any sex and violence between family members and intimate partners (Benbow, Bhattacharyya, and Kingston 1). The historical background of domestic violence can be observed during the second half of the feminist movement in the 1970s. During this period, domestic violence was known as "wife abuse" (LaManna et al. 314).

Domestic violence continues to be a harmful societal issue throughout the country. According to K. MacLure and A. Jones, in 2016 WHO published a factsheet that stated "35% of women all over the world have been victims of physical violence or sexual assault" (437). An estimated one out of four women in the United States alone has reported being a victim of violence at the hands of a recent husband or boyfriend (Karen 92). Physical signs of violence are visible in the forms of skin lacerations, a black eye, smashed joints, temporary amnesia from receiving a hard blow to the head, and decreased ability to see (92).

Domestic violence occurs between intimate partners, unmarried intimate partners living together, and couples due to their financial circumstances, and between couples as a form of control in the relationship (LaManna et al. 314). Intimate partner violence has decreased since the 1970s. It makes up about one-third of police reports on violence (314). Rates vary by race. Incident rates are high (eleven per one thousand) for indigenous women (314). African-American rates are a little high (five per one thousand) (314). Caucasian and Hispanic females' rate is moderate (four per one thousand) (314). Violence between unmarried couples is higher than that of married couples in most cases.

### **Reasons**

Reasons behind domestic violence may be because the offender was mistreated as a child, an individual has a mental health disorder or an inability to manage stress, or the perpetrator witnessed family violence.

## **Childhood Mistreatment**

The inappropriate treatment of a child is defined as bodily or emotional injury, sexual assault, or careless treatment of a child under the age of eighteen by someone responsible for their well-being (LaManna et al. 314). Childhood abuse will negatively affect the mistreated child's mental development and welfare and result in interrupted social interactions as a result of the disturbed social interaction related to child abuse. The individual may develop aggression, hostility, and lawless behavior patterns that appear from childhood into adulthood; these patterns are seen as hostile attacks on people close to them (Henschel, Bruin, and Mohler 824). A history of child abuse correlates with the development of psychological and emotional pain endured as a child.

## **Witnessed Family Violence**

In most domestic violence cases, the perpetrator was exposed to family violence during his or her life span, and the domestic violence the perpetrator delivers is based upon the aggressive and hostile behaviors witnessed as a child. The perpetrator inadvertently carries these behaviors over into his or her adult relationships. According to Henschel, Bruin, and Mohler, the repetition of domestic violence will continue through a member of a household who witnessed the violence within the household (824). When domestic violence happens, physical or mental damage affects family members.

## **Mental Health**

There are times in which the perpetrator of domestic violence suffers from depression. According to Henschel, Bruin, and Mohler, parents suffering from depression—male or female—are likely to misuse their children (824). These abused children reveal an avoidant attachment pattern. These children may avoid touch and eye contact, rarely ask for help, and have abnormal nutrition intake.

Causes of domestic violence can be related to the perpetrator's not being able to deal with the problems of life he or she is encountering (LaManna et al. 314-15). For example, when he or she loses a job, his or her standard of living is lowered relative to the job loss. He or she endures financial hardship drinks excessive amounts of alcohol to cope with his or her situation. This pileup gets the better of them and results in abuse. Domestic violence by the perpetrator can happen to women when they are going through hormonal changes during pregnancy. Expectant moms have moments of unexplainable crying, social isolation, and loss of jobs due to pregnancy complications. The incidence of

domestic violence in pregnancy ranges from three percent to thirty percent in a variety of studies (Bent-Godley et al. 197).

## **Situational Abuse**

According to *Marriages, Families, and Relationship: Making Choices in a Diverse Society*, “Situational couple violence takes place where the perpetrator is a woman or a man. This violence occurs with arguments and is least likely to escalate as the relationship advances” (LaManna et al. 314-15). This form of violence usually starts with fighting and ends with drinking. (314-15). Coercive control is mistreatment that is meant to instill fear and intimidate the opposite partner. This form of control allows the empowered perpetrator to build and keep power. Domestic abuse can be mental as well as physical. When domestic violence happens, family members are deeply affected.

## **Case Summary: An Individual’s Experience**

Megan Alyssa Fletcher used the tool of narration to describe her journey through an abusive six-year relationship. Women of color first used narration to express their experiences (Griffin 138). It allowed sharing in a way that allowed others to better understand and think about those experiences (Smith 273-84). Narrative writing is storytelling.

Megan Alyssa Fletcher used the tool of narration to describe her journey through an abusive six-year relationship. In her narrative, she describes herself as middle class, privileged, in her late twenties, and educated (Fletcher 42).

Ms. Fletcher was able to write about her experiences because she kept a journal throughout her relationship. According to her reflections, everything started well, but by the end of the journal the entries were a cry for help. Journaling was her place of safety where she could be honest about the abuse.

She used six years of lying and avoidance as self-protection so as not to answer the why of remaining with her husband and dealing with the shame she felt. Her husband was all about control. Even if he hurt himself, somehow it was her fault. Everything was her fault. Once, when she said she was leaving and had made it to the door, he grabbed her and slammed her to the floor even though he had said, “Fine. Leave” (Fletcher 42-59).

Ms. Fletcher felt that something during his upbringing had negatively impacted him. She stayed until she realized for herself that he really would kill her. In her journal, Ms. Fletcher describes leaving and being in a motel where he broke into the room, and almost strangled her to death (42-59). He stopped and seemed confused, and she was able to run into the bathroom and lock the door. She called

911, and the operator stayed on the line with her until the police arrived to rescue her and arrest him. She filed charges against him for attempted murder.

Ms. Fletcher expresses at the end of her journal how writing her story in all its painfulness, complication, confusion, and ugliness provides a true picture of domestic violence that academic accounts mostly miss (59). While she felt shame, embarrassment, and worry about putting her history out for all to view, she knew sharing was necessary for helping her process what happened to her. She wants to help others know that someone understands the complications of domestic violence (59). Ms. Fletcher most of all wants victims to become victorious and do what is necessary to reclaim and recognize their worth and value (59).

## **Prevention of Domestic Violence**

According to D’Inverno, Reidy, and Kearns, an effective technique to prevent domestic violence between cohabitating couples and married couples is increasing the family’s income by encouraging women to obtain more education (18). Domestic violence usually escalates due to financial problems. Women need to be in the position to walk away safely from a domestic-violence perpetrator and not feel like they have no choice. Obtaining an education will strengthen these women and help them realize that they can care for themselves financially without the perpetrator.

Another way of preventing domestic violence can be by facing domestic violence head-on through campaigns and supporting the victims of domestic violence (Bruce 25). After members of the public come together to show they care about the victims of domestic violence, these victims will realize that they are not alone.

Both partners in a domestic-violence relationship should seek therapy. Therapy will help them work through mental, physical, and emotional hurt. Therapy will help the perpetrator find the root of the problem and learn how to recognize when he or she is losing control of his or her emotions. This awareness will help prevent the perpetrator from continuing the cycle of abuse. The process is not a quick fix, however, and the victim should not be expecting the abuse to stop. Therapy is a long-term process for all involved (LaManna, et al. 305-34).

## **Conclusion**

Domestic abuse is real and widespread. This paper has defined domestic abuse in its many forms, reviewed reasons for domestic abuse, given factual percentages about populational factors, and included a survivor’s account of and preventive steps for abuse. Social responsibility involving the world and

individual communities will discourage potential perpetrators from causing harm because these possible perpetrators will realize that everyone is paying attention and that they are less likely to get away with hurting individuals. Everyone deserves to be safe and treated well.

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## **On the Way to the San Francisco Opera**

*Sandra Wassilie*

An autumn sun resting  
on the horizon across the bay  
floods the freeway  
in its bright golden wash  
and stabs a blood-red saber  
into my eye navigating  
the drive to *Eugene Onegin*.  
Sets of bright  
sequined bodies slow  
then fast dance  
a shimmer of shiny  
metal moving  
then not

—and approaching rapidly  
the bumper of  
the blinding body ahead—

an unavoidable thunk  
despite the mighty blare of  
horns in the orchestra pit  
and so joining  
two other dancers I pull  
out of formation  
off the six-lane stage.  
We stand and shake the chaotic  
pileup out of our heads  
exchange data on documents  
— no duel tonight—  
and drive onward  
to our respective dramas.

## **Noise**

*David Atwood*

While the quiet are busy with lunch,  
an umbilical feeds a phone to his ear.  
His voice louder with each repeat—

*Can you dance, Ricky?*  
*Ricky, can you dance?*

Hostage in his dialogue, I picture a toddler  
wriggling while Mom cradles her phone  
as Dad directs remotely, ignoring a salad.

*Do you have a nose, Ricky?*  
*Ricky, where's your nose?*

Hoping my medium pepperoni take-out  
is ready before I can find out  
whether Ricky has a nose and can dance.

*Can you say hi, Ricky?*  
Louder still—*Ricky, can you say hi?!*

The server calls my name and ends the wait  
before Ricky can prove to his proud Dad  
how he will one day make his own noise in the world.



**Blue Moon**  
*Susan Helene*

Look at the moon, my sweet girl.  
I will look, too.  
And we will be together,  
Though we are miles apart.

Sing a song, my sweet girl.  
Sing "Blue Moon."  
I will listen, and hear you,  
And smile.

Dance, my sweet girl.  
Twirl in the moonbeams.  
Lift your arms to the sky,  
Fingertips touching the moon,  
Touching me.

Share the moon's light with me, my sweet girl.  
Know that I am there for you.  
Tomorrow and forever,  
Like the moon.

## **Flight at Dusk**

*Sandra Wassilie*

We forget  
    to behold the sky  
keep it lifted  
    with our looking  
our breaths to mingle  
    in congregation  
with the pigeons  
    rising at sundown  
to flee the city  
    away from the day  
of gleaning sustenance  
    on the street  
heads cast down  
    but now the passing  
clouds become thick  
    with a leaving  
signal of the diurnal shift  
    a change in the breeze  
an ancient ritual  
    a beating of wings  
a man standing  
    in the street  
a camera held high  
    with reverence  
in the lift of his arms.

# **On a Theme from the Magnificat**

*Hollis Thompson*

## Characters

AENEAS, 30s-40s, a Roman police officer

AVIGAYIL, 30s-40s, a local guide who gives historical tours

MIRYAM, late teens-early 20s, first-time mother and wife of YOSEF

NATAN, 30s-40s, owner of a pawn shop in Bethlehem

YOSEF, early 20s, husband of MIRYAM

## Time and Place

The action takes place at the gate to Bethlehem and then within the village. The time is a blend of ancient and current times.

## Scene 1

*(MIRYAM speaks in darkness.)*

MIRYAM: He shows mercy from generation to generation

To all who fear him.

His mighty arm has done tremendous things!

He has scattered the proud and haughty ones.

He has brought down princes from their thrones

And exalted the humble.

He has filled the hungry with good things

And sent the rich away with empty hands.

He has helped his servant Israel

And remembered to be merciful.

For he made this promise to our ancestors,

To Abraham and his children forever.

*(Lights rise on the city gates of Bethlehem as proclaimed by a large sign at CS. In the background, the sounds of the town go on constantly. It is a blend of sounds familiar to the First Century—animals bleating, carts rolling, people walking, and the voices of people haggling—and modern traffic—horns, engines, wheels on asphalt, and loudspeakers announcing sales. Occasionally, more ominous sounds just barely break through the white noise—people fighting, Roman officers*

*arresting someone, officers beating someone, children crying. NATAN is standing beside the gate, talking with AVIGAYIL.)*

AVIGAYIL: And when he just frankly told the tax collector that he didn't have the money, that dirtbag sicced the Romans on him. They pulled up to the farm, nearly beat down the door, and, then, do you know what they did?

NATAN: I'm sorry, Avigayil, but I think I can guess. I don't need you to tell me the details.

AVIGAYIL: They grabbed his son, Natan, his three-year-old son, and they beat him black and blue.

NATAN: Everyone's got to pay, Avigayil. Your cousin should have thought about that before he had so many kids.

AVIGAYIL: Natan!

NATAN: I'm sorry. That was too harsh. The fact of taxes remains, though. They're not the only ones trying to get enough cash together. Business has been really steady for me, lately. All these folks from out of town have been selling jewelry, lyres, RVs . . . even camels. They're all trying to appease the tax man and his cronies.

AVIGAYIL: How are they going to get back home if they're selling their transportation?

*(NATAN shrugs.)*

NATAN: I guess a lot of them are going to stick around for a while. That might help you out. You'll get more people to show around.

AVIGAYIL: That will be a blessing. You know no one in this town cares about all its history.

*(SHE looks at her watch.)*

Well, I'd better get back to the grind. *Shalom*, Natan.

NATAN: *Shalom*, Avigayil.

*(AVIGAYIL walks to extreme SR and begins shouting to passersby.)*

AVIGAYIL: Historical tours! Come get your historical tour right here! Get to know the wonderful town of Bethlehem! See the birthplace of the great King David! Weep at Rachel's tomb! Come get a tour!

*(SHE exits SR. NATAN sighs and takes a couple of beats to mask his heaviness. HE puts on a happy face and begins to sing out to the crowds.)*

NATAN: Come on down to Natan's pawn shop! Fa-la-la-la-la.  
We've got deals a-going non-stop! Fa-la-la-la-la.  
I'll buy oxen or alpacas. Fa-la-la-la-la.  
Sell the car to pay your taxes. Fa-la-la-la-la.

*(AENEAS enters CS. HE approaches NATAN.)*

AENEAS: Well, what's this? Old Natan singing a new tune?

NATAN: I'm sorry if it doesn't please you, Officer Aeneas. I know you Romans have a more refined taste in your musical compositions, but I'm just out here trying to jingle up some business.

AENEAS: Actually, I find it quite charming. How's it working?

NATAN: Oh, well, you know how it is, Officer. We're a small town, and we're trying our best to take advantage of this new influx. If I can make some extra cash, I may be able to give my kids some decent toys for Chanukah.

AENEAS: Well, I hope it does you some good. The census has been a nightmare for us.

NATAN: Because of all the new traffic in town?

AENEAS: That and all the defrauders. Managing a crowd is difficult enough, but then we get all these people showing up empty-handed. And we still have to go track down all the local tax-dodgers.

NATAN: Yeah. I've been hearing about that.

AENEAS: Yeah. I'll bet you have. We had to rough some of them up pretty badly. We may have to kill one pretty soon to keep everyone in line.

NATAN: I'm sorry to hear that.

AENEAS: Me, too. Executions really tire me out. And I skipped shoulder day at the gym this week, so all that whipping is really going to suck.

*(Beat.)*

NATAN: You know, it seems to me like you would have a lot less trouble with collecting the taxes if they were a little less steep.

*(AENEAS looks at him with surprise.)*

I'm sorry. It was just an idea.

AENEAS: Natan, look around you. You've got nice roads. You've got water pumping in your house. You've got a nice little shop. And, on top of all that, you have me and my boys to come down and take down anybody who tries to rob that store. Augustus gave you all that because the gods commanded him to bring peace to the world. All he asks in return is that you pay for what you get.

NATAN: I don't mean any disrespect, sir.

AENEAS: No worries.

*(HE starts to go back into the town, but HE stops and looks back at NATAN.)*

The other side of private rights is public duty. You Jews would do well to remember that.

*(He exists CS. NATAN struggles to hold in his anger.)*

NATAN: Sell your prized possessions here, folks! The Romans won't care about your sad stories, but Natan will give you a fair price. Come to Natan's pawn shop!

*(NATAN continues to call out to the crowd. MIRYAM and YOSEF enter SL. MIRYAM is riding a donkey or a bicycle or whatever small transportation the*

*production sees fit to use. THEY are both obviously tired from the journey. YOSEF approaches NATAN.)*

YOSEF: *Shalom*, brother.

NATAN: *Shalom*. Are you looking to sell or buy?

YOSEF: Neither. My wife and I are here for the census, but we've been delayed quite a bit. She'll give birth any day now, and we've had to take the road slowly. Are there any rooms available for us in the village inn?

NATAN: Look, I'm very sorry, but the inn is packed. The whole village is overrun with folks coming for the census. I don't know where you two could find lodging unless it's in somebody's barn.

*(MIRYAM looks intently at NATAN and sees right through him.)*

YOSEF: That bad, huh?

NATAN: Look, I'm sorry if I came off too gruff. It's just been a lot lately.

MIRYAM: Why do you keep apologizing for things that you aren't sorry for?

NATAN: Excuse me?

MIRYAM: Be honest with us, Natan.

*(NATAN is dumbfounded. YOSEF leads MIRYAM away.)*

YOSEF: Thank you for your help, friend. *Shalom*.

*(They exit CS. Blackout.)*

## Scene 2

*(Lights rise on view of Bethlehem. The sign is reversed to show that the action is now within the village. NATAN, still advertising, stands within the gate. A spotlight is on a cave that has been converted into a barn slightly right of CS. MIRYAM and YOSEF are inside. MIRYAM has just gone into labor and is in excruciating pain.)*

MIRYAM: Yosef, I didn't know it was going to hurt this much!

*(SHE screams.)*

YOSEF: Hold on, my love!

*(HE runs to the entrance and begins calling for help. NATAN hears and stops his own calling.)*

MIRYAM: Most High, when I am afraid, I put my trust in you.

*(AVIGAYIL enters running from SR.)*

YOSEF: Please, can you help my wife?

AVIGAYIL: I'm no midwife, but I'll do my best.

*(SHE rushes in and begins assisting MIRYAM, who struggles to recite the fifty-sixth psalm through the pain. Light slowly fades on them. NATAN listens. HE is obviously moved.)*

MIRYAM: In God—I praise His word—  
In God I trust; I have no fear;  
What can human power do to me?  
All day long they twist my words;  
Their only thought is to harm me.  
They gather together and hide themselves,  
Spying on my movements, hoping to kill me.  
Because of their crime, they cannot escape;  
In anger, God, strike down the peoples.  
You have kept count of my wanderings;  
Store my tears in your waterskin—  
Aren't they already recorded in Your book?

*(NATAN cannot bear what HE hears, and HE runs off SL. Blackout. After a few beats, an infant cries.)*



### Scene 3

*(Lights rise on the same space as the previous scene. The floor of the cave is now full of bodily fluids and blood. A placenta lies on the ground. MIRYAM, exhausted after delivery, is holding an infant in her arms. YOSEF is beside her. HE is smiling at the baby.)*

YOSEF: He's beautiful.

MIRYAM: Yes. He is.

*(AVIGAYIL and NATAN enter the cave.)*

AVIGAYIL: See, Natan! This is the Messiah! I nearly had to fight all the shepherds off with their own crooks to give the couple some rest. Speaking of that, you really need to bathe, my lady.

MIRYAM: You're right.

*(SHE kisses her son and then hands him to YOSEF. AVIGAYIL crosses to her and helps her stand. The two exit SR. YOSEF and NATAN are alone with the baby for a few beats. A beating sound comes from the stable door. YOSEF rises.)*

YOSEF: Natan, I need to see who that is. Will you please hold my son while I do?

*(NATAN nods, but HE is obviously uncomfortable when YOSEF hands him the baby.)*

Thank you.

*(YOSEF exits SL. NATAN looks at the baby for a beat.)*

NATAN: People are saying that you're the Messiah. I'd better treat you like that, just in case. So, I won't lie to you. I wasn't sorry about there not being any room in the inn. I'm not sorry about the Romans and their taxes. I mean, I'm not happy that the Romans are bleeding everyone out, but, on the other hand, it does bring me a lot of business. It's just that I'm not sorry for all these things that aren't my fault! I don't want to be responsible for things I didn't do. It's not that I'm cold-hearted. I hate to see my people suffer. It's just that I feel like someone ought to say "I'm sorry" when something bad happens, and that someone should be the one

NATAN (CONT.): who did the bad thing. But the Romans will never apologize. So I listen to the sad stories, and I say it. But I'm so tired of it. I'm so tired of seeing it all day after day after day after day. I wish things were different—I really do—but why can't the people responsible just own up? Why do I have to listen to everyone's misery? Don't I have enough of my own?

*(Beat. MIRYAM and AVIGAYIL enter SR, but MIRYAM stops before SHE enters the cave. SHE halts AVIGAYIL.)*

But I really am sorry for one thing. I'm so sorry that I'm not a better person for you. I mean, it's not like I'm terrible or anything. It's just, I haven't been to the Temple as much as I should. I'm an honest businessman, but I'm not the best father. I'm not there for my kids like I should be, and my wife and I . . . we fight all the time, mostly because of me. And, now, you're here, and I'm not ready to be in your sight, let alone hold you. I'm not worthy, and I'm so sorry. I wanted to be—I really wanted to be. And I'm even more sorry that none of us are. All of us—our whole nation—we aren't ready for you! We've been under the thumb of the Romans for so long that most of us are just trying to survive. We're like second-hand tools—dented, worn, rested. We get along, but we would never do to serve a king. Why did you have to come now? At the census of all times?! We're just not ready.

*(The baby touches NATAN's face with his hand. MIRYAM and AVIGAYIL enter the cave. THEY startle NATAN.)*

MIRYAM: Natan, David said, "My times are in your hand."

*(SHE takes the baby from him.)*

I'm glad that you were honest with him.

*(YOSEF enters, obviously distressed. MIRYAM recognizes this without missing a beat.)*

Yosef, what's wrong?

YOSEF: It's the tax collector. He heard that we just had a baby, and now he's demanding more money because the baby counts as another person in our household. I need the rest of the money we brought to buy food and supplies tomorrow. We don't have anything more we can give him!

MIRYAM: Calm down, Yosef.

YOSEF: Miryam, you don't understand. If I don't pay the tax, he's going to call the Romans!

*(AVIGAYIL looks at NATAN.)*

AVIGAYIL: Natan, can't you do something? We can't let anything happen to them!

*(NATAN brings out his checkbook.)*

NATAN: Brother, happy early Chanukah!

*(HE writes him a check and puts it in YOSEF's hand.)*

AVIGAYIL: I knew you had a gracious heart, Natan!

YOSEF: But I don't even know you!

NATAN: What does that matter?

YOSEF: Thank you, Natan! May Adonai bless you.

NATAN: He's already given me more than I deserve.

*(NATAN looks to MIRYAM and her child.)*

Deliver us, please.

MIRYAM: He will.

*(NATAN nods in acceptance. NATAN and AVIGAYIL exit SL. MIRYAM sits down CS and begins rocking the baby to sleep. YOSEF walks to her side. Lights slowly fade as SHE speaks.)*

Oh, how my soul praises the Lord.  
How my spirit rejoices in God my Savior!  
For He took notice of His lowly servant girl,  
And from now on all generations will call me blessed.

MIRYAM (CONT.): For the Mighty One is holy,  
And He has done great things for me.

*(Blackout.)*

# *The Christmas Letters*

*Caleb Dan Gammons*

## Characters

MOTHER, 35, the rich mother of SARAH and MARY

SARAH, 15, the elder daughter

MARY, 14, the youngest daughter

ACORN, immortal, one of Santa's elves

## Time and Place

The action takes place near the post office of the town of Grumbles during Christmas.

*(A Santa mailbox stands in the middle of the stage area. MOTHER, MARY, and SARAH are standing by the mailbox. THEY hold their letters with both hands in front of them.)*

MOTHER: We have arrived at Santa's mailbox, girls. It's time to put our Christmas letters inside.

MARY: Oh, boy! Oh, boy! Oh, boy!

MOTHER: Curb that wretched enthusiasm, Mary! It's very unbecoming.

SARAH: You just wait, Harry Spencer Sutton. I'll have a brand-new car this Christmas that will drive three times as fast as yours. Then we'll see who's more popular at school.

MOTHER: That's getting into the proper holiday spirit, Sarah.

*(Beat.)*

Mary, open Santa's mailbox so that we may place our letters inside and leave.

*(MARY attempts to open Santa's mailbox but is unable to as it is locked. SHE struggles mightily.)*

MARY: It's . . . *locked!*

SARAH: *What?* No. It can't be locked!

*(SARAH shoves MARY out of the way and begins trying to open the mailbox herself.)*

I want . . . my brand-new car!

MARY: Mother said *I* could open up the mailbox!

*(MARY shoves SARAH back out of the way. MARY and SARAH start fighting, and MOTHER steps between them to pull them apart.)*

MOTHER: Enough! I said enough! If Santa's mailbox is locked, we'll simply have to wait for Santa's elf to arrive and unlock it.

*(SARAH stomps her foot and folds her arms.)*

SARAH: Oh, how long will that take, Mother? I have one need, a need for speed, and this is taking forever!

MOTHER: I'm sure the elf will be here soon enough. Just be patient, both of you.

MARY: The anticipation of all this is so intense!

*(An instrumental version of "Jingle Bells" fades in and slowly gets louder.)*

Do any of you hear music?

SARAH: Is that . . . ?

MOTHER: Either I'm hearing "Jingle Bells," or I've got tinnitus.

*(ACORN comes onto the stage from SR and walks up to the family. The music fades out. The family looks around in confusion.)*

MARY: Who are you?

ACORN: Acorn the elf, of course! Whoeee! That was a long trip from the North Pole. You wouldn't believe how many reindeer traffic accidents I saw on the way here. It was madness!

*(SHE notices the letters.)*

I'm here to collect the letters for Santa. Why didn't you put yours inside of the mailbox?

MOTHER: It appears to be locked.

ACORN: Locked? That's not possible. We lost the key centuries ago. None of Santa's mailboxes are locked.

SARAH: Well, this one is, but since you're here, you can just take our letters, right?

ACORN: Here. Let me take a look at it. I can't leave without all the letters.

*(ACORN begins examining the mailbox. SHE tries to open the mailbox, but the mailbox remains locked.)*

Aw, Mr. Mailbox. I can see you're in a terrible mood. What is it that's troubling you?

*(MARY whispers to SARAH.)*

MARY: Did the elf just talk to that mailbox?

*(SARAH whispers back.)*

SARAH: This whole trip has been whacky, so I'm not surprised.

*(ACORN hugs the mailbox with love and care and then turns to the family.)*

ACORN: Every mailbox of Santa's has feelings just like all the rest of us do. When one of Santa's mailboxes feels hurt or scared, the mailbox may not open up, you see?

*(SHE looks at the mailbox.)*

ACORN (CONT.): Mr. Mailbox, will you tell me what's troubling you?

*(SHE puts her ear to the mailbox.)*

Mm

*(Beat.)*

Oh, I see.

*(Beat.)*

How terrible. They should be ashamed of themselves.

*(Beat.)*

You poor dear. Don't you worry. I'll sort this out for you.

*(SHE stands back up.)*

Mr. Mailbox says that children have been mailing some of the greediest letters it has ever seen. Mr. Mailbox doesn't want Santa to be disappointed, so he has decided to lock himself. He feels very sad about the whole situation. It seems all of Grumbles has forgotten the true meaning of Christmas.

SARAH: You got all that from a mailbox?

MARY: Well, what do you think we should do about that, Acorn?

ACORN: Hm . . .

*(SHE acts deep in thought for a beat. Then SHE snaps her fingers and smiles.)*

ACORN: *I got it!* Maybe if we can show Mr. Mailbox that we all still know the true meaning of Christmas, he may feel better and unlock himself. Here. Why don't we start with reading your Christmas letters? I'm positive that will help.

MOTHER: You want us to read our Christmas letters . . . to cheer up a mailbox? Very well. Though I think this is utter nonsense, I'll go first.



*(MOTHER opens her letter and reads aloud.)*

MOTHER (CONT.): To Mr. Claus. I will need a billion dollars in cash sent to my estate immediately to start up my nail-salon business. Also, my mansion is now a year old. I'll need a new one twice the size with plenty of room for my display of miniature diamond horse statues. I will expect the keys to my new mansion awaiting me on Christmas day. *Don't disappoint me again!* Thank you.

*(MOTHER looks at ACORN, who has a dumbfounded look on her face.)*

ACORN: You call that a letter? First of all, business ought to be about public good, not private greed, which is exactly what it sounds like you want. Secondly, just *no!* Christmas isn't about greed at all! Surely one of your children wrote a better letter?

SARAH: Of course I did. Santa needs to grant me what I asked for in my letter immediately. It's very important to me.

*(SARAH opens her letter and reads.)*

SARAH: Dear Santa . . .

ACORN: I already like the opening much better.

SARAH: I demand that you give a bright pink Bugatti car decorated with roses that can go over two hundred miles per hour! I want to wipe the floor with Harry Spencer Sutton in speed, *crush* his ego into dust, and take back all the popularity that loudmouth jerk stole from me at second-grade recess all those years ago! P. S. Hope Mrs. Claus is well. Thank you.

*(ACORN places a hand on her forehead.)*

ACORN: Oh, brother.

SARAH: What's wrong with what I wrote?

ACORN: Have you ever considered that maybe Harry might be dealing with issues of his own and that he needs friends who will be kind to him? Christmas is never about taking revenge or fighting each other! Mary, I beg of you, surely to goodness you wrote a better letter?

MARY: *Absolutely! My turn! My turn!*

*(MARY excitedly opens up her envelope, pulls out a pile of papers, and unfolds the first page to read aloud.)*

ACORN: *Wait a second! Hold it!*

MARY: I haven't even read anything to you yet. Why are you stopping me?

ACORN: How . . . long is your letter to Santa?

MARY: Thirty pages front and back of all the latest toys, food, and candy I simply must have this year! I'm sure Santa will bring me everything I desire. Do you still want me to read mine?

ACORN: That . . . won't be necessary. I get the main idea of your letter, but that's not what Christmas is about, either. Christmas isn't about just getting whatever we put down on paper. Where's the heartfelt meaning and purpose in that? Don't any of you understand? The true meaning of Christmas is more than the presents or the holiday feasts. It's about the love and care we share for each other.

*(MOTHER, MARY, and SARAH glance at each other thoughtfully. ACORN sighs.)*

I have one more idea to try. Perhaps a song of joy will help us all reconnect with the holiday cheer—the true meaning of Christmas we need—and get Mr. Mailbox to open up again.

MOTHER: What song?

ACORN: Why not "Jingle Bells"? It's full of joy. If we can sing with all our hearts, I'm sure it will help Mr. Mailbox to unlock himself. Are you three willing to sing with me?

MOTHER: Perhaps there are more important things—like my family—than getting a new mansion or another billion dollars. I'm going to rewrite my Christmas letter, and, sure, I'll sing.

SARAH: I guess I don't really need a new car. I might try showing Harry Spencer Sutton kindness instead. I'll rewrite my Christmas letter and sing, too.

MARY: You are so right, Acorn! I'll focus on giving to all those in need this year rather than asking for a bunch of things I don't really need. I'll also rewrite my Christmas letter. As for the song, *I would love to sing!*

ACORN: Then a one, and a two, and a three . . .

*(THEY sing "Jingle Bells." After the song is over, the mailbox unlocks. THEY rejoice.)*

ACORN: *Simply marvelous!* Thanks to you three singing with me, the true meaning of Christmas has begun to spread throughout the town of Grumbles again. Merry Christmas to you all, and to all a good night!

*(Blackout.)*

## **Human over Avatar**

*Miracle Jones*

“Please turn around.”

CMV’s voice comes through my head. I accelerate the speed of my scooter as I try to push through the end of this virtual world.

I rev my throttle and lean forward. I grip my handles tight and hope for the best.

“System Error. Please turn around.” CMV’s voice comes through again. I wish I could turn its voice off.

Ahead of me, I see the dissolve in pixels by a tree. I noticed the break in pixels two weeks ago and have been planning my escape from this virtual world. I want to be human again.

I am not turning around. “Come on,” I say to myself.

I refrain from wanting to scream at the stupid CMV voice in my head. There is a break in the system, so shouldn’t the temperature be cooler here? I shiver at the thought of feeling cold air again. I remember having to hide from the cold back in the real world.

“Syst — err.” CMV goes in and out as I near the break in pixels.

I place one hand in front of myself to shield myself. I see my hand begin to blur and flicker. A bright gray line comes across my vision, and I try to cover my eyes.

I hit something hard. My scooter flies out of my hands, and I fall to the ground. The scooter hits the right side of my body. My vision begins to blur. Gravel and sticks rip through my clothing. Dust clogs my lungs as I lie on the ground.

“Please remain still. Your reset is pending. This could take several minutes,” CMV’s voice says.

They will not let me leave. All I want to do is leave.

I look around and see the SimPixels disappear, and I black out.

Reset.

.....

The System Error is still where I last saw it. Then I notice a bird bounce across my old tire tracks.

I get off my scooter. The cool air comes through from the System Error. I focus on the fresh air coming through the pixel break. Fresh air. We don’t have that here in the virtual world; everything is artificial.

“System Error. Please turn around.”

“Ugh! Please just stop!”

I go near the break in pixels. I start walking in slow motion. I feel a pull towards the break in pixels. The pixels turn grey.

“This is my chance,” I whisper.

I feel like I am expanding as I enter the break. I get closer and closer to the break, and, hoping to feel something, I reach forward. I want to feel normal. My body has disappeared as I go deeper into the break. I wiggle my fingers and feel something rough. As my vision clears and my body reforms, I see that I am touching a tree. A real tree. A tree that does not disappear when you try to touch it. I drag my hand down the tree bark, and it cuts.

Adrenaline races through my arm, and I feel tingling where blood beads to the surface of my skin.

This is what it really feels like.

My body feels like it might dissolve into a billion pixels. Lightheadedness settles in.

My heart slows its beat. My pixels flicker out. I’ve done it again.

“Please remain still. The reset is pending. This could take a few minutes.”

.....

Alex looks up from his chair.

“Hey,” I say in a whisper.

Alex doesn’t respond. His eyes fall to his fists. “Do you not like what we have here?”

“Yes?” The answer is more question than answer. “And no. It’s not you or me. It’s this place . . . that doesn’t even exist.”

“Why didn’t you tell me you had to reset?”

“I didn’t think it was a big deal.”

“Not a big deal?”

“It’s not like I can really die here.”

“Yeah, but you still killed yourself again, Jess! Just imagining you dying.” He covers his face and begins to shake.

“I won’t do it again,” I whisper.

“But you will.” Alex glances at me. He looks at that spot on his arm.

“There’s a System Error right off the trail. Everything feels real, not like this false reality.”

“Does this not feel real to you?” Alex twirls around the room. “Do I not feel real to you?” he whispers.

“It all used to, but now I don’t know.”

“I love you.” His forehead presses against mine. It seems that he is trying to reassure himself that we are okay.

“I love you, too. I want to forget the System Error, but I can’t shake the feeling of wanting something more.”

“I don’t want to unplug,” Alex says.

“And I won’t force you to.”

“The real world . . . out there. It’s not what it seems. We have to get real jobs and—”

“I know.” I grab his hand. No one who grows up in SimPixel leaves the real world because they had a great life outside. “We can do this. We’ll get a house—a brownstone like we discussed.”

“Pay taxes, bills—”

“Make friends, travel.”

“Okay,” he whispers. I’ll do it with you.”

I don’t respond. I’m shocked that Alex changed his mind.

“Just promise me, please, that if we don’t work out, you’ll still take care of yourself.”

“I promise.”

“This might not work out. I need you to be realistic.” Alex grips my hands in his.

Realistic. That’s all I ever needed.

.....

“Who’s next?”

A virtual concierge looks up briefly from her computer. She’s just a bunch of code written by a company called Kinetic. Kinetic is the company that created this whole virtual world.

“Hi.” I hold Alex’s hand so he won’t change his mind and back down.

Alex takes over when I can’t seem to get the words out. “We would like to unplug and return to the real world.”

“All right. One second, please. Let me pull up both of your files.”

Her fingers dance over the keys.

Alex starts rubbing the spot on his arm. It’s a nervous tick of his. So I’ll get to see what it’s really like out there. Our avatars create a false reality. Our “bodies” adjust to what we imagine we look like; they smooth out imperfections and give us the ideal body.

“Please place your index fingers on the readers,” the concierge says.

A red light flashes under our fingers.

“Thank you. We are almost done with the process,” she says. “Next, a concierge will take you both to a bed where we will reunite you with your original bodies. Thank you for choosing Kinetic and allowing us to be a part of your world!” The concierge’s smile cracks as she tries to seem extremely nice. “Now go through the doors to your right. A Concierge will be waiting on you there.”

“Come on,” Alex says. “Let’s go.”

He wraps his arm around my shoulders. The concierge splits into two identical versions of herself. Each version gestures to a differently colored door.

“Can’t we please go in together?” I ask.

Both concierges nod and smile while glancing at each other for approval. “We can arrange that for the two of you.”

Suddenly, there’s only one door. Alex and I walk through together with our hands linked together.

“Please lie in separate beds,” one of the concierges says. “Since your avatar is not real, being separate allows the process to go smoother as your subconscious mind reunites with your conscious body. Once you awaken, we ask you to please refrain from moving. Your muscles will be fragile after several years of being unused. You will need to give your body time to adapt to the new changes.”

“Okay,” I respond as they strap me down to the bed.

“Jess.” Alex wiggles his fingers toward me.

Suddenly, everything starts to feel so real. Magically, I already feel closer to him, and I don’t want it to end.

“Yes?”

“I love you.”

“You say it as if we are dying.”

“Just in case, I want you to know,” he says.

“I love you, too.” I wiggle my fingers towards him. “See you in the real world?”

Alex smiles. “Yeah. See you.”

The concierges smile and start to flip switches and press buttons.

Do any of them mean anything?

Alex’s voice is the last thing I hear. “Jess . . . ?”

.....

“Jess, can you hear me?”

Gloved fingers peel my eyelids back. Bright, furry lights shrink into needlepoint lasers. “My name is Dr. Johnson.”

I blink several times, and her face focuses from a blur of brown pixels—no, they aren't pixels but her real skin. I reach up with my hand and touch her cheek.

She smiles. "Yes. You have successfully unplugged."

My focus shifts. I hold my hands out in front of my face. My fingers are short, and my nails are well-rounded. I quickly notice that these could not be my hands. I press both hands against my chest. I feel breasts. I remove the green paper sheet from my body. I have breasts; they sit like two water balloons wrapped in my own skin.

I look down. There is nothing below between my legs—just a space.

I scream, but not even the scream is mine.

"Jess, is everything okay?" Dr. Johnson glances at the monitors behind her. Then she starts pressing buttons to see if something is wrong.

"No." My voice breaks off. Not even my voice. Oh, God, it didn't work. All this has backfired. Am I still plugged in? Nothing is pixels here.

The room spins as I try to stand up.

"Jess." Dr. Johnson grabs my shoulder. "Remember what the concierge said. You can't move too quickly. It would be best if you let your body adjust.

"Is there a mirror? What did you do to my body?"

"Jess, a counselor will speak to you about your exit plan. I understand that you're currently in shock. You haven't seen your body since you were eight. However, I can assure you that everything has gone according to plan and that you are a healthy woman. You are ready to start your new life."

They put me in the wrong body. I am not a woman.

I laugh a ridiculous laugh.

"Put these clothes on. They should fit you just fine."

I grab the sheet and wrap it back around the body.

"No," I say. "I'll wait until you put me back in my right body."

Dr. Johnson's head tilts like I have seen a dog do. She gestures, and another woman steps forward. "Ms. Trent, this is Jessica White. She just unplugged."

"My name is Jess," I say, "and I'm a *he*, not a *she*."

"Jess, is it?" Ms. Trent smiles.

"Yeah. I'm waiting on someone—my boyfriend, who also unplugged. So you can go ahead and plug me back into the right body, and then I'll be on my way to start my new life."

Ms. Trent grips my hands tightly. "Do you remember signing your contract with Kinetic?"

"Yes, I somewhat remember signing it. I was eight. They promised me I'd be placed with a better family in the SimPixel."



“That’s right,” Ms. Trent says. “As you may know, we keep constant contact with all our contractors to ensure they are physically safe while their minds are plugged into the SimPixel.”

“Okay.” The body is starting to irritate me.

“I want to show you yours if you don’t mind waiting for a few minutes.”

The screen shows my younger self looking helpless. I am being cleaned and prepped by the staff. Sensors and wires are sticking out of my little body. My body twitches as they start to press many buttons. Then the nurses begin to cut my hair and trim my nails.

Next the screen shows my future self. My hair has grown longer than I would typically wear it. My lips are plump and rounded. Two mounds have begun to form on my chest.

“Jess, I hope you understand that nothing is wrong,” Ms. Trent says.

“I can’t . . .” Breathe. I can’t breathe.

“Jess. Hey! Can you hear me?”

Ms. Trent’s voice sounds very far away.

.....

The ground cradles my body. So this is what real grass feels like. I look up at the formed leaves. Not a pixel out of place.

Alex turns towards me and clasps my hand. “I guess they noticed the error and fixed it.”

“I guess so.”

“I’m sorry. I know you really wanted to show me the error.”

“No. It all worked out. I’m just glad to be here.”

I lift our hands into the air. I feel the wind move around us. I take a deep breath and inhale the fresh air.

Scars and blemishes dance across our skin, but we don’t mind.

This is enough.

For us, this is real.

## **Skin Condition**

*Page Petrucka*

### Characters

WOMAN, any age

MAN, any age

### Time and Place

Here . . . in the dystopian future.

*(WOMAN and MAN walk onstage. Their world is a barren wasteland. THEY are dressed in layers upon layers of ragged clothing. THEY position themselves slightly off CS, put their bags down, and begin to survey their new surroundings.)*

MAN: Well, here we are.

WOMAN: Yep. We are indeed. Here.

MAN: Agreed.

WOMAN: Absolutely.

MAN: You know what's weird to think about?

WOMAN: What's that?

MAN: Where "here" used to be.

WOMAN: That's such a great question. I really don't know.

MAN: I don't either. But I sure would like to.

WOMAN: So how long do you think we'll stay?

MAN: I don't know. Maybe until my skin condition clears.

WOMAN: Wow.

MAN: What?

WOMAN: That long?

MAN: I know. I know. It's gotta clear up though!

WOMAN: I'm not arguing with you. I'm just saying it might be a while.

MAN: Well. I'll do my best to make my skin clear up faster.

*(Beat.)*

WOMAN: Can you do that?

MAN: No.

WOMAN: Ok. Ok. But what if you could?

MAN: Then I would be some kind of miracle worker, wouldn't I?

WOMAN: Well, you and I could really use one right about now.

MAN: Why?

WOMAN: Seriously? Look around. What do you see? Know what I see? Nothing. For miles and miles and miles. No green. Just brown. And rocks. And bugs. I hate bugs.

*(During the following dialogue, WOMAN removes from her bag socks with holes and begins to mend them. MAN keeps busy finding items on the ground, placing them in a vessel, and crushing them with a stick. Their actions continuously occur as THEY speak to each other.)*

MAN: I know. You tell me that every time we sit down for a meal.

*(Beat.)*

WOMAN: Remember that show *Naked and Afraid*?

MAN: The one on *Discovery*?

WOMAN: I don't remember the channel.

MAN: It was *Discovery*.

WOMAN: Fine. It was *Discovery*.

MAN: You don't have to get short with me.

WOMAN: I'm not getting short with you.

MAN: Yes, you are!

WOMAN: Well, I am *now*, but I wasn't before.

MAN: Look, you asked me a question. I answered. I don't see why you're being snippy right now.

WOMAN: I'm *not*!

(*Beat.*)

MAN: Yes, you—

WOMAN: *Not*!

(*Beat. SHE continues.*)

As I was saying, *Naked and Afraid*. You remember the premise of the show, right?

MAN: Did you seriously just ask me that?

WOMAN: Right. Yes. So, the people were naked and apparently afraid.

MAN: On *Discovery*.

WOMAN: On *Discovery*. The thing about it, though, is I used to watch it, and I remember thinking, "Why the hell would people do that by choice?" Not to wear clothing and get eaten by bugs for weeks at a time, just to say they were survivalists.

MAN: Ironical. We don't see any of them around now, do we?

WOMAN: My point exactly!

MAN: Crazy, right?

WOMAN: Crazy.

MAN: Huh.

WOMAN: What?

MAN: Well, now I'm thinking about that show.

WOMAN: The naked or the afraid part?

MAN: The skin condition part.

WOMAN: What?

MAN: You know how it showed all those naked butts after being bit by bugs for weeks on end?

WOMAN: Yeah.

MAN: Well, that's kinda what mine looks like. My butt. Because of my skin condition.

WOMAN: That's really nasty.

MAN: That's what I've been telling you!

WOMAN: Well, yeah, but I guess I was imagining . . . I don't know what I was imagining. But it wasn't that. I'm sorry.

MAN: Thanks.

*(Beat.)*

How are those socks coming?

WOMAN: Could be better. Could be worse but could be better. How about that concoction for your skin condition?

MAN: I don't really have all the ingredients I need.

WOMAN: What are you missing?

MAN: Pretty much everything.

WOMAN: What a revolting development . . .

MAN: Excuse me?

WOMAN: Haven't you heard that before? Revolting development?

MAN: I think I have. Maybe on *Naked and Afraid*.

WOMAN: I'm almost one hundred-percent positive they said revolting and development at some point during the span of the series.

(*Beat.*)

MAN: You never told me.

WOMAN: Told you what?

MAN: If you have any kind of condition.

WOMAN: Oh. Well, it never came up, did it?

MAN: I haven't asked.

WOMAN: And I haven't offered.

MAN: But you know all about me.

WOMAN: I don't think I know everything there is to know about you.

MAN: Pretty much. I was the only member of my family to make it. I searched for other survivors. Found you. We get along. The rest is history.

WOMAN: And you have a skin condition.

MAN: And I have a skin condition.

WOMAN: Is that it?

MAN: Mostly. What about you?

WOMAN: It's hard to talk about me.

MAN: Why?

WOMAN: Because my condition is . . . on the inside.

MAN: What do you mean?

WOMAN: I have a condition of the heart.

MAN: What does that mean?

WOMAN: Well, my heart is . . . different.

MAN: Of course it is. They're all different in a way.

WOMAN: But mine is super different.

MAN: Super different. Okay, just spit-balling here. You have a baboon heart.

WOMAN: No.

MAN: You have two hearts.

WOMAN: No.

MAN: You love the color green.

WOMAN: No. Well, yes, but no.

MAN: You don't actually *have* a heart.

WOMAN: *No!*

MAN: Well, what else is there but . . . ? Oh. Oh. You mean—

WOMAN: I do.

MAN: So you're—

WOMAN: I am.

MAN: Oh.

*(Beat.)*

WOMAN: You're being quiet.

MAN: I'm just processing. Is that why you and I never—?

WOMAN: Yeah.

MAN: Oh. Okay.

WOMAN: So . . . what are you thinking?

MAN: I'm thinking I really need some cactus needles.

WOMAN: I'm sorry. What?

MAN: Cactus needles. For my skin concoction.

WOMAN: You mean you aren't going to tell me I'm broken, or that my heart is all wrong, or who I am isn't good enough, or you're ashamed of me, or you won't let your children spend time with me, or that I'm going to burn in Hell, or that I can never be happy, or that I never *will* be happy, or that I'm such a grievous sinner, or that I'm disgusting?

*(Beat.)*

MAN: No.



*(Beat.)*

WOMAN: Thank you.

MAN: Now. Will you help me find some cactus needles?

WOMAN: Sure.

MAN: You'd be amazed at what people were able to do with cactus needles on *Naked and Afraid*.

*(WOMAN stops sewing socks. SHE looks at MAN, and THEY hug. As THEY separate, THEY both smile and begin their search for cactus needles. Lights fade.)*

## **Learning to Live Again**

*Lara Martin*

Life is what happens when you aren't looking. I never really believed that, but all the same, life is ever-changing. The moments and memories move by so quickly that sometimes you don't even realize how important or life-changing a single moment can be. The moment I realized my wife was dead turned the entire universe upside down. I found her in our kitchen after she suffered a massive stroke. Some things only take a single moment, and you know instantly that nothing will ever be the same.

I was left to organize her funeral and do all the paperwork alone. Sure, I have kids who could offer help, but they were just as jarred and traumatized as I was by Gail's sudden death. Gail and I have three kids: Miranda, Carrie, and Sam. Growing up, they all had big-city dreams. They couldn't wait to get away from the mountains of Kentucky to go soak up all the excitement that the cities bring. Miranda's in New York City living her dream as a criminal defense lawyer. Carrie went to Los Angeles to chase the musical dream she's carried since she could walk. Sam went to Dallas to become an engineer but ended up becoming a teacher. All three girls have gotten married and had children of their own. For the last few years, it was easier for Gail and me to spend our free time visiting them since we no longer had children to raise and they did.

Gail's arrangements were left for me to decide. As the father of the family, I had to be the one to handle her funeral and other arrangements: tulips; a dark, wooden casket I think Gail would have loved; and clothes for her. Choosing the clothes was harder than I expected. Going through Gail's closet alone was also harder than I had expected. As I looked through the clothes, I remembered different memories from our life together and felt the grief of losing Gail over and over again right there in that little closet among all her clothes. I chose her life's uniform: a pretty floral blouse and blue jeans. I hope she was proud.

The week of the funeral went by in a haze . . . and it remains a haze, even now. Although I understood what was happening, I wasn't exactly present. I was going through the motions and doing what had to be done and just getting from one day to the next.

Suddenly, it was all over: the funeral, the burial, the good-doers bringing food and coming to visit just to "check in." In a single moment, all of that was over, too, and I was left to do the grieving. I went on like this for a couple of weeks. I had just retired after thirty-five years of working as an insurance agent. I'd been planning on traveling the country with Gail. We were going to pack a

bag, get in the car, and just go. Just be together. Learn one another again after raising our kids and screaming through everyday life at breakneck speed.

It occurred to me that maybe I should go anyway. I mean, what else would I do? Sit around in the house and mope? Might as well mope in the car and see something I'd been waiting years to see.

So I did.

I packed a bag, and I went . . . just like Gail and I would have done.

\* \* \*

I wasn't exactly sure where I was going, but I did know what I was running from. I decided to point the car south. Texas had always sounded nice. Others who'd visited the Lone Star State had given good reviews.

As I drove out of the city, I took in the buildings and the people in the cars around me—faces with no expression all just driving. I wondered if any of them felt the way I felt . . . but no matter. I kept driving.

As I left the city farther behind, the landscape began changing. Instead of the tall buildings, stop lights, crosswalks, and multitude of cars, I saw lush green trees. I didn't even know trees could have so many leaves. The grass was green as an emerald. The air seemed cleaner. I decided to stop in a tiny town in southern Oklahoma right at the border of Texas.

I gassed up, got snacks, stretched a little . . . and then I was gone again with Texas in the windshield.

\* \* \*

I wound my way down the narrow country roads of some county I didn't even know the name of. I eventually stopped and get out of the car because something in me wanted never to forget the place.

The air on a light breeze tasted crisp. The temperature was exactly like I'd imagined spring in Texas. The sun was shining on me, and when I tilted my head back and closed my eyes, I almost felt weightless.

I opened my eyes again to take in the scenery. Tall, wheat-like weeds gently blowing in the wind lined both sides of the road, and I could smell flowers beginning to bloom. I simply stared at the wonder of it all.

No one was around. Just me. No animals scurrying around and scavenging for food. No cars motoring down the road. No houses in sight. Only the road, the grass, and small peaks of mountains way off in the distance.

I hadn't felt so calm in weeks. I'd never gotten such peace and calm in the city. I thought that maybe I should move to Texas. I wondered if Gail would enjoy that . . . and then I remembered that Gail was enjoying something possibly even greater than Texas.

And my heart shattered . . . again.

A tear slid from my eye, down my cheek, and into the corner of my mouth. Another tear followed . . . and another and another until I was crying uncontrollably. I cried until the tears ran out. I let the calm of the place wash over me and take all my pain away. Somewhere deep in my soul, I felt a new kind of life coming, a kind of life, that, on the other side of the grief, I could tell would be an all-right life even without Gail.

I got back into my car, started the engine, and began rolling down the road deeper and deeper into Texas. Sometime later, I drove by the base of a hill and spotted a small, white-frame farmhouse. There was a for-sale sign in front of it.

I pulled into the driveway, and a smiling woman came out of the house next door. She was a small woman, with a wrinkled face and cut-short hair that was starting to turn gray. She approached me with a smile. I got out of the car and walked forward to meet her.

She told me her name was Laura. She'd lived in the little valley around us for the majority of her life. The house had belonged to her father, and since she was already living in the main house, she'd put the smaller one up for sale. Not many people had stopped by, but the ones who had had weren't people she thought she wanted to be neighbors with.

I asked, "Do you think you could be neighbors with me?"

"I think I just might," she said with a wink, and we went to look at the house.

The first thing I noticed was that the house was a shotgun house: a straight hallway from the front door to the back door. Screens covered both doors. Inside, all the edges were muted due to years of having people rubbing against them or cutting corners too quickly. On the right, there was a kitchen with older appliances and a huge island in the middle. I loved it. I moved through the kitchen into a sparse living room. I'd have to buy furniture. I kept moving. I crossed the hall into an empty bedroom with an exact match just across from the kitchen. I could have an office . . . or whatever I wanted.

In my mind's eye, I could see how I could furnish and decorate this place. With a smile, I turned to Laura. "Would you sell it to me?"

She returned my grin. "Absolutely."

\* \* \*

Grief never truly subsides; you only learn to live with it. You maneuver around your grief until you somehow create a new life. That's what I've done here in Texas in this little white-frame farmhouse.

I have a garden and some chickens. I've made friends with the farmers who live close by, and, of course, there's Laura. They've all helped me heal and grow in ways I never thought possible. I've learned how to take care of myself efficiently, and I've even gone on a couple of dates with women I met in town (although nothing's panned out).

I can still feel Gail from time to time. I know she's in a better place looking over me and lending a helping hand whenever I need one. I know that I've found the path through my grief.

And I know that I'm learning to live again.

## Gnoming Viral

*Jordan High*

### Characters

ANDY, 48, president of the local Homeowner's Association

LAURA, 32, LOUIS's wife

LOUIS, 32, LAURA's husband

### Time and Place

The action takes place in Laura and Louis's kitchen. The time is the present.

*(A rooster crows. Sunlight rises to reveal a kitchen in a well-to-do neighborhood with a pair of Dutch doors leading to the backyard and a window over the sink. A spotlight rises on a gnome sitting in the middle of a kitchen island. LOUIS enters wearing his robe. HE begins to fix coffee. After HE starts the machine, HE pauses. HE looks over his shoulder and then slowly walks backwards to the gnome, which HE has never seen before. HE cocks his head to gaze upon the curious phenomenon.)*

LOUIS: Where did you come from?

*(LOUIS makes eye contact with the gnome. HE puts his hands on his hips and then scratches his beard. LAURA enters with a ton of energy. SHE also wears a robe, but her makeup is done. Her hair is in rollers. SHE crosses to the Dutch doors and puts her hands on the windowpanes.)*

LAURA: Good morning, my dear! My! What a beautiful day it will be. The birds are singing, and the sun is shining bright! The first day of summer is finally here.

*(SHE cracks the doors and takes a deep breath.)*

Do you smell that? A summer breeze is a sigh from the sky. It's just so beautiful! What's the plan today, my love? Cleaning? Shopping? A walk? Garden—?

*(SHE finally notices that her husband is staring at the gnome.)*

What? Louis . . . what is that?

LOUIS: I was gonna ask you that.

LAURA: Well, where did it come from?

LOUIS: You don't know.

LAURA: Now how would I know if I just asked you where it came from?

*(The coffeemaker beeps. LAURA crosses CSR and grabs two mugs out of a cabinet in the kitchen island. SHE pours coffee into them.)*

I swear! Sometimes, I don't think you are the smartest tool in the shed. Common sense just escapes you sometimes.

*(SHE crosses to LOUIS and hands him a coffee mug. LOUIS points at the gnome with his mug.)*

LOUIS: Wait. You don't know where this came from?

LAURA: I thought you brought it in.

LOUIS: No. Wasn't me.

*(Beat. THEY slowly sip coffee and lower their mugs in unison. ANDY appears at the SL Dutch door. HE can be seen through the window. HE knocks on the outside of the doorframe. HE pushes open the top part of the Dutch door and props his elbows on the bottom part. HE singsongs a greeting.)*

ANDY: Well, hello, neighbors! How are you all on this *fine* day?

*(LAURA and LOUIS jump. LAURA screams. SHE and LOUIS turn to ANDY. LOUIS sets down his coffee on the island.)*

LOUIS: Andy! Man! You almost gave me a heart attack!

*(HE sits down on one of the barstools. LAURA sets down her coffee and closes her robe tighter. SHE crosses to the doors to admit ANDY, but HE opens his door and walks in.)*

LAURA: How did you . . . ?

*(ANDY stands behind the gnome.)*

ANDY: Ah! You saw the gift I left you.

*(HE stands in a superhero stance. LAURA closes and locks the door and walks back to the island.)*

LOUIS: You left the gnome? How did you even get in?

*(HE turns to LAURA.)*

Honey, did you forget to lock the door last night?

*(ANDY shakes his hands in a stop-right-there motion.)*

ANDY: No! Heavens, no! I'm the president of the Homeowners' Association, remember? I just got a key from the guard shack. Just wanted to help you folks out a bit.

LAURA: You did what? You can do that?

*(SHE turns to LOUIS.)*

He can do that?

*(LOUIS shrugs.)*

ANDY: Sure! I know you folks are new to the area, and you're still young, but that's how we help each other out here in Greenhaven. Anyhoo . . . I noticed that your walkway was dark last night, and—according to ordinance 351 of the going-green proclamation that the board of the HOA approved last week—your walkway must be lit by solar power. So I just picked up this little guy for you.

*(Beat.)*

Now you might need more light, but this is a start. Besides, look at the little guy. He's quite the character.

LOUIS: Let me get this straight. You broke into our house to deliver a—



*(LAURA slams her mug on the island. SHE puts up a hand to stop LOUIS.)*

LAURA: What my husband means to say is, “Thank you for the very thoughtful gift.”

LOUIS: Yeah. Thanks. Do you do this often? The breaking-in thing?

LAURA: Louis!

*(SHE walks around to the coffeemaker. SHE grabs the pot, crosses to LOUIS, and pours coffee into his mug.)*

I apologize for my husband’s behavior. He isn’t a morning person. He just needs more coffee.

*(SHE takes another mug out of the island’s cabinet and places it on the counter.)*

Would you like a cup?

ANDY: No, thank you, Miss Jones. I’m quite all right. And I completely understand.

*(HE turns to LOUIS.)*

You might want to try exercising in the morning. I walk. It . . . is . . . invigorating! Totally changed my mornings.

*(ANDY begins to walk towards the door. HE hides his mouth from LOUIS and speaks to LAURA.)*

Plus it might help with infertility. I overheard you folks having a conversation while you were bringing in groceries the other day.

*(LAURA rises and tries to speed ANDY on his way.)*

LAURA: Oh! Well. It was very nice of you to stop by. We actually have somewhere to be in a bit, and we really must get ready.

*(SHE almost pushes him out the door.)*

LAURA (CONT.): 'Bye! Thank you for coming. 'Bye now!

*(Once ANDY is outside, SHE closes the door and locks it.)*

'Bye! See you soon, Andy! 'Bye!

*(SHE closes the windows' curtains and then puts her back up against the door to keep ANDY from coming back in. SHE looks at LOUIS.)*

Oh . . . my . . . God! Can you believe . . .

LOUIS: . . . the nerve of that guy?! And how he . . .

LAURA: . . . just broke in like that?! And he left this godawful . . .

LOUIS: . . . light-up solar-powered lawn gnome? I know!

LOUIS AND LAURA: We need a new door!

*(LOUIS walks to another cabinet in the island and finds his cellphone.)*

LOUIS: I'm tweeting about this! The world needs to know how crazy that was. How crazy Greenhaven is!

*(HE types on his cellphone as HE walks back to LAURA.)*

LAURA: Louis! This is our home. I don't want it to go viral!

LOUIS: Laura, the world needs to know!

LAURA: If you make us go viral, we might get kicked out of the neighborhood.

*(LOUIS takes a picture of the gnome with his phone and then goes back to typing.)*

LOUIS: We won't get kicked out.

LAURA: You're responsible for every tweet you make. If we have to move, that'll be on you.

*(The lights fade to black.)*

## **Excerpts from *The Steel Ball Quietly Clatters***

*Eliel Josue Andrade Leal*

### Prologue

It was so long ago that every memory of the event remained etched into my mind, not by any sort of mental acuity but by the raw emotions and sensations that ensued with every sight I beheld that fateful day: the amazement of seeing my mother's anxious expression for the first time in my life as she, with trembling yet speedy hands, loaded clothes into our bags; the fear of incessant yelling from two government officials banging on our door as they demanded my father's presence; the strength of his hug as he said his goodbye to us before we escaped through the window; the thrumming echoes of gunshots barely masked by the heavy rain; the burning pain in my lungs as we desperately ran towards the van; and the warmth of my mother's trembling hand as she caressed my wet forehead while with the other she tried to muffle the sound of her disconsolate crying. This would be the last time I ever saw my father or my other family members.

On February the twenty-fourth of 2022, exactly two years before my birth, Russia formally launched its invasion of Ukraine and greatly escalated a conflict that had been steadily brewing since 2014 into an all-out war. Although during the final months of 2022 Ukraine had made major advancements in securing its borders against the Russian army, a surprise attack orchestrated on December the thirteenth on the city of Kyiv and the southern border with Moldova allowed the Russian Army to redirect their enemy's attention away from the previously secured territories in the east. The diversion provided a golden opportunity for the Russians, who, armed with a newfound barbarity that surpassed anything previously seen in the conflict, pushed into the battlefield and annihilated over forty-five percent of Ukraine's remaining forces.

On January the twenty-fifth of 2023, Ukraine fell into Putin's cold, iron grasp as the nations of the world turned their backs on the country to avoid further escalation. But the passivity with which they protected themselves would do nothing but feed the beast that rapidly grew more zealous on its hunt and began sizing them up to prepare for its deadly pounce.

Historians would refer to the fall of Ukraine as the "First Invasion" due to its role in emboldening other countries' desire for expansion. On April the twelfth of 2027, China began its naval invasion of Taiwan. By surrounding the island's coast with type Fifty-five-E destroyers and a ravaging bombardment over the city of Taipei, the people of Taiwan had no choice but to submit to the CCP's might as the "Second Invasion" took place. The Chinese mainland's invasion of the island of

Taiwan took the world by storm and caused nations to arm themselves and garner the support of protesters all over the globe . . . yet none were more valiant than the ones who rebelled against their very own country of China and even fewer were braver than Ju Hui Pan, my father.

Empowered by his unyielding beliefs and armed with his inspiring speeches, he created the Anti-War Coalition of China (AWCC) and organized rallies that successfully broke millions of Chinese citizens from the programming instilled in them by the government since childhood; however, it all became futile when the “Third Invasion” occurred. North Korea invaded South Korea on June the tenth of 2028, and leaders of the AWCC began to “disappear” mysteriously. Their disappearance made millions finally lose their already depleting reserves of hope for a peaceful resolution; war had become a horrifying yet very plausible possibility.

Many countries began to pass all manner of bills and sign intricate treaties to guarantee ease of operation, close cooperation, and solid alliances during a possible new World War such as the annexation of Puerto Rico as a new state and the readmission of the United Kingdom into the European Union. These preparations resulted in the new allied powers—which were comprised of the United States, Canada, South America, and most members of NATO—and what became known as the Great Communist Alliance (GCA) between China, Russia, and Korea who, in their quest to exert greater control over their citizens, pledged to extirpate any semblance of what they deemed “imperialistic propaganda.”

Understanding the GCA had its sights on him more closely than ever and that war was imminent at this point, my father paid the ultimate price to ensure my mother and I could escape to a safer country . . . and he was right to do so. On July the eighteenth of 2029, just two months after my mother and I had immigrated to the United States, the allied powers declared war on the GCA after China’s attempted invasion of Okinawa, Japan.

This would be the beginning of one of history’s most tense periods. After the GCA declared they would pursue the nuclear option if any other country interfered, the United States’ sitting president, Jonathan H. Morton, replied, “Then let us doom one another to extinction” as a way to let the enemies know of the allies’ resolution to retaliate if that were the case. Panic ran rampant through social media and every news outlet on what came to be referred to as the “Doomsday Declaration.” Many called for President Morton to be impeached immediately, but it would later be revealed that he was only allowed to deliver such a response after Congress itself had agreed there was no other way to defend the nation’s interests from the GCA’s heavy threats.

A few hours after this ghastly response, the Japanese navy reported that

Chinese troops had seemingly pulled back. Military drones of the newest AT-8000 series were deployed to inspect the Japanese coast to determine whether this was genuine information or simply a ruse by the Chinese only to find the coast deserted as their fleet had long since retreated. A day after this incident, the leaders of the GCA sent a message to the United Nations calling for a meeting to discuss the terms for the war and possibly banning the nuclear option.

It was laughable that the leaders of the so-called “free world” were sitting down to discuss how to kill one another safely; this is what the world had come to. Humanity breathed a sigh of relief as it avoided extinction as much as it braced itself for the ravaging bloodbath that was to come.

The war was fought on four fronts. The European forces took on the Russian west aided by platoons of both American and Canadian troops while the Japanese and Australians focused their efforts in Korea with the help of South-American soldiers. Although neutral, Indian and Middle-Eastern nations were secretly supporting the allied powers, and their support facilitated the stationing of Canadian troops in Russia’s south. At the same time, the United States focused the majority of its manpower on the Chinese southeast.

As the war proceeded, history repeated itself like some twisted comedy born out of mankind’s avarice and ignorance, yet this was a new century with brand-new tools crafted for the age-old art of war. On October the twenty-fifth of 2030, the first series of Raytheon HS-1000 combat armors was authorized for field usage. The invention of specialized EMP grenades followed—they were capable of exclusively targeting enemy equipment—as well as the creation of the first cloaking device, whose blueprints were stolen for the allies by the ASIS (Australian Secret Intelligence Service).

Still, all these inventions paled in comparison to the Air Carrier Model Three, affectionately referred to as *La Santa Victoria* (“The holy victory”) by the Argentinian engineer who designed it. Maintained airborne by quartets of turbines spinning at subsonic speeds located at each corner of the rectangular structure, *La Santa Victoria* was a marvel of modern technology armed with over five hundred turrets, military living spaces and recreational facilities, an armory, and a carrying capacity of two hundred F-39 battle jets. But the war could not be won by technology alone. Winning the massacre required men. It required their tactics; it required their ingenuity; and, ironically, it required what started it all in the first place: their gluttony for conquest.

The war was fought on four fronts, each with its own set of stories, many of which were crafted by one side or the other to incite whatever response they wanted amongst the people. To get the truth, they had to analyze closely the rhetoric in every article, revise every image for traces of digital alterations, and check the facts against the sound sources . . . and no source was more trustworthy

than the battlefield because, despite its dangers and its cruelty, the battlefield didn't lie.

The war was fought on four fronts, each with its own stories of victory and stories of hope; they were stories that restored people's faith in one another such as the reunification of the Koreans with its images of North and South Korean soldiers embracing as they put their guns down. Stories such as the bombing of a children's hospital in India destroyed that faith again, and some stories that went well beyond that. These stories were hidden from the public as the vivid depictions of the atrocities they retold could have opened a pit of dark emptiness somewhere in their listeners' incredulous hearts. These were reports whose every line would have grabbed hold of the readers' lungs and rendered them breathless before the horrid images that consolidated the macabre descriptions of the events they would have never accredited a human of being capable of orchestrating.

These reports ceased being simple stories. They were like myths that opened hidden windows into the grotesque truths behind the price that was paid to break the GCA's seemingly impenetrable barrier into the heart of China. At the beginning of the war, the allies had repeatedly attempted to break the southeastern defense to no success . . . until something changed.

A platoon led by a man who used egregiously inhumane tactics became a key element for the allies' victory, much to the detriment of the dignity of anyone who served under his command. His unit was an anomaly that defied all logic of the battlefield with the aberrant strategies he executed; he was the infamous General "Steel Ball" Andrade and his Black Cadres, and they were responsible for the war's most nightmarish exploits (including the hellish event known as "The Dead Man's Parade" of 2031).

The conflict lasted for three years. Each year saw an increase not only in the death toll (which had already surpassed that of World War II after only a year of its commencement) but also in global poverty levels as much of the world's resources went into the development of new warfare technology.

I was too young to remember my life during the war properly but not young enough to forget my experiences after it ended on March the twenty-seventh of 2032 when I was only eight. Even though my mother was able to procure a job in the military thanks to the United States' demand for electrical engineers, thus allowing us to avoid poverty, she was not able to save us from the harassment we experienced after the conflict's resolution.

After the war had decimated over five percent of the world's total population, the hearts of the people were torn by the loss of their families, and they desperately sought an outlet for the pain that overwhelmed their souls. They found one such outlet in harassing Southeast Asian people like my mother and me. The line between innocent civilians and GCA supporters had been blurred by the

indoctrination to which these countries had subjected their populations. Oftentimes, I'd hear comments from individuals who tried to ingratiate themselves by remarking that "I had been one of the lucky ones" for I "had been on the right side of history." These comments would make me think of the death of my noble father and of my grandparents, uncles, and cousins who had become just another casualty of the conflict. Had they simply been on the wrong side?

## Chapter 1: After All These Years

He was thirty-six but felt sixty-three. He sat with his legs crossed over his desk while staring into the pale ceiling and thinking how years of office work had done a number on his back. It had been twenty-seven years since the war now, and despite the many challenges of living in a post-war world, Xing Pan (now Xing Anderson) had managed to accomplish the ultimate goal of the immigrant: financial stability.

The war that took everything from his mother and him had created a variety of stable jobs and a high demand for people to work them, so when the time came to choose a career he decided to pursue journalism. It was an easy choice, after all, and one he made as a vigorous eighteen-year-old against his mother's wishes. She still lived by the idea of drawing no attention to them, but, most importantly, she did not want her son to suffer his father's fate. But his mother's honest concerns were of no matter to him, for an intense force inside his heart drove him—an unexplainable desire to expose the world's ugliest truths to the masses. He realized too late that the masses had grown tired of the world's ugliest truths.

After the war ended, there was nothing the world wanted to do more than move on from it. Governments took it upon themselves to stitch back normalcy out of the detritus that was left while the people grew distant from it all. They placed the blame for their woes on scapegoats and engaged in the blind consumption of fast-food entertainment. As a result, he had spent thirty percent of his fifteen-year-long journalistic career interviewing what he called all-is-well government agents and obnoxious celebrities. The remaining seventy percent of the time he spent inside his office dispassionately cataloging said interviews into articles. Despite how much he hated it, he couldn't quit due to two simple reasons that prevailed despite the drastic changes the world had undergone: rent wasn't cheap, and the money was good . . . or at least so he told himself.

It was twenty-five minutes until his meeting at 1:00 p.m. He looked indifferently at the ceiling while imagining what kind of government douchebag would—

"Good afternoon, Mr. Anderson," a female voice said before he had time to

finish his thought or even remove his feet from his desk. A young woman came suddenly into the office. She was of average height and a slim build with pale, pinkish skin that contrasted with her brown hair, which she neatly kept in a bun; she wore a denim coat with a matching knee-length office skirt and carried a suitcase, yet her most striking attribute was her gracefulness. From how she walked into the office to how she sat down on the chair and made Xing awkwardly remove his feet without breaking eye contact, her every move was conducted with mesmerizing elegance.

"I am agent Valencia from the Bureau of Investigations. It's a pleasure meeting you," said the woman as she proceeded to shake his hand. Her words had awakened him from his trance. She was just another pompous suit here to worsen his back pain.

"You're twenty-five minutes early," Said Xing while shaking a soft-yet-unusually-firm hand.

"I decided to arrive early for our meeting."

*And she's a tryhard*, he thought while dismissively turning to his computer and feigning opening a file.

He was not particularly interested in whatever news about inconsequential cases she had brought until she opened the suitcase and placed three Manila folders on the desk. He thought this strange. Most people who brought documents would simply project them on the wall, even government officials.

"I'm sure you heard about the recently leaked files regarding the Black Cadres."

He paused for a second before resuming his fake browsing. How could he not know?

"If you just want some biased Chinese mouthpiece to condemn the army's cruelty, go somewhere else. I have no interest in documenting any more of your sensationalistic bullcrap."

He replied without averting his gaze from the screen. He was annoyed. It was not the denouncing of the cruelty that bothered him but how it would all be used as a scapegoat for someone else; it was just another goose chase to protect some country's "best interests." He felt it was dishonest, and despite how unglamorous he felt his job was, he still had a reputation to maintain. He took pride in his reporting and would not sell himself to the likes of—

"We are looking to prosecute General Andrade."

He paused . . . longer this time . . .

"Excuse me?" he said, looking into her deep brown eyes incredulously.

"The International Crime Court has reviewed the aforementioned files and is currently taking action to prosecute General Andrade for his transgressions. The



Bureau is currently aiding them with the recollection of information, and what could be better than testimonies from members of his platoon gathered by a third party? These folders each contain information about currently living members.”

“I-I don’t . . . Why me?”

“You just so happened to be the most qualified person for this task. You are a natural at what you do, but, what’s more, you have conviction. All this year you’ve stayed in this job hoping to one day bring justice for your family and punish those who took everything away from your mother and you. Isn’t that right, Mr. Anderson . . . or would you prefer Mr. Pan?”

Her words sent a chill down his spine.

“How did you—?”

“Mr. Anderson, please. I believe I already mentioned I was with the Bureau of Investigations. I know a great deal about you, about your father’s movement, and the circumstances surrounding his death. I know of the uncertainty your mother and you felt when entering the United States. I know of the fear of persecution that made you change your last name, but most importantly Mr. Anderson . . .” She leaned in closer. Her words made him dizzy, yet they ignited a strange emotion deep within him. “I know that after all these years you are still looking for closure. So what do you say?”

He thought of his father and the strength of his hug the last time he saw him. He thought of his grandparents, his aunts and uncles, the cousins that never had a chance to grow as he did . . . and the memories still fresh on his mind set his heart ablaze. He was consumed by an intense feeling he had not felt in years.

Closure. Yes. That was right. It was a fervent quest for closure that had pushed him onto the path of a journalist in the first place, and it was this renewed determination to find it that now revitalize him.

“When do I start?”

He was thirty-six but felt twenty-one.

## **Cooley Farm**

*Jason Clayton*

In these parts, the trees grew in long thick stretches bounded by the dirt roads, the odd pasture, and the occasional cluster of mobile homes (often with an older wood frame nearby or next door). The northern end of the woods was marshy. The thin oaks and pines sank into the backwash of the lake, surrendered to the water completely after about a hundred yards, and resumed a half-mile away on the other side of the creek mouth, rising from the muck in unison and marching into the distance. A stillness hung on the air like a mask, suspended on a wire with the mistletoe and any perception of time; one day passed like another, dusk and dawn, with ne'er a sound or stir. The trees stood watch over a kingdom where very little moved very far, and in the way they bore themselves, the way they stood over the gray dirt watching all and seeing naught, they seemed alert, cohesive, and nearing the end of their inhuman patience.

The old Cooley farm was at least a mile from neighbors in any direction. The house sat with five old black walnut trees looming around it in a ring: two in front of the house, one at each side, and one behind. In another life, the walls had been white, with a grand porch that now lay somewhere under the rotten rafters and old branches. In the backyard, under the shadow of the old walnut tree, the door to the storm cellar had long ago rotted off its top hinge and hung back haphazardly at an angle, while behind it the stale air was silent but for the random echoing plop of a drop of water. To the east of the house lay the remains of the wooden barn, grown over entirely by weeds and thorns, and closer to the road an old brick chimney from the original house stood black and stoic amidst tangled bushes.

From where Luke stood in the woods across the road, thick darkness covered the property. He could only see the house as a vague black form underneath the shadows of the trees. The old Caudle man who owned the place only made an appearance to take stock of the decay and cut the grass with his tractor when it suited him, perhaps every month or so, which was, at least before the April thunderstorms, enough to keep the grass from being too high. Luke studied the place as best he could, looking for movement or any sign of human presence and finding none.

Caber stomped through the trees behind without any attempt to conceal himself. Luke sucked in a breath.

“Dude, what the fuck? You want someone to hear us?”

Caber threw his head back and brayed. “Relax, ya fuckin’ pussy. Ain’t nobody e’en out here!” He switched the trash bag to the other hand and threw it over his shoulder.

Luke shuddered. “They might be if you keep this shit up.”

Caber gave Luke a dirty look. “What the fuck you gotcher panties bunched up for? You afraid the dark or somethin’?”

“I don’t fuckin’ like this place.” Luke crossed his arms and shifted on his feet. He stared ahead at the inky form of the house.

Caber scoffed. “Oh, knock it off. It’s just a house, for fuck’s sake.” He stepped out of the trees onto the road. Luke felt the lack of company swell up to swallow him in the dark, and his chest tightened.

“Wait!” He darted out into the road. Caber kept walking, but Luke grabbed his arm and pulled him to a stop. “C’mon, let’s just go fuck with that ol’ black guy down at the bridge.”

Caber shook him off. “What’re you, twelve?! Stop actin’ like some lil’ bitch! We’re not goin’ over to the bridge. We’re not goin’ anywhere. We’re gonna do this, got it?!”

He tore across the road and into the yard before Luke could answer. Luke hesitated and eyed the darkness one last time. He called, “Hey, wait for me!” and trotted after him.

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*Once upon a time, in the years when the world lay bruised from the greatest war it had ever known, the Powers That Be created a lake at the place where the Sulphur River left Texas for Arkansas. They hauled a dam out of dirt and concrete, and when the time was right, they arrested the river and forced it into its new basin.*

*This isn’t to say that the Sulphur River lowlands were not inhabited. Several of the area’s oldest outposts of habitation, and not a few Native artifacts, found themselves abandoned and overtaken by the coming waters.*

*The land itself seemed almost to have an opinion on this matter. For years after the Sulfur’s banks extended and created Lake Texarkana (as it was then known), the clay below stirred and mixed, unable or refusing to lie down, so that the lake’s entire surface, even on the sunniest of days, reflected a dark, unforgiving murky brown that revealed nothing of its depths.*

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From within the yard, with the darkness surrounding them, Luke could see two windows on each side of the fallen porch. Beyond the cracked and missing glass, the shadows merged in a solid wall of black. They couldn't make their way in the front, not through the debris covering the door, so instead they made their way to the right so they could try the back door. Somewhere inside Luke thought he saw something glimmer the way faint light catches glass or an ember flares at the bottom of a pile of ash.

Caber gasped. "Did you see that?" He spoke in a low voice. "Looks like there's somethin' shiny in there. See, I *told* you there was shit in here!"

They kept on around the side of the house. There were three more windows on this wall. As they made the corner, Luke could see, then smell, the old cellar. His nose wrinkled. The air had a sour scent that Luke immediately wanted to call "buried," a rotting, deathly, dirt smell. He looked up at Caber, and he was frowning.

"Bugshit, dude. That's fuckin' rank."

"I know, right?"

They turned at the back corner of the house. There were five windows on this wall and a back door that, though a good three-and-a-half feet from the ground, was clear and leaning open. Luke's heart started beating faster. Caber chuckled and ran up to the door.

"Looks clear in here. We can climb in."

He put his bag on the floor inside, stepped up with his left foot, and hoisted himself up by grabbing the door frame with his right hand. He stood a moment to scan the interior of the room, and Luke, watching, waited a few paces away from the door. He felt an uncomfortable pressure in his chest that made it a little hard to breathe.

He wasn't the type to scare easily like this. He may have been many unpleasant things, but Luke Sanders was no pussy. He and Caber had been ransacking abandoned houses and terrorizing the neighbors for years since the day they met at the church daycare and promptly got themselves thrown out. Except for the time they accidentally set the woods near the Berry Farm on fire, nothing bad ever happened to them. They'd never truly suffered any consequences for their shenanigans. (The police came close with the Berry Farm fire, but they ended up arresting a pair of drunk dumbasses Luke and Caber went to school with.)

Yet somehow, somewhere inside, he didn't feel right about this one. Of course Caber wouldn't understand—Caber was an idiot. But he was the only idiot dumb enough to let him stick around, Luke figured, so he tried to swallow his nerves and remind himself that he'd done this sort of thing before. There wasn't anything in there that would eat him.

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*Whether or not the property owners along the river bottoms were adequately reimbursed for their lost homesteads is unclear. Within a generation or two, no one remembered anyone's living in those areas now submerged. So it was quite a shock one night, fifteen years after vast stretches of the county had been written off as parts of the lake, when a Deputy Sheriff stumbled across an abandoned stretch of dirt road marked with an old sign designating it "CO RD 1212." A quick call back to the dispatch told him nothing of the sort existed on the county maps, at least not in his location. The deputy made his way down the road to make a report on its conditions, and though it was old, it was still navigable. A call came in from an older deputy who informed him that he knew of the road in question and that it had been flooded out by rising lake waters. Soon after, the deputy found an old homestead and, further on, the remains of a family burial plot.*

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Caber turned around and offered a hand to Luke. "Think it was the kitchen. There's some counters 'n' shit. It's safe to walk around in here. The floor's still good."

Luke stepped up to the house—heart pounding, body screaming in protest—and took Caber's hand. It slipped because of the sweat on Luke's palm, and he fell on his ass.

Caber chuckled. "You all right?"

"Yeah."

Luke stood up, knocked the dirt off himself, and tried again. This time it worked. Luke looked around. The floor did appear to be intact, and against the far wall stood a few pieces of the old counter. The refrigerator and oven were gone, and pieces of the sink lay scattered on the floor. There were two more doors, and when Caber opened one nearest to them, they saw it was the pantry. Luke tried to read the labels on the handful of cans that remained inside, but it was too dark.

"Won't get far through here." Caber closed the door and stepped over to investigate the counters. Luke glanced around. The paint was peeling off the walls. The plaster had fallen off the ceiling in one spot over the stove space. The room only had one cracked window covered with a handful of cracked boards. All else that remained was a blackened crucifix hanging by the window.

Caber laughed. "Aw, dude. Come see this shit!"

He pulled a magazine from under the counter. He reached into the bag, pulled out a flashlight, and pointed the spot of light at the cover. A *Playboy* from 1973.

Luke smiled. "That's what's up."

"No, it ain't." Caber flashed him a wolfish grin.

Luke chuckled. "Queer."

Caber raised an eyebrow and opened the magazine to the middle. "What's queer 'bout this?"

Luke shrugged one shoulder and nodded. "Fine, you win."

"Every fuckin' time." Caber turned his attention back to the centerfold. He made a small grunting noise—something like "mmh"—and adjusted the front of his jeans.

"Fuck it. I'm keepin' it." He opened the bag and dropped it in. "There ain't nothin' more in here. You ready to move on?"

Luke nodded. Ready as he'd ever be. He didn't like the house any more now that he was in it. The air was too still. The buried smell was less dirt and more rot but no less dead. Caber stepped over to the other door and opened it.

Beyond, the darkness was total. Caber pointed the light through the door, looked left and right, turned back to Luke. "It's a hallway."

"How's it look?"

"Uh . . . looks all right. Ain't nothin' in here neither."

Luke cocked an eyebrow. "Well, what'd you think would be in there? It's a fuckin' hallway."

Caber shined the light in his face. "Don't make me fuck you up." He aimed back down the hallway. "There's a couple'a doors down here."

He took a few steps into the hall and studied the doors to figure out which would be best. He turned to Luke and pointed the light at him. "Which one you wanna try first?"

The floor opened with a terrific crash, and Caber dropped. His eyes stretched wide and his mouth opened for a scream that never came. The light dropped out of his fingers.

Luke sucked in a hard breath and grabbed his chest. Caber fell the four feet to the ground under the house and stood with his chest and head poking up through the hole in the floor. He froze for a moment with his arms raised to shoulder height and his face stuck in terror in a way that would've made Luke burst into obnoxious laughter any other night.

"You all right?" Luke whispered.

Caber let out a long, pent-up breath. "I think so." He placed his palms flat on the floor on either side of him and pushed down. He came up a few inches, but he couldn't lift himself any further than about waist-high.

"Goddamn this perfect ass!" Caber punched the floor and made another crack in it.

Luke wanted to laugh at this, but he couldn't find the energy. He stepped up and offered a hand. "Here."

"Careful. Stay in the kitchen." Caber grabbed Luke's hand with his right, pressed down on the floor with his left, and they pulled. He came up another few inches before his ass got stuck yet again underneath the floorboards.

Caber sighed. "Fuck my life."

"How we gonna get you out?" Luke asked.

Caber threw his arms in the air. "How the fuck should I know?! Why you always gotta ask me stupid shit like that?! Look around for somethin' to smash the floor!"

Luke turned back to the kitchen and started rooting around under the counter for something metal. He found an old Stretch Armstrong, an old magazine filled with black-and-white pictures of naked young wrestlers, and a bit of paper with a goat's head imposed on an upside down star. He cussed under his breath while he folded the paper and the magazine together and ripped them up.

"Any luck?" Caber called.

Luke scanned the room one more time, came back to Caber empty-handed, and stomped the floor next to him with his right foot. The floor gave with a limp, tearing sound. Luke took Caber's hand again and pulled him up into the kitchen without difficulty.

"Why don't you go first?" Caber asked. "You're smaller'n me."

Luke opened his mouth to protest, remembered who he was talking to, and sighed. "Move over."

Caber grabbed his bag and the flashlight from the floor and tiptoed over by a cabinet. Luke crept around the hole with his eye on the dirt below and his toes feeling around for soft spots in the wood. The floor was weak from the edge of the hole to the wall opposite the kitchen door. Elsewhere the floor seemed fine.

"Gimme the flashlight," Luke whispered.

Caber tossed the light over the hole. Luke caught it with his right hand and pointed it down the hallway. There were three doors on the left wall, two doors on the right wall, and one in the wall at the end of the hall. Luke thought for a moment that the death smell was stronger, but he decided he was just tripping himself out.

"How's the floor?" Caber asked.

"It's fine. Just watch that wall." Luke pointed the ray of light at the weak area of the floor. Caber stood on the balls of his feet as best he could and snuck around the hole. He spat on the floor.

"Fuckin' piece of shit!"

Luke turned to look down the hall. "So which one you wanna check out?"

Caber paused to eye the doors. He considered it for a long moment while Luke tried to keep from hyperventilating.

*Will you hurry the fuck up?* he thought. He felt the hairs rise on his arm. He wondered vaguely if he looked as bad as he felt. He hoped not. The last time Caber had suspected Luke of flaking out, he hadn't heard the end of it for six months. He was about to start throwing obscenities when Caber jerked his head toward the nearest door to the right.

"That one."

Luke pointed the light forward and approached it. It was painted light brown to match the rest of the hall. The doorknob was glass. Age hadn't damaged this one as badly as the other parts of the house that they'd seen. Luke drew a shaky breath, reached out, grabbed the knob, turned, and pushed.

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*The property, designated on old maps as the Cooley homestead, sold at police auction for a pittance to a branch of one of the better-off families in Maud. They hired a handful of men to clean the place and make the necessary repairs and otherwise kept off the place as much as they could, but the entire Dickens brood—man, woman, and four children—were on the property for a picnic on the day they found the bodies.*

\* \* \* \* \*

The hinges squealed. On instinct, Caber dug his finger in his ear and jiggled it around. The door opened easily enough for all the noise. Luke pointed the light inside the room, but the place was empty save for the remains of a dead 'possum in the middle of an old black cloth. The carpet was riddled with large black holes, and a layer of ash coated the entire floor. The window in this room was in one piece, but it was open.

Caber wrinkled his nose at the 'possum. "Ugh." He glanced around. "Helluva paint job in here."

Luke nodded. The walls were spraypainted with a wash of whitish gray. Black and maroon pictures were scratched in lines across the walls all around the room like an Egyptian tomb. They didn't make a whole lot of sense. He considered a pair of stick men dancing with a circle on a stick and a lopsided letter y while Caber took the flashlight and grabbed the doorknob to the closet. The wood of the frame made an awful racket, but Luke again had to wonder if it was just his nerves. The light hovered over the shelves inside; they were bare except for a broken knife, a few pieces of old newspaper, and a black candle. The light



paused on three words scratched into the wood on the back wall: NOTHING ALIVE HERE.

Caber frowned. "Dude. What the fuck?"

Luke's breath hitched in his chest. He took a step back. His heel came down on the edge of the cloth. His heart plunged in his chest. He spun and hissed, "*Shit!*"

Caber closed the closet. "Let's go check out another room." He stepped over to the door, reached for the knob and gave it a quick twist. "*Fuck!*"

Caber doubled over with his hand pressed to his stomach. Luke felt like his heart had dropped a few floors down an elevator shaft. He approached, reached for the light, and aimed it. The doorknob had shattered at some point, and the edges had sliced a long tear across Caber's palm. Blood coated his entire hand and dripped onto the floor.

Caber tried to look at his hand, but his eyes slid out of focus. He swayed on his feet. "Why the fuck did you close the door?!" he hissed.

Luke shook his head. "I didn't. I swear!"

"Oh, bull-fucking-shit! Ow! *Fuck!*"

He doubled over again. Luke wrapped his hand with the front of his shirt and opened the door. He almost walked into the girl before he saw her and did a double take.

"Hi!" She smiled widely as she said it.

She couldn't have been more than sixteen at the most. Her hair was dirty blonde and done up in pigtails with two red bows. She wore a brown dress that went all the way down to her shins. Her shoes were the same color as her dress and flat-soled with buckles. Her eyes, bright and green, stared straight into Luke's without flinching.

Luke and Caber stopped cold and looked back at her. "Who the Hell're you?" Luke asked.

The girl blushed. "I'm Nellie Cooley. Who are you?"

The boys stared back at her blankly. Luke's eyes took on a filmy cast. He felt his heart pick up speed. Nothing seemed quite real anymore.

"Nellie *who?*" he asked.

The girl giggled. "Nellie *Cooley*. Now, who are *you?*"

Luke made a few strangled sounds like he was choking. Caber stood up to his full height, stepped around Luke, and smiled.

"Hey, baby. This here's Luke Sanders, 'n' my name's Elroy Dickens. But most people call me Caber." He winked at her.

She giggled anew and glanced at the floor bashfully. "Why do they call you that?"

Caber stretched his good arm over her shoulder. “Oh, that’s just m’middle name. Why do they call you Nellie?”

The girl giggled again. “It’s short for Eleanor.”

Her accent struck Luke as odd. It was so thick, so country, more so even than Caber’s or his own. It reminded him of his Great-Memaw. Whatever it was, he was almost certain he’d never heard a young person talk like that outside the state of Arkansas.

Nellie glanced down in a discreet attempt to examine Caber’s form. She spotted his hand and gasped.

“Oh, my word! How did that happen?”

Caber chuckled. “I cut it on the doorknob in there.” He pointed into the room. Nellie wrinkled her nose.

“Oh, I don’t go in there. It’s too musty. Here. Follow me and I’ll fix that right up for you.”

She marched off through the door to the far left. Caber and Luke hesitated for a moment before Caber took the first step to follow and Luke came after him.

“Dude, did we take anything?” Caber asked.

“I don’t remember anymore,” Luke whispered.

Nellie poked her head into the hall. “Are y’all comin’?”

Caber flashed her his best grin and nodded. “Yeah. We’ll be right there.” She smiled back and ducked back into the room. The boys made eye contact, shared an unspoken fuck-it, and followed.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Lottie Dickens heard the Foster boy scream first. Being one of the middle children, she didn’t immediately get anyone else’s attention by pointing and calling. But when the boy tore out of the storm cellar shrieking and ran for the road, all five men on the premises flew after him. With some coaxing (and half a fifth of JD), the Foster boy told them that he’d stumbled across a body buried in the dirt floor of the cellar.*

\* \* \* \* \*

They stepped into the room and stopped. The space within was well-lit, warm, and clean. There were two wing-backed chairs and a large sofa, all red. On either side of the sofa, in between the couch and each chair, two kerosene lamps burned on two end-tables made of dark wood. The drapes, dark green like the rug, were pulled closed. The fireplace of dark gray stone in front of the sofa was also closed. Next to the window in the back of the room stood a tall bookshelf full of

leatherbound books. Nellie was next to it at a rolltop desk made of mahogany. She was digging through the desk's drawers.

"Here it is!" She returned with a roll of bandages, a hand towel, and a small cup of water. She noticed the way they stood at the door gawking and looked around. "What? What's wrong?"

Caber blinked, collected himself, and smiled. "Nothin', babe. It's just a lot nicer than we expected."

Luke bit back a peal of high, hysterical laughter.

Nellie blushed. "Well, thank you. I've been a-cleanin' and a-scrubbin' in here all day."

Luke frowned. Again with that damn accent.

Nellie didn't take her eyes off Caber long enough to notice. She took his good hand and led him to the couch. Luke stayed back by the door and watched them. Nellie examined Caber's hand, met his gaze, and looked away with a giggle. She poured water on the cut to clean it.

Caber hissed a bit. She looked into his eyes with a sorrowful look and pouted slightly. He grinned a little to reassure her that he was fine. It worked, and she started wrapping his hand with the bandages.

"That'll be a mighty deep scar," Nellie said.

Caber chuckled. "Yeah. It will. It'll be good for showin' off at the lake."

"Lake?" Nellie leaned her head to one side. "What lake?"

"Wright Patman. Over there." Caber pointed vaguely.

"Huh." Nellie put her head in her hand and leaned on her knee. "What do y'all do out there?"

"Fishin', campin' . . . y'know. Every now and then bunch a people go down there to get drunk and get a little riled up."

Nellie covered her mouth as she laughed outright and turned a new shade of scarlet. "Gee. I've never done anything like that."

"I bet you'd like it."

Luke rolled his eyes. Caber kidded and flirted with the girl some more while she finished wrapping his hand. Luke watched and thought over the course of the evening. He went over anything they might've swallowed or smoked. The last thing they had was a blunt from the new sack Caber had bought from J. C., and that was three hours before they headed out into the woods.

He supposed the sack could've been spiked with something like PCP or acid. He'd heard stories about that sort of thing, and he had to admit that J. C. was dumb enough to miss that sort of detail when buying from a supplier. He took another look around at the perfect little room and the perky girl in the old-timey clothes. It was the only thing that made sense.

On the couch, Nellie recovered from another fit of giggles. “So where are you from?”

Caber pointed north with his good hand. “Oh, we’re from Maud.”

Nellie’s face lit up. “Oh! I haven’t been to Maud in . . . gosh-a-mighty, it’s at least been since my last visit to the doctor’s. Ma used to take us in the car whenever we needed to see Doc Carlow. Then we’d go get ice cream from the Womack’s. She was always sure to make us swear Pa would never find out about that ice cream.”

Even Caber looked put off by what she said. “Doc Carlow?” he asked.

Nellie nodded. “Yeah. He lives on Fannin Street, next to the railroad.”

Caber glanced at Luke, cocked an eyebrow, looked back to Nellie. “And the Womack’s?”

Nellie nodded again. “Yeah. The ice-cream place. It’s down from the Methodist church.”

The boys made eye contact again, shared another unspoken moment of fuck-it, and Caber nodded. “I remember that place.”

“Lemme tell you, I just love that ice cream. Have y’all been there?”

“It’s closed now.” Caber scratched behind his ear.

Luke almost added, “For the better part of fifty years now,” but he decided against it.

Nellie’s face fell. “Aw. That makes me sad.”

Caber chuckled. “Hey.”

He slipped his good hand under her chin and coaxed her to look at him. “Don’t ever let me see that pretty face without a smile, you hear me?”

Nellie laughed and blushed all over again. She seemed to notice Luke standing by the door for the first time. “Oh! Would you like to sit down?”

Luke opened his mouth to decline, but Caber said, “Sure he would!” and gestured to the nearest chair with his eyes and a hint of warning. Luke lowered himself onto the seat with his hands flat on the cushion to brace himself for whatever happened when ass met surface, but he settled into the chair without complication.

Nellie watched him and laughed. “You’re a funny little man.”

Caber threw his head back and unleashed his loudest bray yet. Luke felt heat rise in his face. He was being embarrassed by the comment of a girl who probably didn’t exist. He felt rather silly when he thought about it. He crossed his arms over his chest and muttered, “That’s what I aim for.”

A low voice boomed from the back: “Nellie, who’re you talkin’ to in there?!”

Nellie’s face fell. The color drained away from her cheeks, and her eyes grew wide. “Oh, Pa.”

Caber frowned. "What's wrong?"

Nellie's breath started to quicken. "It's my pa. He's home early."

Luke cocked an eyebrow. He wanted to ask, "Early? Ain't it a little late?" but he was too scared. He looked at Caber, but Caber was too busy worrying over Nellie. He noted how typical it was for Caber to be more concerned about a hallucination's feelings than their safety, simply because the hallucination had boobs. Caber cooed at Nellie. He was trying to calm her by telling her that it would all be all right, but for once Nellie wasn't listening to him.

Heavy, deliberate footsteps came down the hallway, and she became more and more restless.

"I'm not supposed to have nobody here. I'm not even supposed to talk to boys even when I'm with my ma and pa—"

"Babe, it's all right." Caber took her hand with his good hand, but she pulled away like he was on fire. The footsteps stopped outside the door, and in the moment that followed Luke was too scared to breathe. The knob turned, squeaked, and as the door came open, Luke wished that they were on the bridge harassing the old black man.

Her father's shadow came into the room before he did; it stretched across the floor before his heavy black boots in a way that reminded Luke of the Angel of Death in an *Exodus* movie as it slithered forth to smite the unbelievers. The man himself was about six foot two. He was wearing long black slacks and black suspenders over a long-sleeved, button-up white shirt. His hair was gray, short, and combed back in a way that hadn't been considered fashionable, even in these parts, since before the Korean War. His face was fierce and set in an expression of stern, calm fury.

Nellie stared up at him with terror darkening her eyes. She sat as far away from Caber on the couch as she possibly could without falling off. Caber watched him without expression, but Luke could see the fear fluttering wildly in his eyes behind the mask.

"What're they doin' here, Eleanor?"

Mr. Cooley's voice carried a veiled threat like a mad dog that only growls once before attacking. Nellie tried to speak, but her words kept sticking in her throat and she could only make choking noises.

"We were passin' through and got lost in the dark," Caber said. His voice was steady, but Luke detected something in it, something shaky, that he'd never heard before. It scared him even more.

"I cut my hand," Caber continued, "and Nellie here was kind enough to help us out." He held up his hand to show him the wrapping.

Mr. Cooley didn't acknowledge him. He stared at Nellie with a dark look in his eyes.

“Eleanor, what have I told you about boys?”

A tear spilled out of her left eye. She swiped it away. “Please, Pa, I’m sorry—”

“What did I tell you, girl?” His voice rose a bit. Luke shivered.

Nellie drew a shaky breath. “I’m sorry, Pa, but he was hurt—”

“Go to the prayer room.” He extended his arm straight out beside him and pointed into the hallway.

Nellie sobbed, and the tears started to flow freely. “Please, Pa! Please don’t—”

“Don’t make me tell you again, girl.”

Nellie rose slowly. She dragged her feet across the room like they were heavy, and as she passed him, her father gave her a hard slap on her ass that echoed in the room. Nellie cried out, and on his way into the hall, Mr. Cooley slammed the door. By the sound of the steps outside, they were headed into the room with the broken doorknob. Nellie’s sobs grew louder.

As soon as they heard the other door close, Luke jumped up from his seat and took Nellie’s place on the couch.

“Dude, what the fuck are we gonna do?”

“I dunno.” Caber was still trying to act tougher than he was, but he was much more subdued—quieter—which told Luke he was just as scared as he was.

“Can we get through this window, y’think? You wanna try?”

“Nah,” Caber whispered. “I think the pieces of the porch roof are blocking the other side of it. Otherwise we would’ve come in through here.”

Mr. Cooley started getting loud. He was yelling about the Bible and whores. Nellie’s sobs grew louder, also. She was begging for forgiveness and mercy. A loud pop cut her off, and her sobbing turned into wails. The old man screamed at her some more. He was telling her to stop crying or she’d have something to cry about directly. She just cried louder and begged him to stop. They heard more pops—louder, rhythmic—then a sound like something hitting the wall.

Mr. Cooley was screaming so loud now that they couldn’t understand him, and she was shrieking and sobbing. He screamed some more about the Bible and God and sin, and the noise he made got louder and louder until they heard a sickening crack—very small—and the screaming stopped like someone had pulled a plug.

Luke blinked in sudden darkness. He could only hear the sound of his own heartbeat in his ears and Caber’s ragged breathing.

“Wha . . . what now?” Caber was whispering.

Luke felt his stomach sink. Twelve years and Caber’d never asked him that before. He didn’t think that meant anything good.

Luke strained his ears to hear sounds from the other parts of the house, but he heard nothing. He noticed that the springs under him were digging into the backs of his thighs. He felt the upholstery with a hand; it was dusty, holey, and threadbare.

Caber reached down for his bag in the darkness, pulled out the flashlight, and turned it on. The spot of light found the fireplace first. It was cover-free and filled with ashes. The chairs, even the one Luke had been sitting on, were missing at least a leg each, and they leaned dangerously at odd angles. Dust swirled in the light like dancers in a spotlight, and when Caber turned to shine the light around the room, the furniture was broken, fallen, or simply missing wherever they looked.

“Okay. I don’t hear anything,” Luke said softly.

“Me, neither.” Caber sounded like he was prepared to take charge again. They waited a moment to check, and for once, the tomb-like silence of the house was a blessing.

Luke cleared his throat. “Can I ask a stupid question?”

Caber looked at him and tipped his head up and down in a quick nod.

“Shoot.”

“What the fuck is goin’ on here?”

Caber shook his head. “Man, I ain’t even sure I wanna know.”

“I got a feelin’ we gotta kick J. C.’s ass.”

Caber gave it some thought and saw what he meant. “Agreed.”

They waited a bit more in case something else moved, but when nothing did, Caber stood.

“Let’s get outta here.”

They crossed the room as quietly as they could while listening hard for any other sounds. When he reached the door, Caber glanced back at Luke. Luke nodded, and he pulled it open.

The light fell on Nellie’s face. Her eyes were red, bloodshot, and tears streaked down her face. She looked up at them with an accusation burning in her pupils.

“You . . . you didn’t help me.”

The boys blinked at her. Their mouths dropped open to answer her, but no words came.

Another tear rolled down her cheek. “You didn’t . . . How could you let him do that to me?”

Caber stuttered for a second before he could speak. “I—we weren’t even sure what was goin’ on.”

“You’re not deaf. You knew perfectly well what he was doin’ to me!”

Her voice rose into a shrill squeal. Luke's breath sped up such that he wasn't able to do it properly. His lungs burned, but he couldn't slow down.

Caber raised his free hand and put it on her shoulder. "Look, I'm sorry. We—"

Nellie slapped his hand away. Her face twisted with rage. "Don't you touch me again!" Her voice was a fierce growl. "You only want one thing. I feel it. I have done since you came in here. Mama said all you boys were the same! Well, you ain't a-getting' it!"

"I just wanna get out of here and go home!" Caber cried out.

Nellie glared into his eyes like she thought she could make them melt in his head, and her mouth tightened into something like satisfaction. "Hm."

She was gone. The light pooled on the wall on the opposite side of an empty corridor. Luke thought he had missed something, but the look on Caber's face told him otherwise.

The larger boy turned and looked at Luke without trying to hide the terror in his expression. "Dude, let's get the fuck outta here!"

They stepped into the hallway. When Caber pointed the light down the hall, the door to the kitchen slammed shut. Scores of small fingers, bony and pale and grimy, reached up through the hole in the floor to tear more and more pieces of the floorboards down into the crawlspace below the house. The air was thick with dust and a strong scent like rotten eggs and charcoal.

"There was a window in here," Luke muttered. He stepped around Caber and reached for the doorknob to the room that Mr. Cooley had called the prayer room. He heard a tiny sizzle before his brain registered the heat in his palm.

Luke cried out and let go. He grabbed his arm by the wrist and squeezed.

The fingers in the hole regrouped. They moved around to work in Luke's direction while ripping away more and more of the wood that stood between their grasp and the boys.

Caber reached out and grabbed Luke's arm. "C'mon!"

He lunged for the last door in the hall. He let go of Luke and yanked it open. "Aw, hell, yes! There's a window in here!"

He took a couple of quick long strides into the room, tripped, and fell with a groan. Luke never heard him hit the floor. When he stepped into the last bedroom, the light was gone.

Luke could hear the fingers at work still trying to come closer and closer. His heart was going so fast and so hard that he thought the damn thing might break itself. He nudged forward with his toes. He was trying to find Caber or what he'd tripped on and finding nothing. The burn on his hand had cooled to a dull, stinging throb. In the black of the house, his eyes perceived white dots and smears that danced in front of him without substance or meaning.



His breath was harsh and shallow. He was hardly taking in what his body needed. Somewhere in the house behind him, he heard a small high-pitched chuckle.

His feet came out from under him as if someone had pulled them from behind. He fell face-first. His head was light and swimming from lack of air. He crawled forward a few feet with his arms and legs squirming before his lungs would unlock to take new breath. His mind ran in circles: to get out, to find Caber, to keep moving no matter what.

The sound of the fingers working away at the wood was nearing. They made a cracking, ripping cacophony as they sped up and closed in. Luke reached and pulled to move, to escape, to figure out where Caber fell. With the lack of any other sound, the sound of the fingers filled his ears and became impossibly loud. His own fingers wrapped around a long, round stick warm with body heat, and the noise stopped.

Luke sucked in a sharp breath. *The flashlight.*

He pulled it to him and felt around for the button, but at either end he felt only round lumps like rock. In the new silence, his heartbeat filled his ears with the tattoo of its full gallop. He felt the warm stick over again, trying to figure out how he had missed the button. It took him a few seconds to realize that the stick was a human bone.

Fingernails tore into him from all sides. He didn't have time to scream before it was over.

\* \* \* \* \*

*There were three at the end of the day. The police were called, and the bodies were hauled away—a woman, a teenage girl, and a little boy. They were never properly identified, not in the legal sense, anyhow, but the old-timers of Maud and Redwater murmured in quiet assent to themselves while remembering a dim whisper of foul deeds done years ago. When the bodies went into the ground in the cemetery in Maud, the old-timers went to bed knowing that three-quarters of the lost Cooley family had finally been put to rest.*

*A month later, the first renters took up residence in the house. They would not remain long. By the time a pair of young ne'er-do-wells were expelled from the daycare program at Maud United Methodist, the old farm had been abandoned for ten years.*

## **Along the Creek**

*Swetha Amit*

Along the creek, I spot a mother raccoon.  
I can smell the rain from the previous day.  
How tough it must be to tend to her babies,  
To live in a place with a musty smell.  
The water is gushing at a furious pace.  
I see her look around and usher her young ones:  
Blurry black eyes and twitching whiskers.  
In her eyes, I see a sense of trepidation  
Scurrying in a hurry as raindrops fall.  
A gust of wind blows.  
The family of raccoons becomes a blur.  
I mutter a silent prayer  
Hoping their fate isn't doomed like mine,  
Where I watched in helplessness,  
My kith and kin  
Swept by nature's fury:  
Torrential currents and a raging deluge.

## **Black Ghazal I**

*Thomas Kneeland*

We be the spirits of the mountains, extending our fingertips  
to the edge of the exosphere, reconnecting with galactic fingertips.

The earth gives us up & we crumble in its fist  
until we reach our last tectonic rift      until we're nothing but fingertips.

Bags are packed, clothes burst at loosened seams—  
we've worn these rags for millennia      stitched them ourselves, by fingertips.

Stomachs famish for *carnitas*, burrito bowls, a dollop of sour cream  
& phoenix sun in a water bottle, puckered open with red fingertips.

Airport gatekeepers pick up their receivers, ready to dial the blue;  
we've left a bag of rags in one of their seats      left behind our fingertips.

We take flight into twilight—our dreams of touching the sky collide;  
imagine the same hymn twinkling among the stars' fingerprints.

## **Nature's Phases**

*Swetha Amit*

Sun's first rays bloom the buds.  
Beyond the dewdrops, a world of petals open,  
Yellow hibiscus attracting bees.  
The hummingbird swirls around the world of nectars.  
Golden rays kiss the roses.  
In the glaring sky, a hawk flies.  
Tucked among the trunk of towering trees  
There is a home of twigs with eggs,  
Swallows swallowed by pink clouds.  
Light fades as the coyote howls.  
Darkness seeps, and the fireflies glow.  
An owl awakes and hoots.  
The moon rises in full beam.

## **Summer Haiku**

*Casey Purifoy*

a hot summer night  
many crickets play their songs  
a few stars peek out

both sides of the road  
cicadas call and answer  
songs hidden in trees

the skink on the log  
a small one, says my brother  
next to one he saw

watermelon shell  
the inside picked until clean  
the woods feasted here

these cicada songs  
lightning bugs glittering, too  
musical twilight

full moon in the trees  
fireflies light up with the stars  
a moment to howl

## **mt. rainier & Black men are the same**

*Thomas Kneeland*

Look closely:            see  
the mountain of a man reaching  
above the firmament that separates  
his head from his body  
& if you wait long enough, you'll  
hear him call to you from the pier  
& I'm just waiting to see him  
like I'm waiting for some  
nameless god that is not my God—  
this mountain has the soul of a Black man,  
is rain that arrives but never lands,  
is a soul of fire encased in a cold mountain  
of subterranean flesh,  
sleeps by force of nature  
to keep from erupting  
into his own death,  
is a reflection of the day  
when I'll leave this place  
with Baldwin's fire  
& the next time I arrive,  
I'll reach above the mist—  
like your unsung lover, longing  
to inhale evergreens  
that keep you dormant—  
& carry you in the furnace of my lungs  
dredging up Black smoke,  
spreading your Black soul,  
like an ocean of bearded irises  
that just want to soak sun  
grow golden within & Black  
throughout for all who soar above  
to see that a sea of Black does not  
have to follow death.

## **Savoring Tulips**

*Swetha Amit*

See these resplendent hues  
dancing amidst green,  
pink, white, orange, yellow, and purple.  
Hovering like showstoppers,  
I plucked them for you.  
See, these long stalks are holding their cups,  
soaking sunshine in their delicate petals.  
Smell them. Inhale the floral scents,  
sometimes citrus-like, honey-like.  
Feel them. Touch them.  
Sweeten your life with these bell-shaped flowers.  
Heal your sorrow. Tarnish the rotten blood.  
Embrace your soul with sweetness  
as you enter a new life.

**The Grove**  
*Susan Helene*

When I'm gone, scatter my ashes  
Where the sun shimmers through the leaves  
Forming dancing patterns on the verdant meadow.

Let the sun warm my soul.  
Let the wind carry me skyward  
To nourish what comes next.

Then, I will be content.



## **The Creative Syntax of Edgar Allan Poe in “The Fall of the House of Usher”**

*Chloe Fincher*

In the Edgar Allan Poe short story “The Fall of the House of Usher,” Poe dives into a somber and decaying world of mystery. He uses syntax to create a tone of despair and somberness by connecting the characters and setting to the overall themes of madness and mortality. From the beginning of the short story, the tone is set up to be somber through the description used by the narrator. Poe writes, “During the whole of a dull, dark, and soundless day in the autumn of the year, when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens . . .” (788). The narrator is traveling to meet with the resident of the House of Usher, Mister Roderick Usher, who has written to him saying he has fallen ill to a “mental disorder which oppressed him,” and the narrator feels he must see him in person (789). The narrator learns that this illness has affected the family for many years and is also affecting Usher’s sister, who resides with him in the manor. The narrator chooses to stay in the Usher manor and visit with his friend to try to put him in a better mood.

Roderick Usher must come to terms with being the last living member of the Usher family. His sister, Madeline, while suffering from a similar illness as his, also has moments of “cadaverousness” (Poe 791). When the narrator introduces her, the syntax is written in a way that makes the character seem already like a ghost who is haunting the home. In an article discussing gothic romance and authorial intent, Robert Hiatt writes:

Note the syntax that accomplishes the sense that Madeline is either already a ghost or will be part of a paranormal experience: “While he spoke, the lady Madeline (for so was she called) passed slowly through a remote portion of the apartment, and, without having noticed my presence, disappeared.” By postponing the action on Madeline’s part, this sentence achieves a suspenseful effect and also temporarily makes it ambiguous as to whether or not Madeline is alive. (36)

Hiatt suggests that Poe wanted to explore the question of whether Madeline was there and whether the narrator did see her walking around alive or dead.

This idea plays into the introduction of madness within the narrator; this idea receives expansion once Madeline lies buried. The narrator makes note that Mr. Usher starts showing behaviors much like Madeline’s before her passing shortly after the burial. The narrator states, “He roamed from chamber to chamber with

hurries, unequal, and objectless step” (Poe 796). Mr. Usher is slowly diving more into the madness and gloom of his lineage and his own mortality.

The tone of the short story dives deeper into despair as Usher is now turning into the ghost-like figure haunting the halls. Usher has taken on physical changes that reflect his mental state (just like the crack in the manor’s outside structure). The narrator says his eyes have lost their “luminousness,” his voice has lost its “huskiness,” and that he now has a tremor that shows from a mind that is always agitated (Poe 796-97). The effects of the madness become steadily more apparent, and this progression gives the story a tone of somberness that foreshadows death. Usher shows signs of coming to the end of his life by acting how his sister had acted before she died.

The narrator describes the manor as showing signs of aging and decay both on the outside and the inner décor. The manor reflects the state of the master of the house and how he is slowly slipping away with time. Arthur Robinson makes this same point in his article discussing order and sentience: “So far as such a matter is definable, the physical aging and deterioration of Roderick Usher follows the pattern set by his family mansion” (72). Robinson mentions that the building itself is acting like an organic character by responding to the actions of the family.

At the end of the story, when Madeline has clawed out of her tomb, the house responds by throwing open the doors so that she may be seen. Poe writes, “. . . the huge antique panels to which the speaker pointed threw slowly back, upon the instant, their ponderous and ebony jaws . . . [and] there did stand the lofty and enshrouded figure of the lady Madeline of Usher” (800). The house acts thusly so that Usher will see his sister and know the truth about his own pending demise. Robinson states, “. . . when the building falls, it is to ‘a long tumultuous shouting sound like the voice of a thousand waters.’ Such figures of speech, apparently incidental, associate the inorganic with the organic or even human worlds, and condition the reader to accept an ever closer and closer relationship between the two” (70). This reflection shows how Poe uses his choice of words to connect the character and his home to the theme of mortality. When Mr. Usher dies, so must the home.

Throughout the text, Poe indicates that fear may lead someone to take actions that bring about more of the same fear. Usher buries his sister, who is known to appear corpse-like, and instead of rescuing her once he hears her out of her crypt, he waits for her to seek justice. The text returns to a somber tone after the house has disappeared. The narrator closes by stating how all that remains are fragments of the manor. This story emphasizes fear of mortality and guilt. The phrases and descriptors used by Poe allow for the emotions of the characters to come across with ease so that the reader can empathize with the characters. This strategy creates an overall tone of despair when facing the fears of life.

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## **Going Down?**

*Susan Helene*

Ashley entered the building and strode with confidence to the elevator. She was sure this time would be different. She was prepared. She was ready. Or was she? Stepping into the elevator, she opened her oversized purse and confirmed that her résumé was there. She glanced at her reflection in the shiny doors. Professional, and conservative. Her mother would have approved. She pressed the 7 button, and the doors shuddered and began to close.

“Hold the elevator, please!”

Ashley grabbed the door and peered through the expanding opening at the approaching figure. She had never seen anyone like her before. The woman stood barely four feet tall. Her face was abnormally long and narrow in contrast to her round body. Two thin braids of bright red hair wrapped around the crown of her head partially obscured a receding forehead. A large mole nestled in the corner of her mouth. She walked with a rolling motion as if one leg were shorter than the other. Her gaze moved up Ashley’s body to her face. Ashley blinked. Had the woman seen her staring at her?

“Thank you. I see you are going to 7. Me, too. Are you applying for the receptionist’s job at Extreme Casting?”

Ashley took a moment to compose herself. The woman spoke in a loud, high, singsong voice.

Ashley nodded.

The elevator shuddered and began its ascent. A mechanical voice chimed. “Going up.”

“You know that as a receptionist you have to be courteous to everyone, regardless of their appearance.”

*Oh, God! She saw me staring at her.* “Yes, you’re right. I hope you don’t think I was staring at you.”

“No, deary, I *know* you were. Your type always does.” She turned her back to Ashley, facing the doors.

Ashley flushed. “And exactly what is my type?”

The woman swung around and faced Ashley. “Your type? Why, acceptable, of course. You fit all the norms—normal height, normal weight (given a pound or two), a normal body type, and an average-to-pretty face. And no disfiguring blemishes.” She placed a finger on the mole and smirked.

Ashley folded her arms. “I got it. I’m the competition, and you know you don’t stand a chance. Well, life isn’t fair, and you looking like you and me looking like this is just the way it is. Don’t expect me to feel sorry for you.”

The woman snickered. “You’re no competition for me, deary—not for this job. You do know what this job is, don’t you?”

“Of course. It’s a casting agency, and I’m the perfect receptionist ‘type.’ No one wants someone who looks like you greeting potential clients.”

“Well, let’s find out, shall we?”

The elevator ground to an abrupt stop. They both turned and faced the doors.

“Seventh floor,” the elevator voice announced.

Ashley adjusted her skirt and threw her shoulders back. The doors opened. Standing before her were two of the oddest men she had ever seen. Ashley took a step back.

A tall man with a disproportionately large head on a skeletal body smiled broadly. “Well, long time, no see, Miriam. You coming back to acting? We miss you. There are some great opportunities right now. There’s a huge market for space aliens and monsters. I’ve got two auditions set up this week and Hugh here . . .” He gestured to the gnome-like man beside him. “He’s just landed a role in that new live-action movie of *Where the Wild Things Are*.”

Hugh’s voice was low and guttural. “They’re looking for someone just like you. They’re short two ‘wild things,’ and we know how wild you can be, Miriam.”

The three laughed, an unworldly chorus to Ashley’s ears. She shrank back into the corner of the elevator.

“Sorry, boys,” said Miriam. “I’m off the stage and into the office. My arthritis in my knees ended those days for me. I’m applying for the receptionist’s job, and so is this pretty lady here. Think I’ve got a chance against her?”

Miriam glanced back and smirked at Ashley. The two men craned their heads to better see Miriam’s competition. This set off another round of laughter.

Miriam gestured for the men to move aside and strode off the elevator. She turned to Ashley. “Just a bit of advice, deary. Do some research before you apply for a job. Are you coming?” She stepped out of the elevator and toward the sign that read:

Extreme Casting  
*For the Unusual and Exceptional Actor*

Ashley couldn’t move. The two men entered the elevator and looked at Ashley huddled against the back wall, and then the small man pointed at the open doorway. She shook her head. A long, emaciated finger pushed a button. The door closed.

“Going down,” the elevator intoned.

## **sermon on the jagged rock**

*Thomas Kneeland*

Trees connected at the roots,  
deafen the city down to decibels  
with rustling leaves & hymnous birds.  
Cicadas weld themselves to bark with heat  
from subterranean hibernation & they cry  
the sawing kind.

I feel you near the bubbling brook,  
where schools of fish meet me  
at the small stone, a mount  
where they may hear from the Lord, too.

I thought them, my ancestors—  
in the frail, bony bodies—gasping  
for brief bubbles, air pockets in thick,  
murky water. They followed me down  
the riverbank & when I stopped again,  
so did they, tuned themselves to my  
vibrations, stationed in pews  
as believers would, one row behind the other.

Elder fish stare eerily from the back  
of the congregation at my young stature.  
Perhaps they worry that we learn  
& die young now, instead of  
learning young & dying old.

## **A Vindication of Vanilla**

*Hollis Thompson*

There is no better sign  
of a diseased culture  
than the hideous fact  
that “vanilla” is now a  
dirty word.  
People spit it out,  
vilify it,  
and use it in their  
one-star reviews  
of cafés, hotels,  
and the women they meet there.

But they all forget,  
as they stand in front  
of the ice-cream parlor,  
judging its selection  
of color-stained  
assortments of novelties—  
unaware or uncaring  
that the myriad  
chocolate varieties  
were made from the pain  
of slaves and children—  
the pure-petaled beauty  
of the vanilla flower,  
twin of the Easter lily,  
opening only for  
one precious day  
in the live-long year  
yet rejoicing in  
The Holy Season.

But for anyone  
who cares  
enough to order

a “plain old scoop”  
of vanilla  
will discover  
with blessed, thankful  
joy  
that the plant the world scorns,  
is one of God’s flowers.



## **Rhyme Theory**

*J. Lamson Meyer*

- I want to write an essay that flows off the tongue.
- Flow how? That's been done among writers. What's the fun?
  
- I want to show in slow motion scenes knowing low caution—the free sowing new notions.
- Are you trying to rhyme? That's been done many times. Poets find the wise crime to articulate with nice pride inside the artistic mind relies.
  
- Fine, but I shine and thrive upon the manipulation and articulation of language accumulation.
- Do I sense a premonition?
  
- I have plenty of ammunition, so prepare for the acclimation without aggravation or expectation. Counting the aggregation, you'd think this was an amputation or an annexation. Don't mind my alliteration, but that's not the application, so keep up. Resist the stagnation. Make an annotation.
- You call this an essay? I call this a comfort station full of accommodations and no compensation.
  
- It takes heavy concentration to connect the syllable constellation. It's a kind of conjuration, a conjugation, a contemplation.
- Sounds like a condemnation, a conservation to avoid conforming to the constipation of literature like a corrugation of defamation. You should stop before you give yourself a herniation.
  
- Don't suggest hibernation. I prefer exploration of the syllabic fragmentation. It's my interpretation, not a fabrication or imitation but something of an intricate incantation without limitation.
- The sounds of integration will be lost in translation. Doesn't that give you hesitation?
  
- This feels like my obligation. This essay is my orchestration, my preservation of sound. It's a protestation against literary classification!
- Do you ever consider rotation for lyrical maximization?

- I believe in noncompliance. It's in the pseudoscience. Nothing can confine us. The pious guidance holds a bias, stays in silence, and supplies us with messiahs said to triumph.
- It feels like you're trying too hard in your defiance. Or is it self-reliance like a kitchen appliance?
- It's a metaphysical alliance, a rhythmical science of whimsical suppliance.
- Was it accidental, an internal antennal compartmental feeling of transgressional words?
- It's experimental and could be transcendental even if incremental. It may seem coincidental, never governmental but sometimes sentimental and intercontinental.
- The resulting saudade feels like a grenade of reminiscing accolades in need of a hearing-aid to interpret the masquerading escapade.
- I'm constructing a protective palisade against the subjective crusade of liturgical switchblades disguised as reflective nightshade.
- Aren't you afraid that this style will decay and degrade? You'll never get paid.
- I cannot be swayed. I'll become a dreadnaught upgrade. This is no crackpot charade. It's a free-thought cascade releasing the blood-clot blockade as Gordian knots unbraid.
- End your rhyming in pairs. It's over the top like a constricting firmware. Perhaps this essay is poetry. I don't care!
- That's not my intent, and I'd hate to misrepresent, but this essay needs no consent for dramatic effect. I have no reason to relent, so please don't resent.
- Are you changing the subject? That's arranging the concept like exchanging the unchecked.
- I'm estranging the object, never short-changing the subject. I'm creating a sound-ranging dialect, defanging the stigma disconnect.
- You imply a sound phonetic while you blow-dry their side-effect. You're a small fry with no self-respect.

- Nonsense. My agenda is artistic with no defense for the linguistic pretense. It's an alchemistic offense for the aesthetic past tense, but this is my optimistic civil defense for a futuristic capital offense.
- Sounds like an antagonistic passed progressive tense. It's unrealistic, and you need common sense. This essay is anarchistic, so expect no recompense.
  
- I didn't ask for approval. It's not crucial, but consider an auditory perusal. Leave now and you'll surely feel rueful.
- It seems you've intrigued my curiosity and fatigued my ferocity. I meant no animosity toward this segued monstrosity.
  
- Yet you still wish to chastise and deputize? I'll have to offer a reprise to demonstrate the alchemized words transformative as butterflies. Though I may improvise and fragmentize, I'll never brutalize or patronize since I wish to harmonize.
- But does this style optimize? Your words pressurize and rhapsodize until they synthesize and symphonize. Do you theorize that readers will be paralyzed when asked to categorize?
  
- I don't try to classify or codify. They rarely coincide since my words are fortified and magnified to never liquefy. You might be petrified, mortified, or horrified to learn that genre's been nullified, occupied until writers become open-eyed to override the preoccupied, qualified, and specified definitions with declassified saccharide.
- Yet alone can you rise above the floodtide with your lodestone of pride? There's an undertone of an intensified philosopher's stone.
  
- Let me testify to the underside of sounding unified through the verified specified. Let me introduce the subdivide to diversify the dissatisfied. Like Jekyll and Hyde, I'll disqualify in formaldehyde and identify the preoccupied agenda until I'm satisfied.

## **Stop the Clock: Reconceptualizing Time and Trauma in the Short Story**

*Brandon Pettey*

The finite nature of time causes much of humankind to run the proverbial rat race. Social pressures attempt to dictate the pace at which people live their lives. Introduced in “Cracks Filled with Images: Mental Disability, Trauma, and Crip Rhetoric in *Cereus Blooms at Night*,” feminist disability scholar Jennifer Marchisotto’s concept of Crip Time explains that trauma often necessitates a reconceptualization of time. Diverging from the social construct of what is timely, however, disrupts social norms in order to promote positive change. Many characters throughout literature have challenged societal perceptions of time to gain agency for themselves and others in situations similar to theirs. To better understand how reconceptualizing time can promote a more equitable world, one may first look at how the main character in Perkins-Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” fights against patriarchal forces and works for gender equality. Equally viable is the character of Arnold in Gina Berriault’s “The Stone Boy.” Arnold challenges the adults in his life to accept his perception of time in relation to a traumatic loss and how his choices advocate for the rights of children. These fictional characters can help readers understand how others understand time and trauma and the responsibility that people have to realize that time and trauma are both individualized experiences.

Perkins-Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” is the story of a late-nineteenth-century woman who experiences postpartum depression. Her physician husband relegates her to bed rest in order to avoid truly addressing her depression. “The Yellow Wallpaper” often receives praise for its brave indictment of manipulative therapeutic practices. Vivian Delchamps argues that the text asks the question, “What is one to do with diagnosis, its consequences, and fallibility?” (105). While this question is an important one to ask, one must also analyze what can happen when someone loses the right to control the timing of recovery.

From the beginning of “The Yellow Wallpaper,” conflict exists between the couple, especially in regard to the duration and scheduling of the main character’s convalescence. This conflict is evident when she says, “John is a physician, and *perhaps*—(I would not say it to a living soul but this is dead paper and a great relief to my mind—) *perhaps* that is one reason I do not get well faster. You see he does not believe that I am sick!” (Gilman 608). Although her husband does not believe that she is sick, he sees her weakness as an opportunity to take control. In the aforementioned quote, she acknowledges that her husband’s being male and a

physician does not necessarily earn him the position of power that he thinks it does. Through the perspective of her main character, Gilman shows that witnessing and taking note of the inequities that exist in society can be the beginning of realizing real change.

The main character's husband is content to use the opportunity of convalescence to dictate the exact scheduling of her rest days. She speaks of her husband's control over her daily activities: "I have a schedule prescription for each hour in the day; he takes all care from me, and so I feel basely ungrateful not to value it more" (Gilman 609). What John takes from his wife is not care but her agency to make the decisions that affect her future.

The female protagonist in "The Yellow Wallpaper" chooses to push back. She says, "I did write for a while in spite of them; but it *does* exhaust me a good deal—having to be sly about it, or else meet with heavy opposition" (Gilman 608). With this statement, she claims time spent writing as her own and asserts that the influence that the men in her life have over how she occupies herself is, in fact, deleterious to her recovery. In making such a claim, she takes a stand for women who have little agency at this time in America.

Similarly, a tragic loss demands that Arnold in Gina Berriault's "The Stone Boy" separates himself from others' expectations about time and trauma. "The Stone Boy" follows Eugene and Arnold—two young brothers growing up in 1960s rural America. While walking through a fence, Arnold's rifle goes off, and he kills his older brother Eugene. Arnold must then navigate the trauma of losing his brother on his own. Professor of English at California State University Charles May sees "The Stone Boy" as a lesson about what can happen when someone does not discuss problems. May notes, "Unable to change their lives or to fully identify or express their feelings of loss, despair, and loneliness, Berriault's characters often suffer in silence and isolation" (178). The isolation that Arnold feels after losing his brother certainly is harmful; however, that this isolation is the product of the adults in his life judging him for not responding "quick enough" to meet their expectations.

Arnold's tragedy reveals how trauma can cause someone to lose awareness of time. After accidentally killing his brother, time stops for Arnold. The trauma from what just happened causes him to lose his sense of urgency and the need for immediate action. Arnold's situation shows how being unable to explain one's changed relationship to time can cause a serious rift with one's community. He chooses not to acquiesce to societal expectations or apologize for his choices. In doing so, he proves that young children deserve a voice in society.

Arnold's father, unfortunately, cannot understand how his son experiences Crip Time because Arnold does not fully grasp it himself. Berriault writes, "But when they asked him why he hadn't run back to the house to tell his parents, he

had no answer – all he could say was that he had gone down into the garden to pick peas. His father stared at him in a pale, puzzled way . . .” (4-5). Once met with his father’s judgment, Arnold could have easily admitted wrongdoing to please his father. Arnold, however, knew that killing his brother was truly an accident. In refusing to apologize or admit guilt, Arnold serves as an avatar for children’s rights and the rights of people who experience trauma.

The sheriff resorts to judgment when he cannot understand Arnold’s needs to escape time: “Well, all I can say is . . . he is either a moron or he’s so reasonable that he is way ahead of us . . . . It’s come to my notice that the most reasonable guys are mean ones. They don’t feel nothing” (Berriault 6). The sheriff’s words are proof of how easily society dismisses the complicated lives that children lead. Even when Arnold faces a court of law, he refuses to back down. This choice takes his campaign for independence from being localized to his home to the community at large.

The sheriff does offer an apt prediction for Arnold’s future. When asked if he wants to detain Arnold for killing his brother, he says, “Maybe in a few years” (Berriault 6). This statement reveals how precarious was the position of Arnold and other children at the time. The court had the power to influence Arnold’s future. Incredibly, even in a disadvantaged position, Arnold stands his ground.

Arnold’s case serves as a tragic example of how circumstances outside of their control can marginalize or judge people. Such people can then relent to social pressures or take the responsibility to fight for themselves and others like them. Arnold fights. He shows that sometimes the body’s response to trauma necessarily is an escape from time. Neither one’s parents nor the government has the right to influence one’s relationship to time. Arnold’s choices and silent protest push for a more equitable world for children.

The characters in Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” and Berriault’s “The Stone Boy” reveal the complexity that trauma brings to one’s perception of time. Gilman’s character shows the dangers inherent in someone’s losing agency over the timing of recovery. The main character makes every attempt possible to be an active participant in her recovery and prove that women deserve an equal voice. Arnold in “The Stone Boy” exemplifies why trauma sometimes demands that people eschew traditional perceptions of appropriate timing. Taking a moment to pick peas is what he psychologically needed to begin recovering from losing his brother. The family interactions in “The Stone Boy” help readers understand that individuals who experience traumatic loss must walk the path of recovery in their own time.

Both of these stories reveal the real-life harm caused when outside forces try to dictate the timing of recovery. Gilman and Berriault’s characters insist that people should acknowledge the validity of Crip Time. For their own good and the

good of others like them, they prove the complex relationship between time and trauma.

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# **The Old Man and the Seat**

*Joshua Zeitler*

*after Ernest Hemingway*

He walked into Scruffy Mo's swinging a birthing stool at his side. The drinkers hushed. They had been rowdy, but they knew each wrinkle on his face. He was very old, and they respected him.

He put the stool at an empty table. It was a sturdy stool. It had been with him a long time, and they had been through a lot together. A sturdy stool for a sturdy man. It made him think of the war. It was a hell of a war. He sat down.

"Good to see you, Papa. What'll you have?" the waiter said.

"Dry martini. Cold."

It was a fiction they played out every day. The waiter pulled a glass from the freezer and filled it with a cheap whiskey. The old man took a sip. It was good and cold.

His face was unshaved. He had been busy. The usual. Fishing, hunting, drinking, brooding. He liked to brood over things past, like the war. It was a hell of a war.

"The young boys have been talking." Sergio walked up. He was old but not as old as the old man. He was a damn good fisherman. He was a good man, and the two respected each other. "There's some question on what your favorite drink is. They want to know what they should be drinking. They look up to you."

"Damn fools," he said. They'd never been to war.

"So, then?" Sergio said.

"A man's favorite drink should always be the drink he has in hand," he said. Like most things, he'd learned it in the war. He grasped the handle of the birthing stool. It was an old wood, and wise.

Sergio grabbed his drink and set it across from the old man's.

"Another martini," the old man said. The waiter pulled a glass from the freezer and filled it with a cheap whiskey. He rinsed out the old glass and put it in the freezer.

"I don't know how you drink that shit," Sergio said. He sipped his *mojito*. "You never drink anything sweet."

"Life isn't sweet." He'd learned it in the war.



“That’s true. It needs a little sweetener,” Sergio said. They had the same debate each day. Neither ever won. The old man couldn’t hold it against him. Sergio was a damn good fisherman. The old man respected him. He’d seen his equipment once and found it adequate despite his wife’s complaints. Sergio’s wife had died after the war. It was his only wife. The old man had been married many times and divorced as many.

“The only good wife is an ex-wife,” he thought aloud.

“That’s true,” Sergio said.

“Another martini,” the old man said. The waiter pulled a glass from the freezer and filled it with a cheap whiskey. He rinsed out the old glass and put it in the freezer. It reminded the old man of the war, except then he had drunk martinis. Very dry, very cold martinis.

The band played a new song. It wasn’t about the war, but he’d first heard it then. He’d been squatting in the trenches fiddling with the radio when a station finally came through. It was in French. He didn’t understand the words, but he could sing them. He hadn’t had the seat then. He wished he had. It was a damn fine seat.

“This is a damn fine seat,” he said.

“That’s true,” Sergio said.

The old man finished his drink.

“Another martini,” he said.

## **Holiday Board-um**

*Page Petrucka*

### Characters

CHIP, any age

JAX, any age

KIT, any age

G, any age

### Time and Place

The action takes place in the present in a boardroom at midnight in mid-December.

*(Lights rise. CHIP and JAX are sitting at a typical board room table. JAX is at a laptop computer. CHIP is holding a pen and writing on a legal pad. KIT is standing at a large whiteboard with several dry-erase markers and erasers. The table has stacks of paper and various holiday decorations, including a mini-Christmas tree and elf ears. The energy in the room can be felt immediately. Lines are delivered rapidly and in an overdramatic fashion [think William Shatner as Captain Kirk]. Everything is at stake!)*

KIT: Chip, are you ready?

CHIP: Legal pad and pen, and extra pens, and extra legal pads. Check.

KIT: Good. Jax?

JAX: Laptop fully charged. Backup laptop ready. Backup charger ready.

KIT: Perfect. Where's G?

JAX: He went to get the food.

KIT: That's right. Did we give him our order already?

CHIP: We did, sir. Um, Ma'am. I mean . . .

KIT: I know what you mean. What did we order?

CHIP: Pizza.

KIT: What toppings?

JAX: Cheese and pepperoni. Extra sauce.

KIT: Excellent.

*(Just then, G comes busting through the door on his cell phone.)*

G: There's a problem with the order!

KIT: *Dammit!*

JAX: What's the problem?

G: Possible wind. Possible rain. Possible tornado. All causing a delay in delivery. No one wants to be out on the road if there's a chance that some kind of weather might happen at some point tonight. Or early tomorrow morning to sometime around mid-morning to late afternoon.

CHIP: Kit, how are we going to *do* this tonight without food?

KIT: G? What are our options?

G: Okay. Okay. Um . . . I keep a box of Nilla Wafers in my desk. I also have a small bag of gummy bears. And Capri Suns.

CHIP: Really?

JAX: How *old* are you?

KIT: Don't give him a hard time, people. It's all we've got, and we're grateful for it. Get it, G. Quick.

G: On it.

*(G runs out of the board room.)*

KIT: While we wait for G, let's go over what we're doing here. Chip?

CHIP: Holiday play, sir. Ma'am. Boss.

*(KIT writes on the white board "Holiday play." From here on out, any writing KIT does is on the whiteboard.)*

KIT: Length?

JAX: Ten minutes.

*(KIT writes.)*

KIT: Ten . . . minutes . . .

CHIP: Wow! That's a long time.

KIT: Stay with me, Chip. Don't panic *yet*.

JAX: I believe we can do this, Kit.

KIT: So do I, Jax. So do I. All right. What are our parameters? Jax?

*(JAX looks at notes.)*

JAX: Four characters.

*(KIT writes.)*

KIT: Four . . . characters . . . What else?

JAX: We have to incorporate the quote "The best mess is a Christmas mess."

*(KIT writes.)*

KIT: "The . . . best . . . mess . . ."

CHIP: Wait. I thought it was "Business depends on profits, the world depends on principles."

*(KIT writes.)*

KIT: “Business . . . depends . . . on . . . profits . . .” Is it both of them? Or just one?

*(No one answers. KIT continues.)*

Come on, people! What is it?

*(CHIP frantically looks through his notes. JAX grabs her phone and scrolls through it.)*

I need an answer. Now!

JAX: I got it! Both! It’s both.

*(ALL breathe a sigh of relief.)*

KIT: Nice work, everyone.

*(Just then, G comes bursting through the door with his snacks and paper towels from the bathroom.)*

G: I got the food!

CHIP: Thank *heavens*. My blood sugar was tanking fast.

KIT: *Great* work, G. You’re a lifesaver.

CHIP: I wish we had some of them. I love lifesavers.

JAX: Same. But the fruity kind. Not the minty ones.

KIT: Divide it all up amongst everyone. But none for me.

*(EVERYONE is shocked.)*

JAX: Boss, no. You can’t do that.

KIT: It’s my decision, Jax. You all need this to get through the night.

G: But so do you!

KIT: It's okay. I wouldn't be a good boss if I didn't know something like this might happen. I'm prepared. I'll be fine. I promise.

*(JAX tears up a little. So does G.)*

G: Boss, if you don't eat, neither do I.

*(CHIP stands.)*

CHIP: Me, too.

*(JAX stands.)*

JAX: Same with me.

KIT: If you all don't just take the cake.

CHIP: I wish we had some cake.

JAX: I love cake.

KIT: Damn if I don't have the finest group of people working for me. All right. We'll split it evenly. Now sit down. Let's get back to it. G? Would you mind?

G: It's my job, ma'am, and I'm happy to do it.

*(G starts evenly dividing the meager snacks and drinks. It's rather ridiculous but also very sweet.)*

KIT: What other parameters do we have? Is that it?

CHIP: I believe that's it.

JAX: Wait! No, it's *not*!

CHIP: Good heavens, you're right.

KIT: *Dammit*. What else do we have to do?

JAX: The Christmas tree. We have to use the Christmas tree!

*(KIT writes.)*

KIT: Christmas . . . tree . . . How? How are we supposed to use it?

CHIP: We have to make it look like something else!

*(Once G is done passing out the snacks, HE then goes around feeding the group and holding up their Capris Suns for them to take sips. HE also dabs EVERYONE's foreheads occasionally with a paper towel.)*

KIT: But what?

CHIP: I don't know! They didn't say. Or did they? Why can't I remember . . . ?

KIT: Best guess here, people. Think holiday. What would you dress a Christmas tree up as? And why? Why are we doing this?

CHIP: For fun?

JAX: As a disguise. We're disguising it!

*(KIT writes.)*

KIT: Disguise . . . tree . . . As what?

CHIP: A car?

KIT: No. Not holiday enough.

JAX: A fruitcake?

KIT: Too holiday.

G: An elf!

KIT: G, you're a genius.

*(KIT writes "elf" on the board.)*

G: Thank you, ma'am. I learned from the best.

KIT: We're lucky to have you on our team. G, since it was your idea, would you do the honors?

G: Yes, ma'am!

*(G takes the elf ears and places them on the mini-Christmas tree in the center of the table. Afterwards, HE finishes up feeding everyone and eventually takes a seat at the table sipping on his own Capri Sun.)*

KIT: Well done. And that's all that is required?

JAX: It is.

CHIP: I concur.

KIT: I don't want anyone to be alarmed at what I'm about to say.

JAX: Kit, what is it?

KIT: I believe I have something that will absolutely make us the front-runners.

CHIP: What?

KIT: Chip, I'm going to ask you to do something for us.

CHIP: Whatever you need.

KIT: One of the characters in our play must speak in verse. Now I know what you're thinking. You're thinking, "How? How on Earth are we going to write that?" Well, we all have to walk before we can run. So right here, right now, Chip, I want you to practice speaking in verse. I want you to rhyme, Chip. Rhyme! And once we all hear it, we'll be able to write it. Of this I have no doubt.

JAX: Am I hearing you correctly, Kit? You want Chip to speak in verse?

KIT: Yes.

CHIP: Me?

KIT: Yes, you.



CHIP: Starting when?

KIT: Now.

JAX: Kit, you know I respect you and your stellar leadership. But sometimes . . . sometimes you ask too much.

KIT: That's my job, Jax. To push you. Each and every one of you.

JAX: But this is madness! Madness, I tell you.

KIT: *Jax!* Get a hold of yourself. Chip can do it. And so could you, if I asked you. Do you know why? Because you are the *best* group of Earthings ever assembled.

CHIP: She's right, Jax.

JAX: She is. I know she is.

CHIP: I can do this. I know I can.  
I can do this because I'm the right man.  
Or person. Or human. Or whatever.

KIT: Just end the sentence when you actually make the rhyme, Chip. Don't keep going.

CHIP: You got it, boss. I hope it's not a total loss. Of things. I don't . . .

KIT: No, Chip. Make the rhyme and then stop talking.

CHIP: You mean make a rhyme  
All the time.  
When I talk,  
Don't take a walk.  
Or run. Or bike ride.

JAX: Just end it. End on the rhyming word.

KIT: I can see it's going to take some practice, which is exactly why I asked Chip to start now.

JAX: Boss, you're such a visionary.

G: No doubt.

CHIP: She has a lot of clout. And . . .

KIT: No! That's it. Stop right there. Well done. Folks, let's give him a round of applause.

*(EVERYONE claps. CHIP takes a bow.)*

CHIP: Thank you all so very much.  
I can walk without a crutch.

*(Beat. CHIP continues.)*

Unlike Tiny Tim . . .

JAX: Aw, man! You had it. Right up until that last line.

KIT: It's all right. Keep it up, Chip. Okay. Is everyone in a comfortable spot?

JAX: Check.

G: Yes, ma'am.

CHIP: I am, too.  
And I don't feel blue.

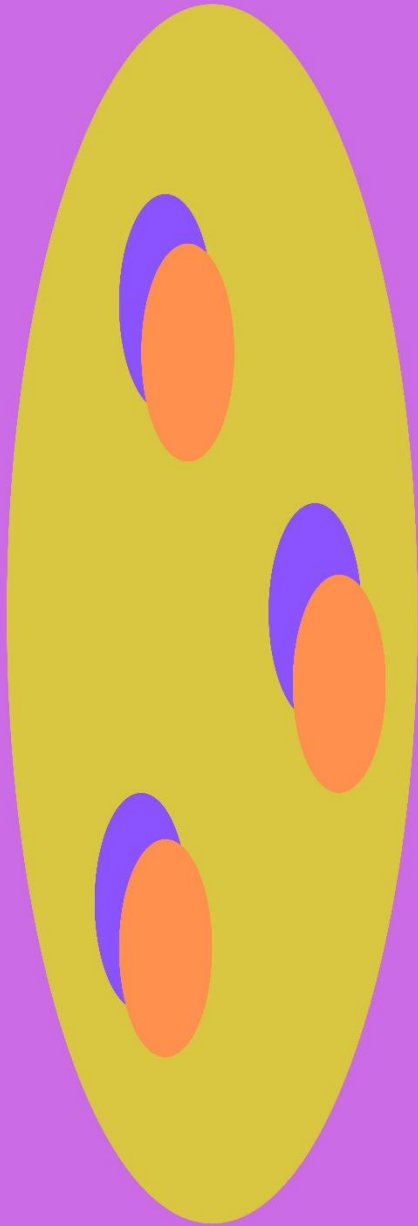
KIT: Ready to dig in?

*(EVERYONE yells, "Yes!", "You bet!", etc. KIT continues.)*

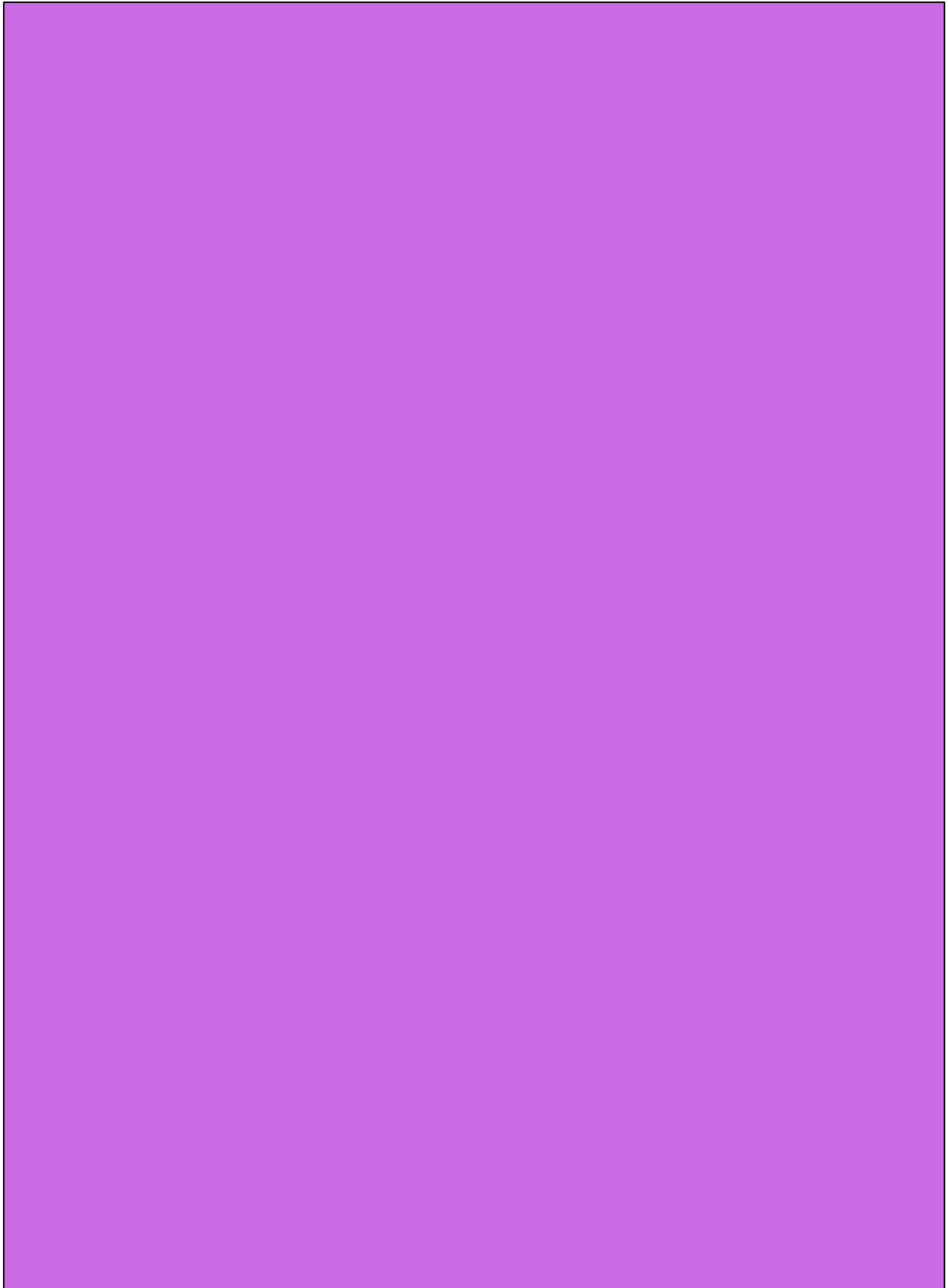
And now, *we write!*

*(KIT sits down at the table. THEY all talk amongst themselves about the play they are supposed to write as the lights fade out.)*

Written and Illustrated  
by Tommy Tye-Cornelius

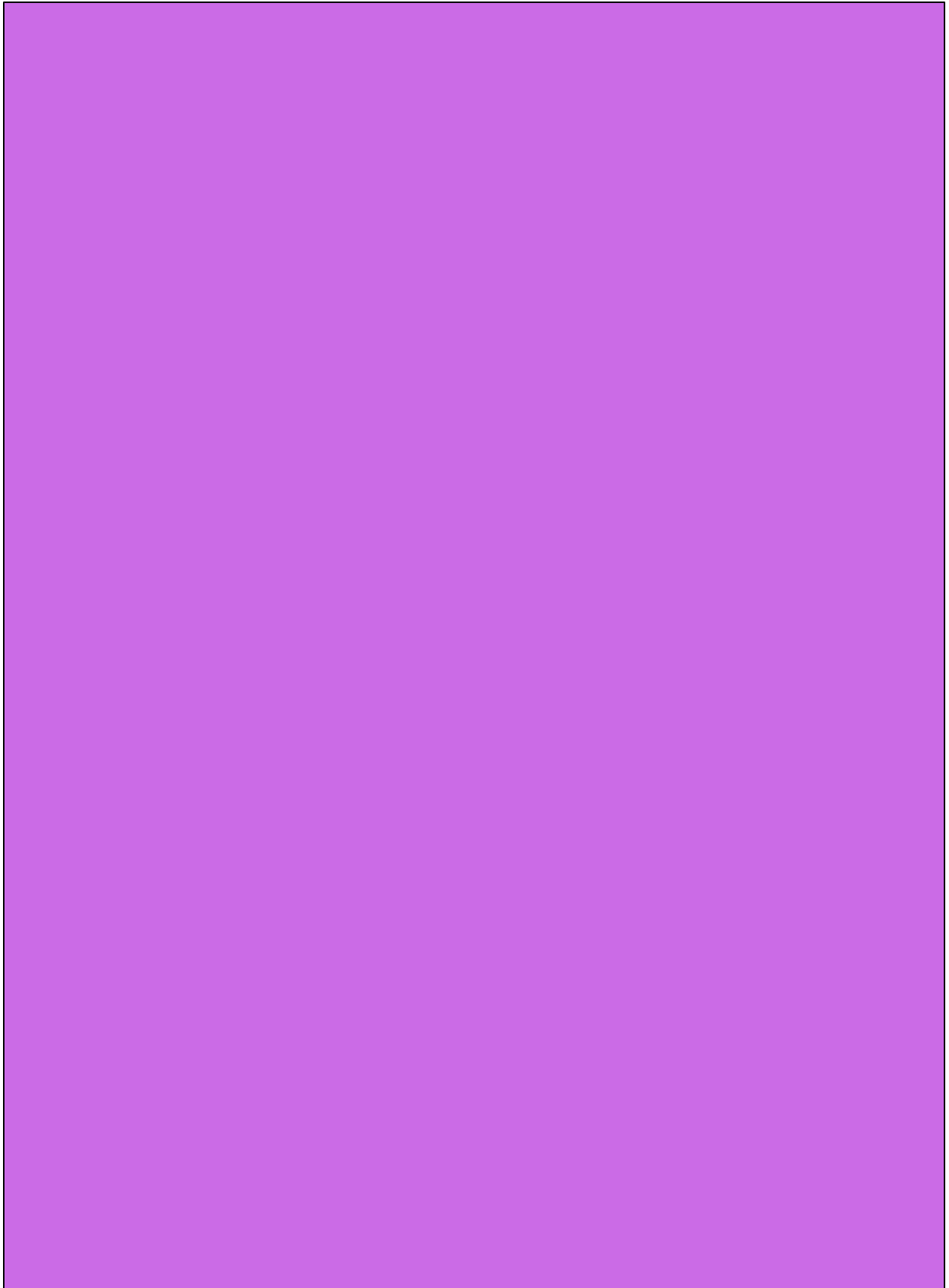


# The Dragon With No Flame

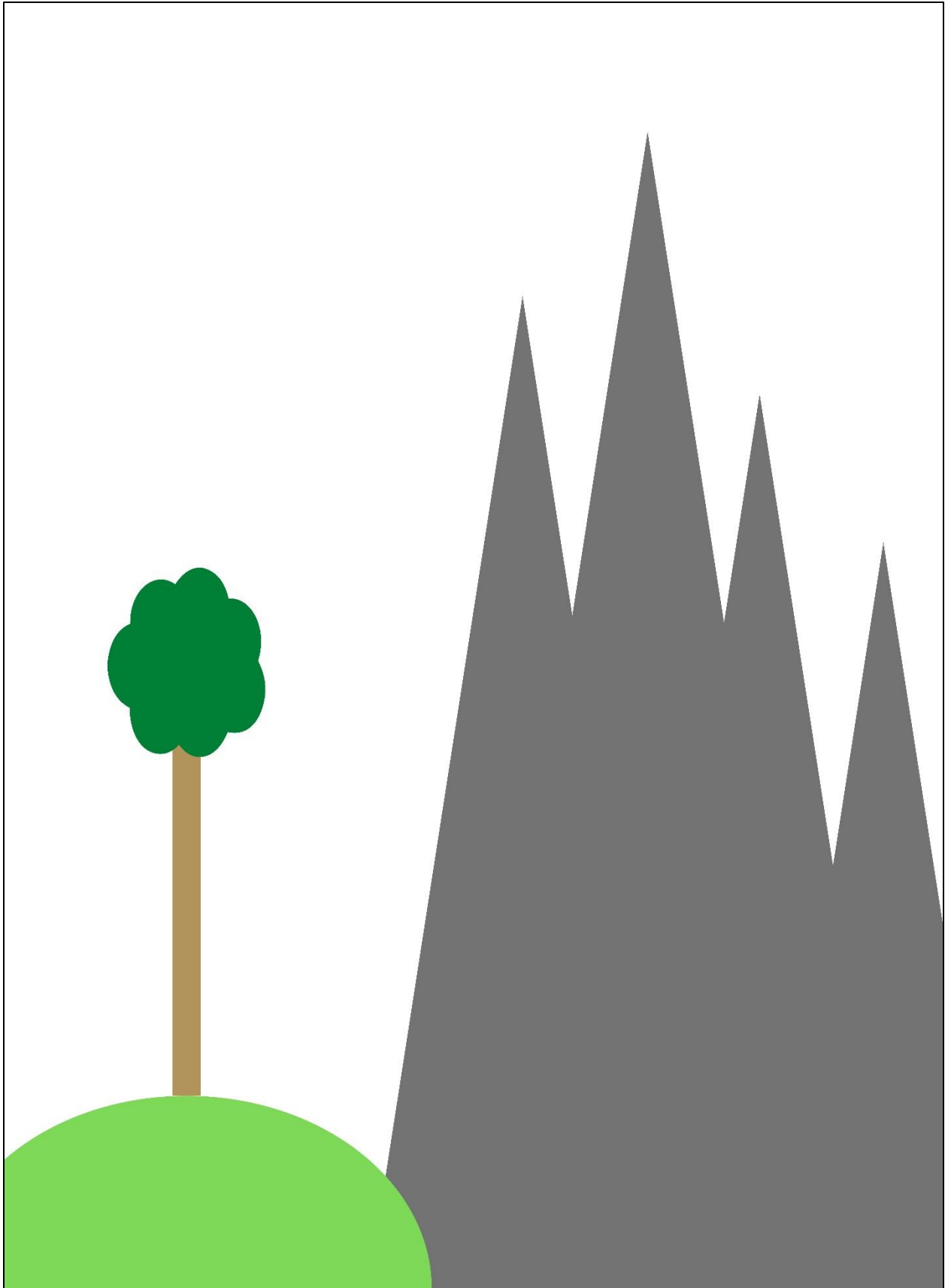


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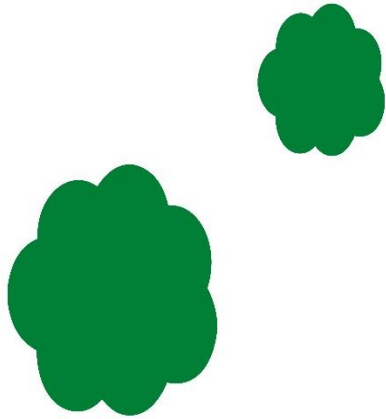




Long before the age of humans,  
great and powerful dragons roamed  
the earth, sea, and skies.

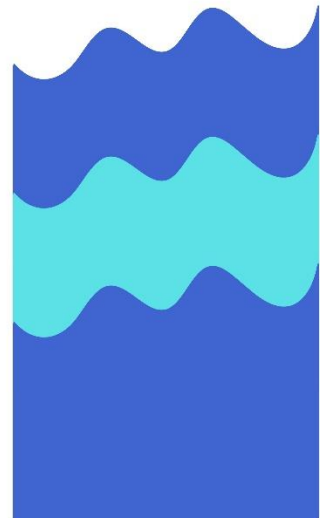






Some, like the **Great Green Sky Wyverns**, used their powerful wings to stoke their flaming breath.

Others, like the **Wicked Water Leviathans**, used their flames to boil the watery seas that they called home.



One thing, though, remained ever constant.

No matter flying, swimming, stalking ...

Red,

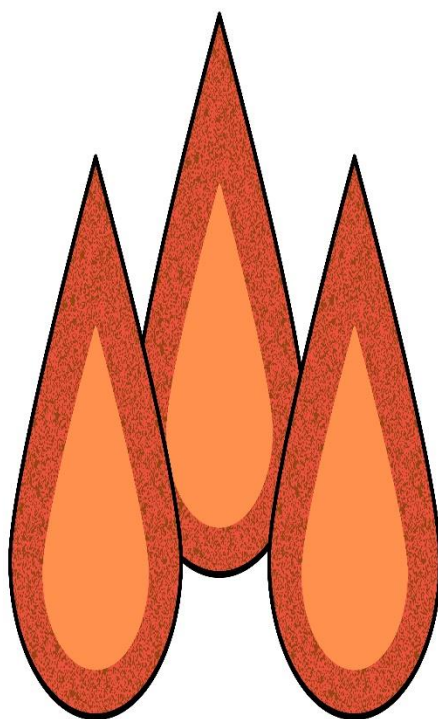
Green,

or Blue ...

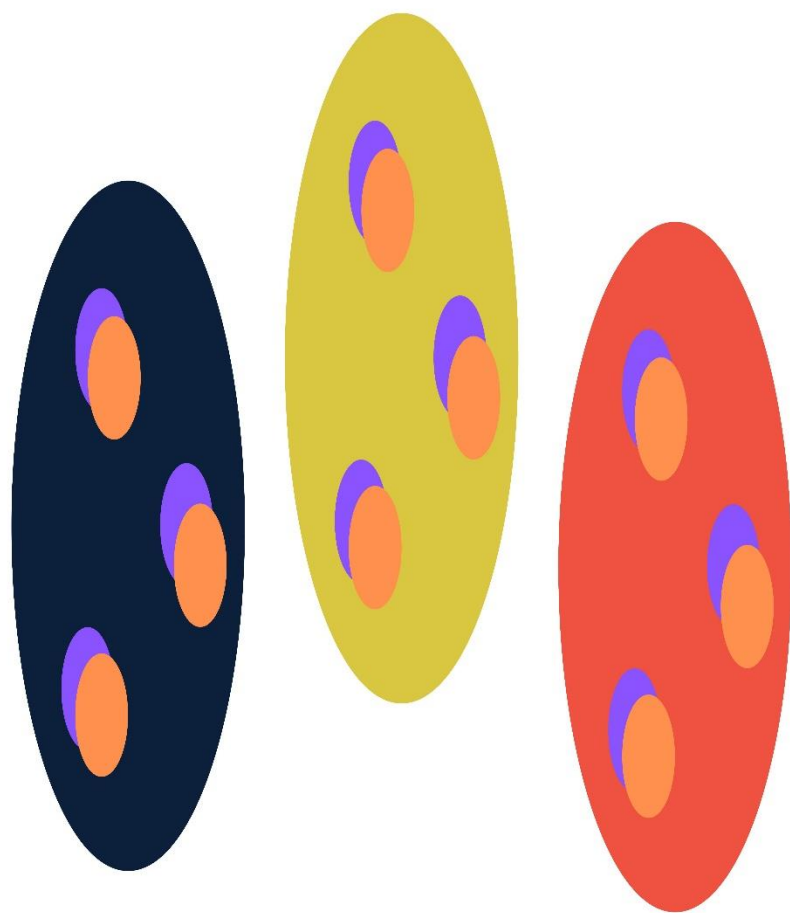
Big

or small ...

Every dragon had a flame.

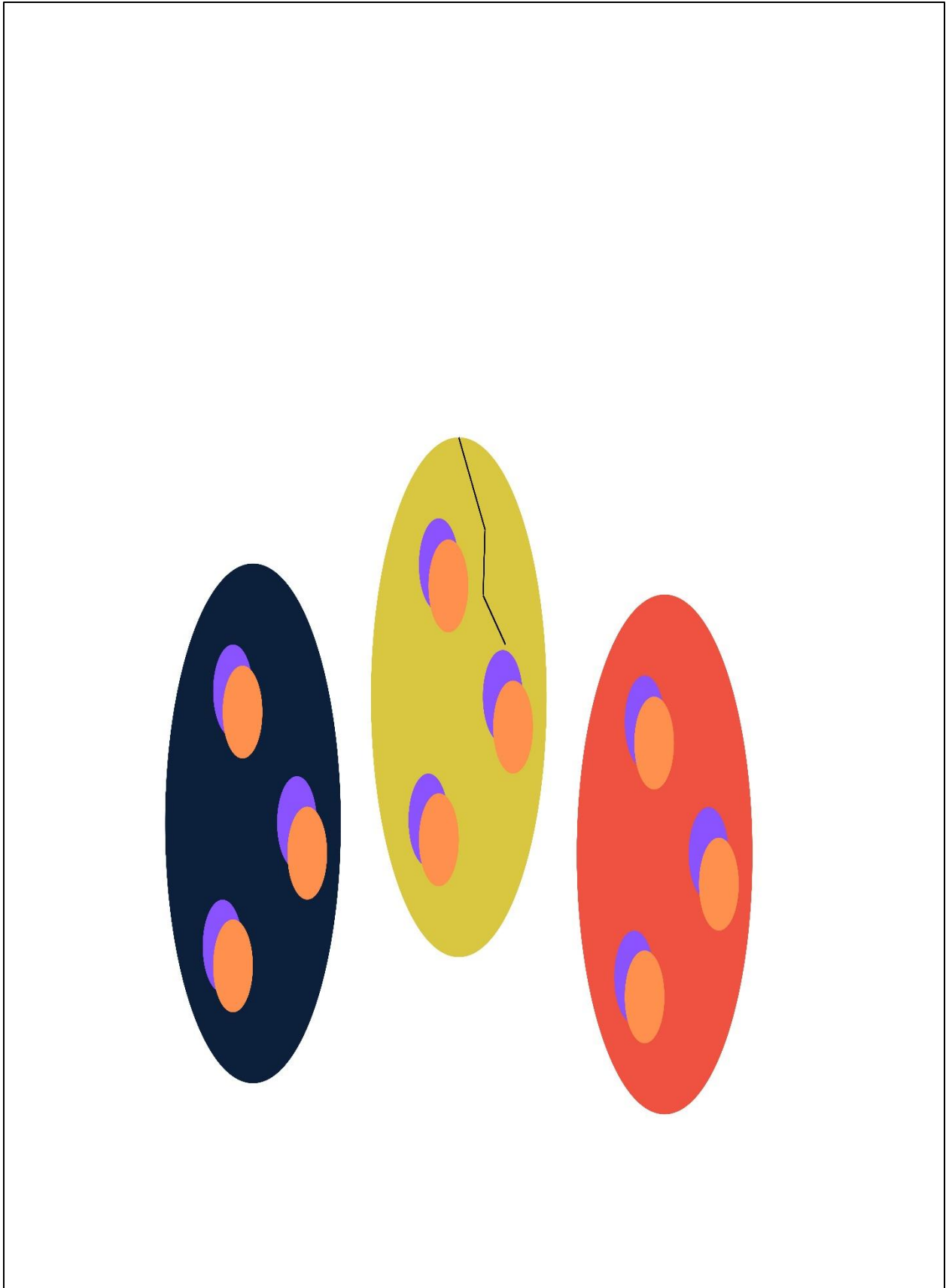


And every flame had its dragon.

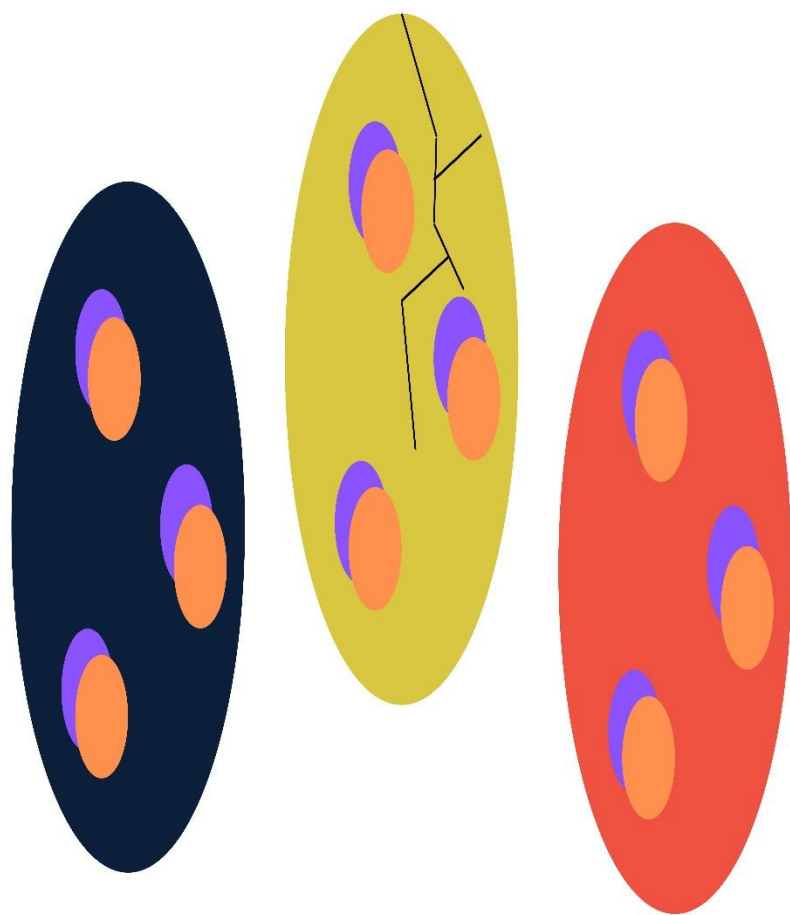




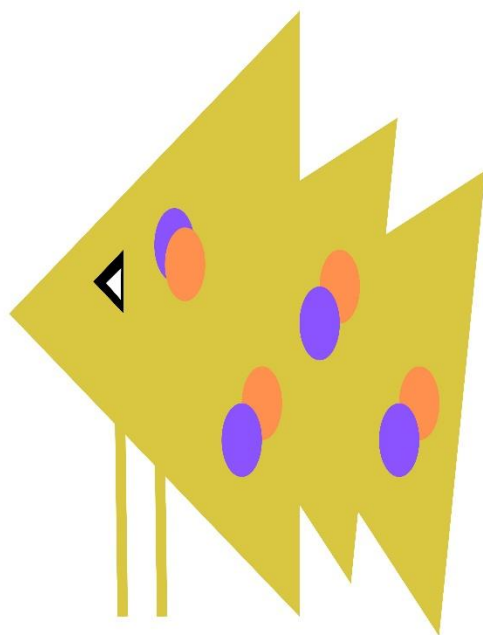
That is, of course, until Jacobi the Golden Light Dragon  
hatched from his egg.



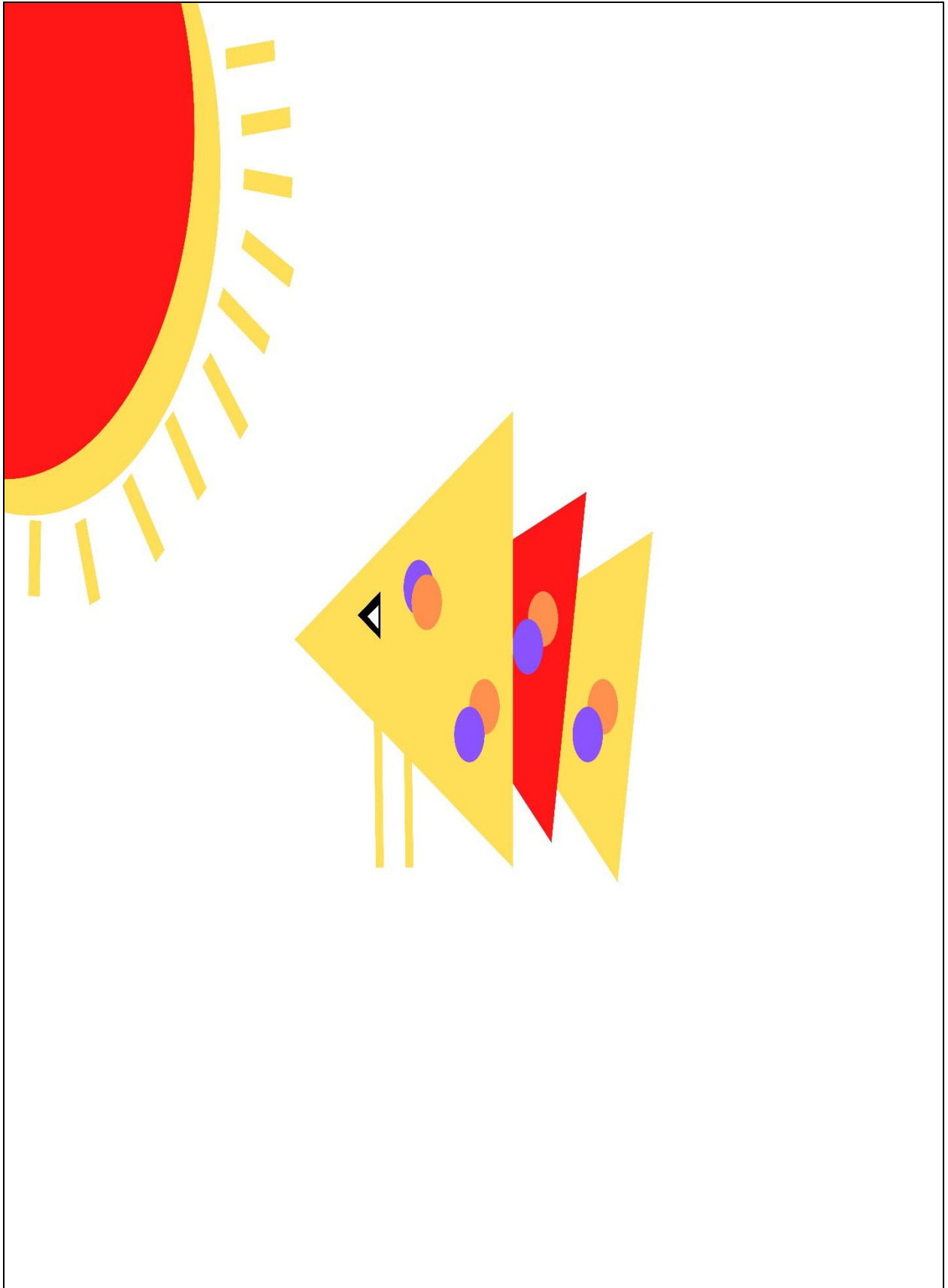
He came from a long family of **Royal Light Dragons**  
and had been said to be the best egg his family  
had ever seen!



Everyone was excited to see what he would become,  
and when he hatched he did not disappoint.

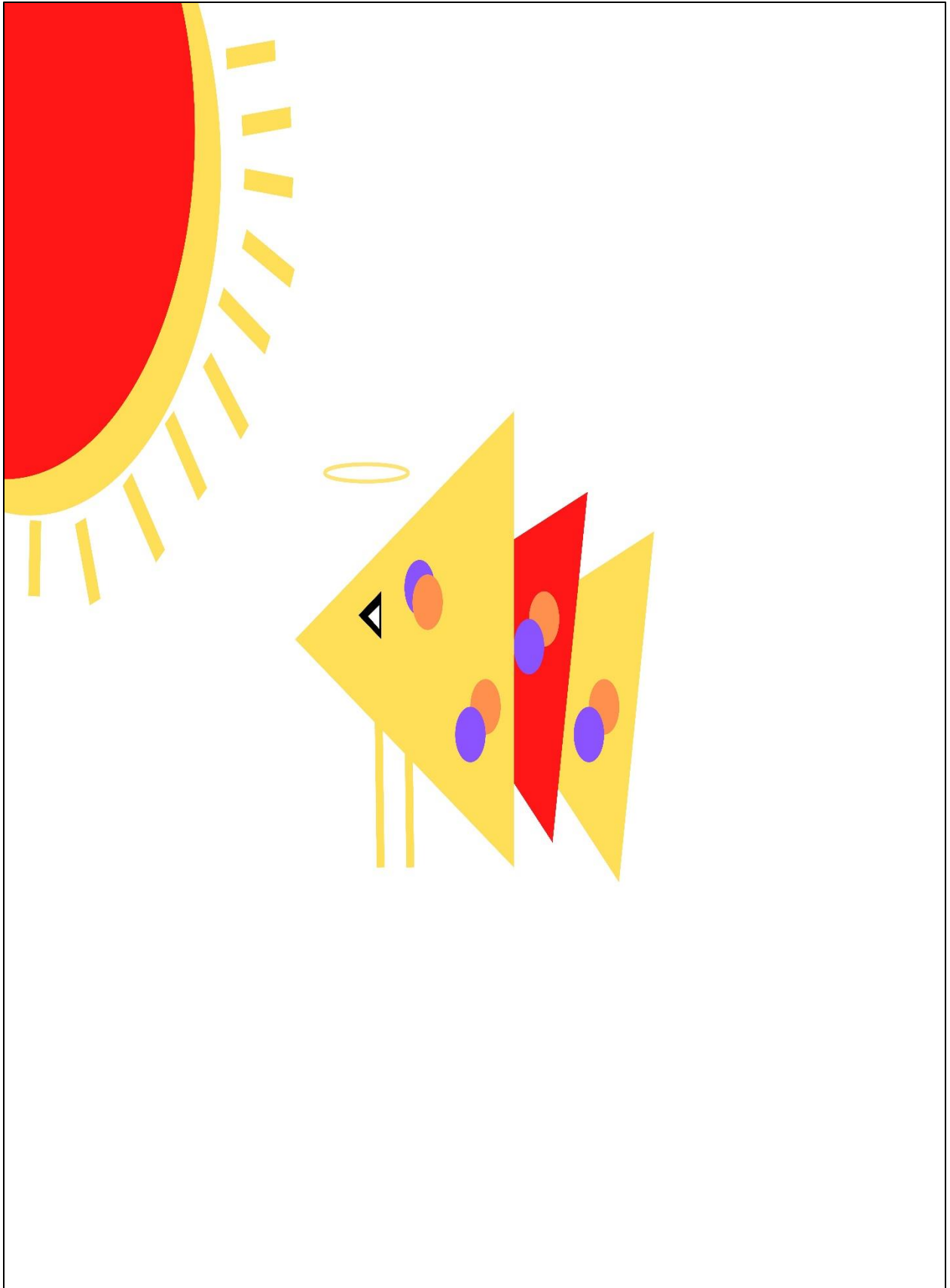


His golden skin reflected the sun's rays.

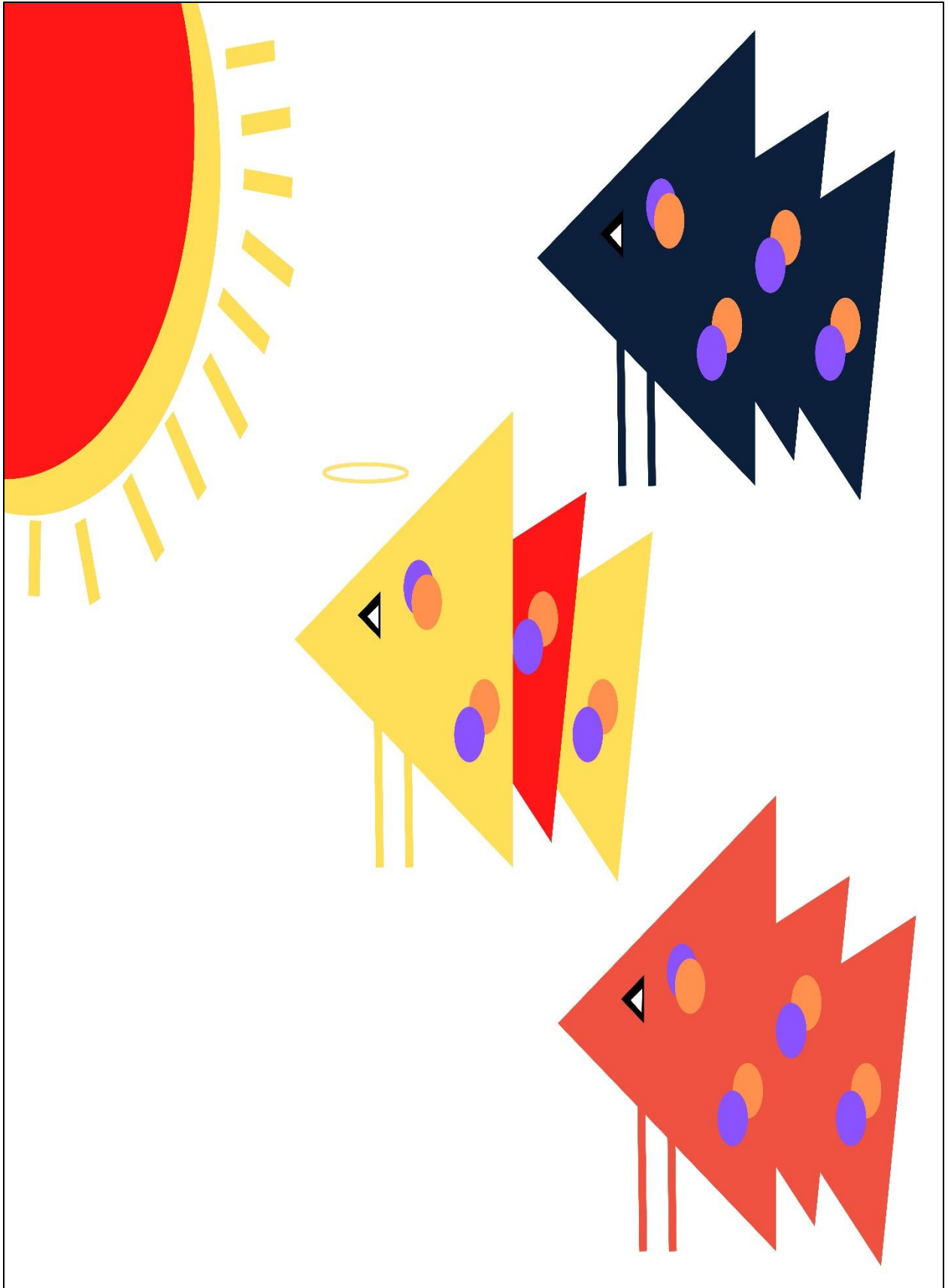




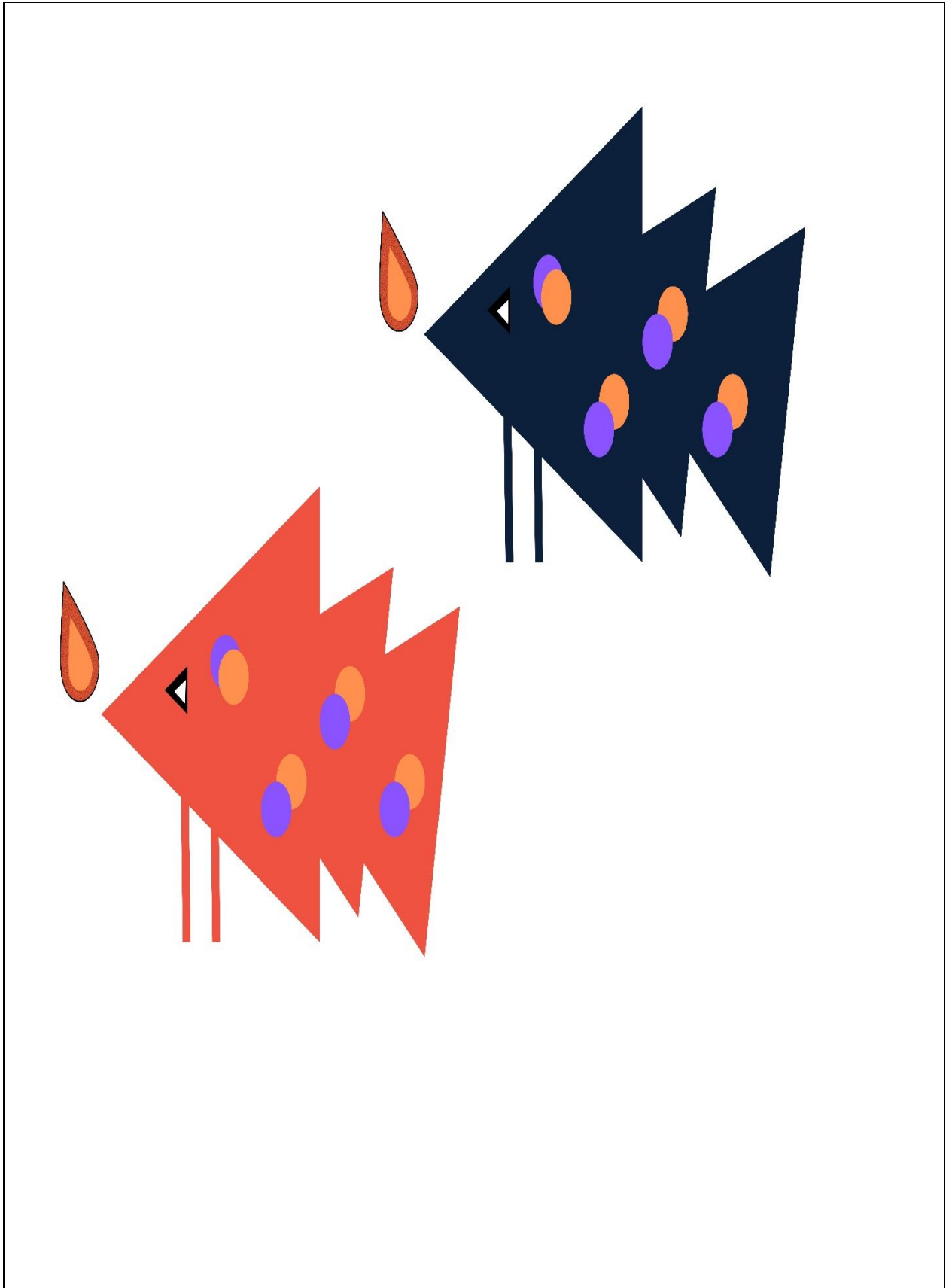
If he flew just right, it would appear as if he had  
a halo on his head.



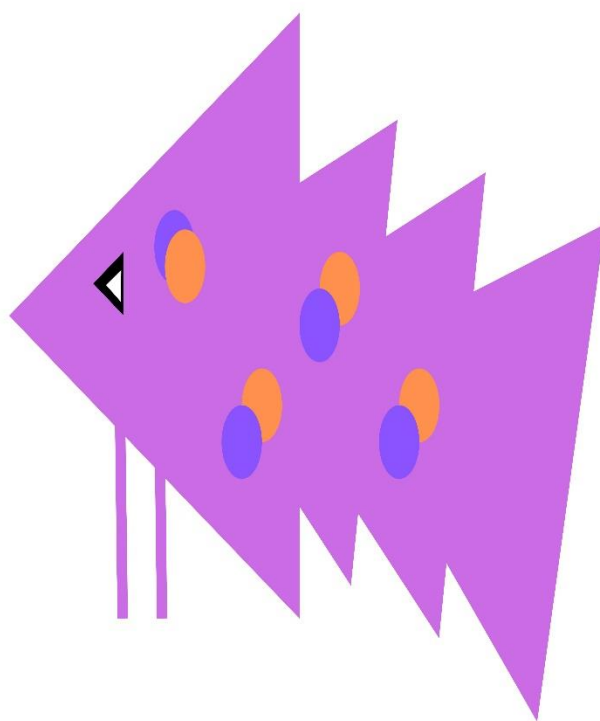
This made him very popular with all  
his clutchmates.



But on the day that they were  
all supposed to use their flames  
for the first time, Jacobi was terrified!

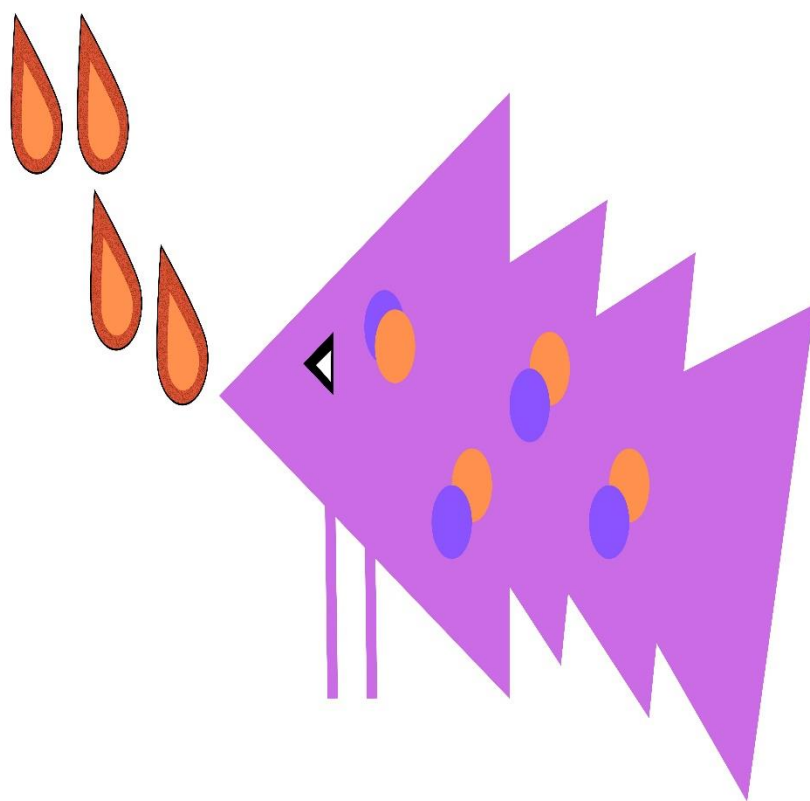


He knew he didn't feel a flame within him,  
but he didn't know how to tell anyone he couldn't do it.  
He was the perfect dragon, after all!  
Still, Jacobi had a plan.  
He had previously mentioned his situation to a friend--  
Myra, the Purple People-Eating Dragon.

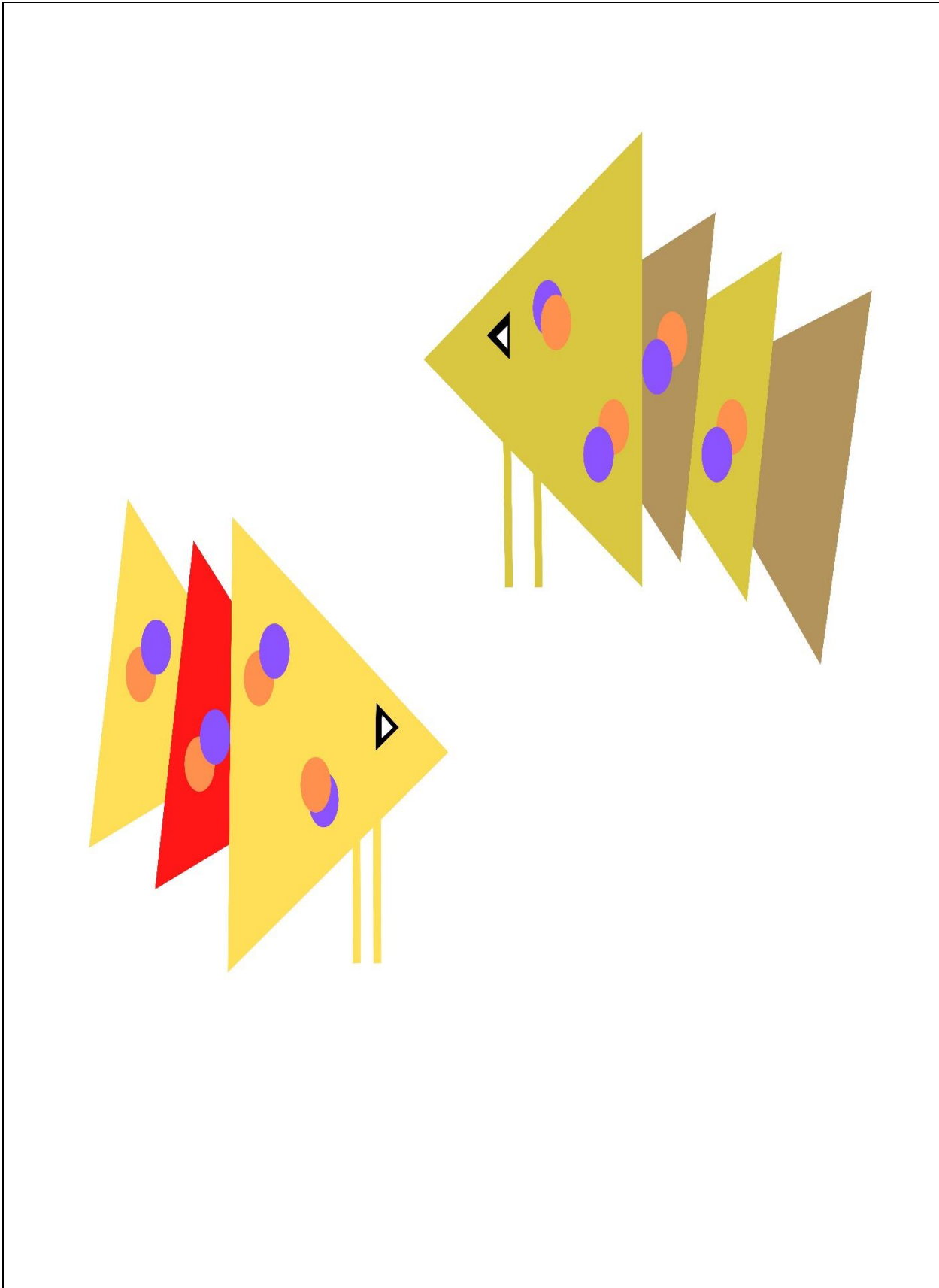




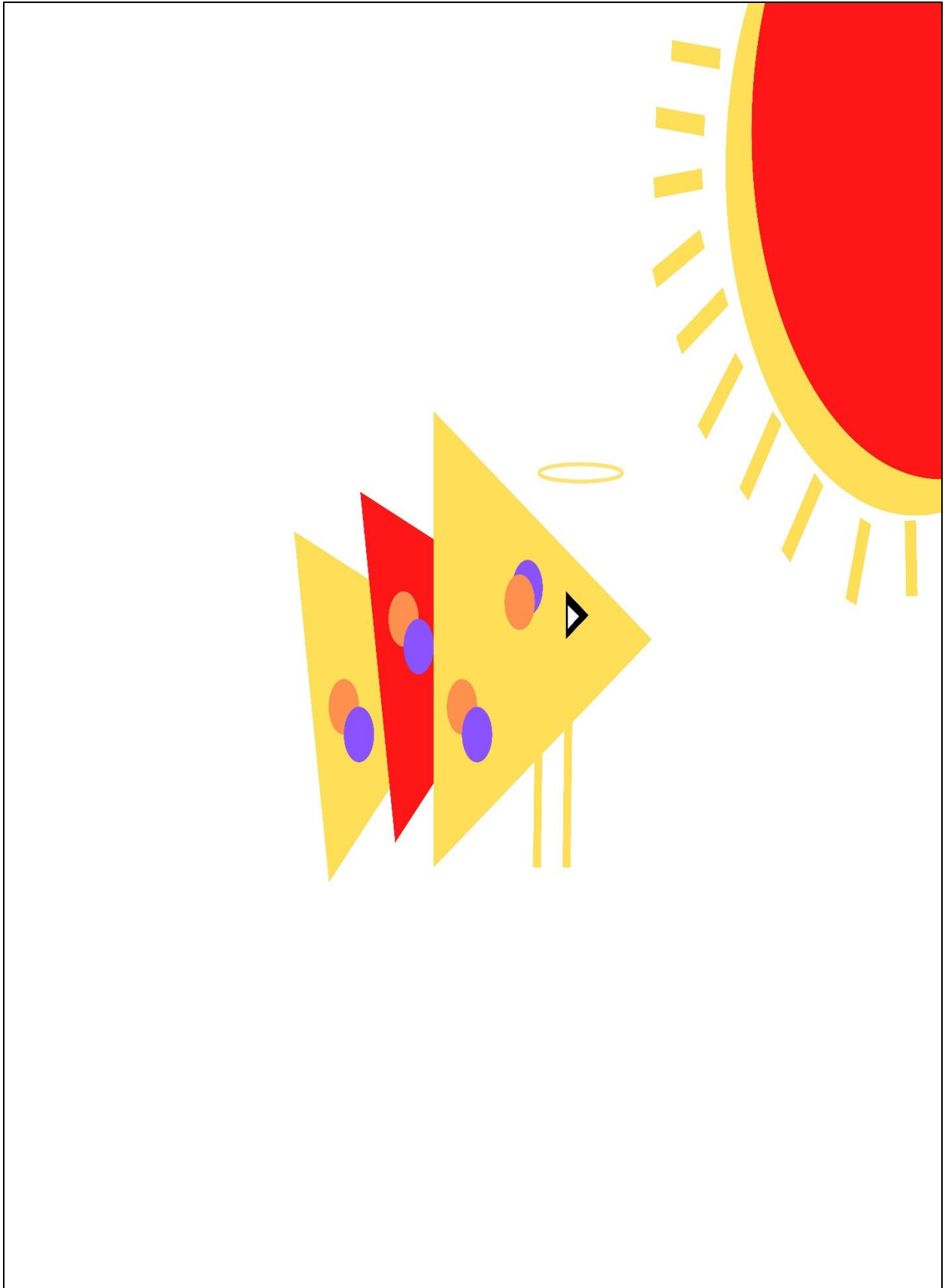
He knew Myra had a flame.  
She was a people-eater, after all.  
He told her he'd help her become more popular  
if she would make a distraction before his turn  
so he could slip away.



The time for flames came up all too soon.  
Just before it was Jacobi's turn, his mother,  
Jaria the **Golden**, pulled her son aside.  
She told him that she'd known all along about his lack of  
flame and that he didn't have to be afraid.  
She caught Jacobi off guard, but she helped him  
feel relieved at the same time.



Jacobi called off the distraction.  
He and his mother went out in front  
of the other dragons together.  
At first, they laughed at Jacobi for not having a flame,  
but he knew he was great in spite of that.  
He reminded them about his shine and his halo.  
Then his mother said something that Jacobi never forgot:  
"You don't have to be like everybody else.  
That would make the world far too boring."

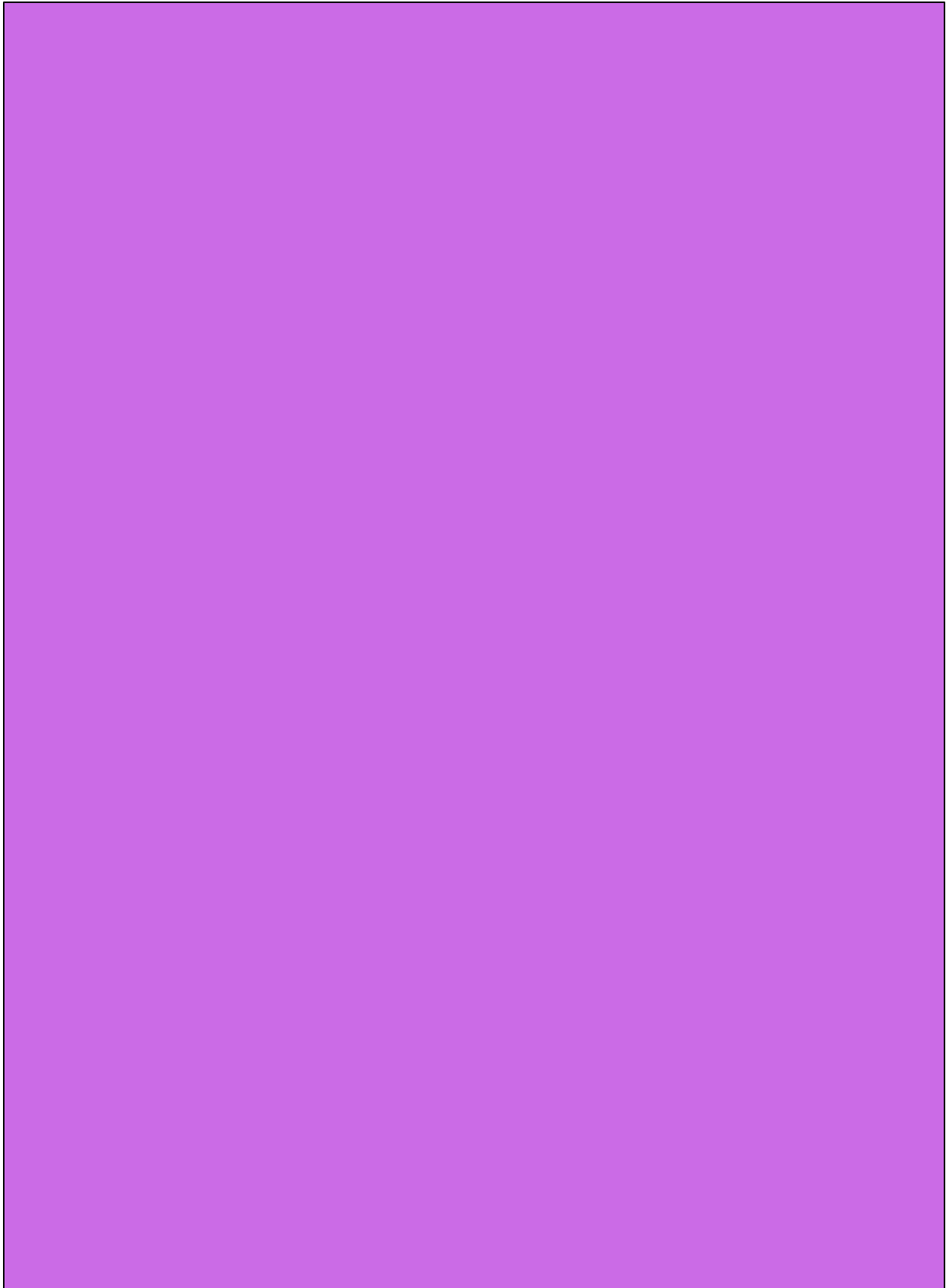


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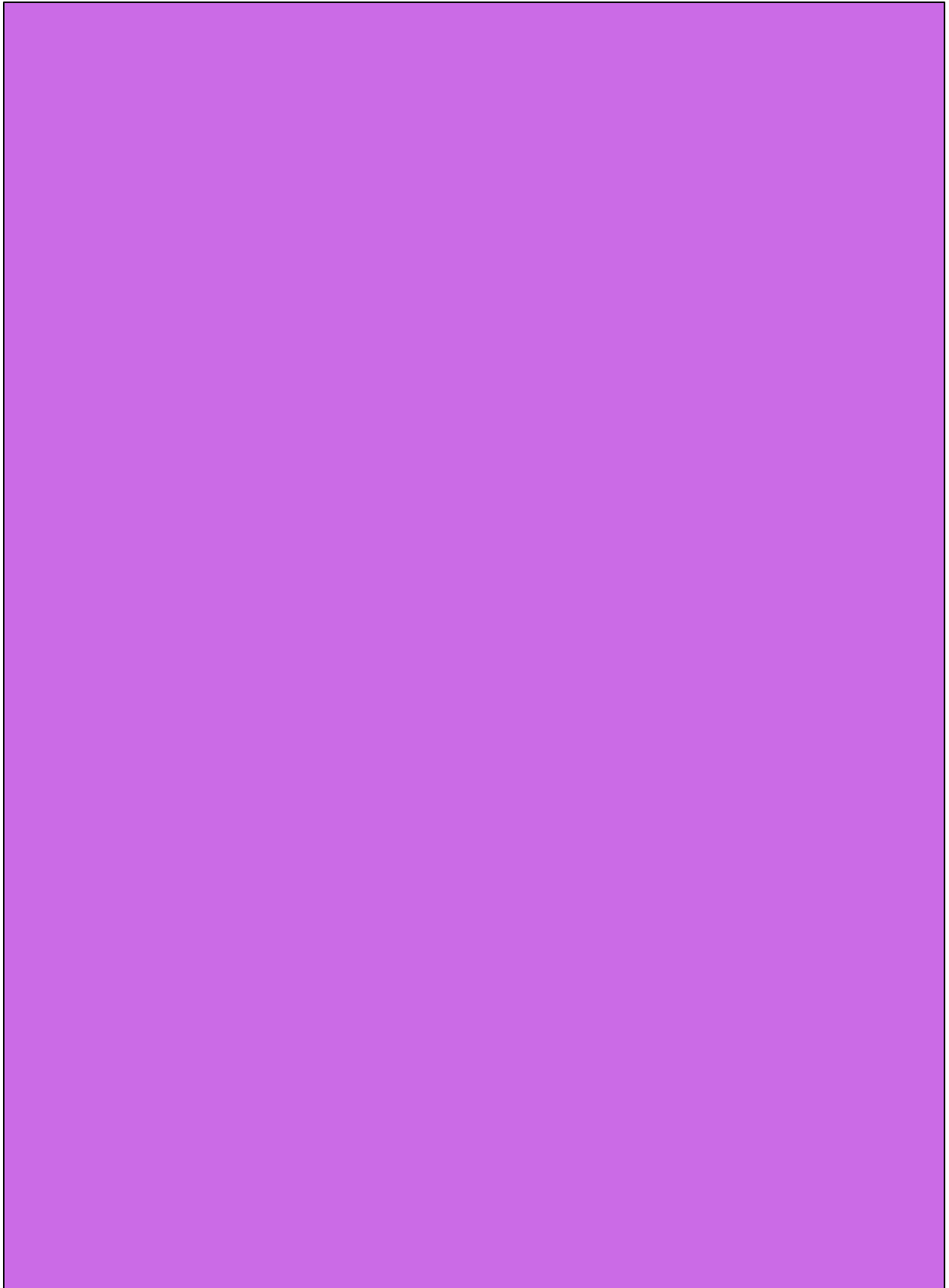
Texas A&M Texarkana's *Aquila Review*

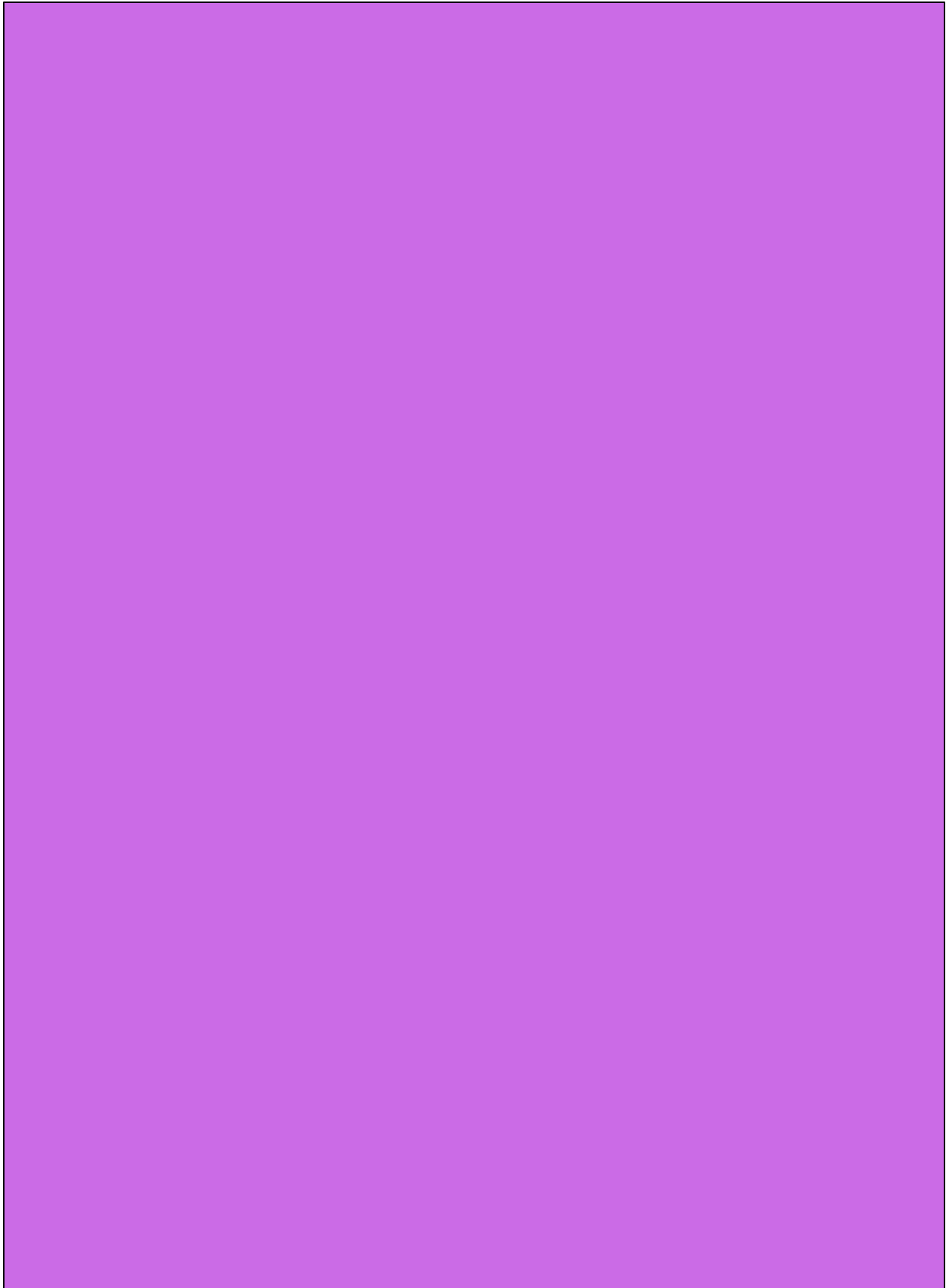
This book is typeset in eighteen-point Schoolbell.

The illustrator prepared the pictures digitally  
using Canvas and MS Paint.









## **About the Contributors**

**Swetha Amit** is an Indian author based in California and a recent MFA graduate from the University of San Francisco. She has published works across genres in such journals as *Atticus Review*, *Oranges Journal*, *Toasted Cheese*, and many more. She was a reader and contributor for *The Masters Review* and a staff writer for the literary magazine *Fauxmoir*. Two of her stories were nominated for the Pushcart Prize in 2022. She is also an alumna of the *Tin House* Winter Workshop (2022), the *Tin House* Summer Workshop (2023), and *Kenyon Review*'s Writers' Workshop (2022 and 2023).

**David Atwood** is a native New Orleanian, voice actor, radio DJ, and poet living in Alexandria, Louisiana, with his wife, writer Christee Gabour Atwood. He earned a Bachelor of Architecture degree from LSU and has worked in radio in Baton Rouge, Atlanta, and, currently, in Alexandria. His first chapbook of poetry, *Find Your Way Home*, was released in 2010; his second, *Catfish Bones and Cajun Ghosts*, in 2016; and *Instamatic* in 2022. Atwood has also been published in *The Louisiana Review*, *Delta Poetry Review*, *Louisiana Literature*, *Aquila Review*, *Belle Journal*, and *Verbatim*.

**Jason Clayton** grew up in Bowie County, Texas, looking for inciting incidents in the woods with his friends. His greatest writing teachers were Stephen King and Flannery O'Connor, and he enjoys writing about the wonders—and horrors—hidden under the banality of daily life. When he isn't writing, he enjoys traveling and trying not to succumb to general existential angst.

**Audey English** is a sophomore at Texas A&M University-Texarkana who is working on earning a bachelor's degree in English.

**Chloe Fincher** is a senior at Texas A&M University-Texarkana who is pursuing her bachelor's degree with a major in English. She enjoys reading and studying all types of literature. Authors such as Edgar Allan Poe, J. R. R. Tolkien, and Lois Lowry helped create her passion for the use of creative phrasing to describe a moment. After graduating, she hopes to try her hand at writing fiction.

**Hailey Freeman** is pursuing a master's degree at TAMU-T. She is a native of Arkansas who made the switch to Texas to pursue a higher education. When not writing, she enjoys spending time with her dog, Zoey. Occasionally, she helps

with online charity events. She enjoys playing video games with her friends. As with all budding writers, she hopes to publish a novel one day.

**Caleb Dan Gammons** is an author, an actor, and a playwright with a passion for telling great stories. His most notable projects currently are his collaborations with the Biblical Drama Institute (BDI) of Texarkana, Texas. He is thankful for his guiding influences: his parents, his sisters, his girlfriend, and his many friends. He thanks his future readers for taking the time to read his writing.

**Sarah Garrison** is an English major and a drama minor at Texas A&M University-Texarkana.

**Susan Helene** published her first collection of short stories, *Womenscape: Selected Stories of Eclectic Women*, on December 20, 2022 (Unsolicited Press). More of her stories appear in *Survival: Tales of Pandemic*, and her “The Sixty-First Day” was published in *Montana Mouthful* in October of 2020. Her humorous memoir, *The Dubble Bubble Bubblegum Caper*, will be published in Bad Day Books later in fall of 2023. She retired from Fullerton Community College, where she taught mathematics and computer science, to pursue her interests in the arts. She is also a certified Tai Chi instructor and a ceramic artist.

**Jordan High** is currently completing her Master of Arts in English at Texas A&M University-Texarkana. She is a published author of fantasy crime fiction.

**Miracle Jones** is a sophomore pursuing a Bachelor of Science in Political Science at Texas A&M University-Texarkana. She is the author of two books: *Anmir, Different? Dare to Be Different* and *Cancer, Are You Listening? I Believe*. After graduating, she plans to pursue a career as an attorney and open a safe house for victims of domestic violence.

**Thomas Kneeland**—born in California, raised in Mississippi, and transplanted to Indiana—writes poetry to create a time vault his daughter can walk into long after he’s gone. Having come so far without answers to questions he’s asked, he attempts to tether himself to the past, present, and future through the world he creates in his poems. He is the founder and Editor-in-Chief of *The Elevation Review*, and he will complete Butler University’s MFA program in December of 2023. He is the author of the chapbook *We Be Walkin’ Blackly in the Deep*, and he was recently named as one of ten finalists for the 2022 Frontier Global Poetry Prize (Africa). His poems can be found—or are forthcoming—in *Up the Staircase*

*Quarterly, South Florida Poetry Journal, INverse Poetry Archives, Rigorous Magazine, and elsewhere.*

***Eliei Josue Andrade Leal*** was born in Maracaibo, Venezuela, on April 13, 2004. From a young age, he displayed a fervent interest in drawing, a passion for art that later made him dive into American comic books and Japanese manga. In early July of 2016, his family immigrated to the United States in search of better prospects. He learned English and became introduced to a variety of different English-language media. Today he is a full-time student at Texas A&M-  
Texarkana. He strives to write and illustrate a character-centered story that touches the hearts of his readers.

***Lara Martin*** is a graduate of TAMU-T with a Bachelor of Science in English. She is currently enrolled to pursue her Master of Arts in English. She lives with her boyfriend Richard, two bonus sons (Thomas and William), and an old pup named Diego. She teaches eighth-grade ELAR and is the debate coach at Mount Pleasant ISD. She loves reading, learning new things, sewing, crochet, and all things English.

***Joseph Lamson Meyer*** (called Joey by his friends) is a multi-genre writer currently residing in Durham, North Carolina. He is a regular contributor to the Borussia Dortmund blog *Fear the Wall*, and he is excited to see more of his writing enter the world. In a few short months, he will graduate from Alma College's MFA in Creative Writing with a dual concentration in fiction and creative nonfiction.

***Macaïra Patterson*** is a graduate of Washington Academy Charter School in Texarkana, Arkansas, who is currently attending Southern Arkansas University and majoring in mathematics. Her interests include drawing and renovation projects.

***Page Petrucka*** is an accomplished actress of the stage and screen, a director, an award-winning and published playwright, and a professor of theatre at Northeast Texas Community College. Her film work includes supporting roles in Hallmark, Lifetime, and Disney movies, multiple commercials, and industrial films. As a stage performer, she has acted regionally in the United States and overseas in both England and the Czech Republic. She has written multiple ten-minute, one-act, and full-length plays.

**Brandon Pettey** is from Carrollton, Texas. He currently resides in Mount Pleasant, Texas, and is a graduate of Texas A&M University-Texarkana with a degree in secondary education and a specialty in English. He is currently completing a master's degree in English. His life motto is, "People are like puzzles. No single piece tells the whole story, but together they create a beautiful picture."

**Casey Purifoy** holds a bachelor's degree and a master's degree in English and English literature. A writer and a lifelong native of Texarkana, he writes poetry along with occasional fiction and essays. For his day job, he works at Workforce Solutions Northeast Texas as a Student HireAbility Navigator. He has published in *Aquila Review* and *TypeWrite*, two Texarkana publications, and he has placed in TRAHC's Write On Art competitions as well as TAMU-T's PLACE writing competitions.

**Kimberly Robinson** is a veteran and a senior at Texas A&M University in Texarkana, Texas. She will be graduating with a Bachelor of Science degree in the spring of 2024 with a major in sociology and a minor in social work. She plans on applying to the master's program for social work at TAMU-T to continue her studies.

**Bennett Sewell** is a retired physician, lacking four days of being ten months old when Roosevelt was inaugurated for the first time. He grew up in Boyce, Louisiana, where he worked on his family's farm. He completed his studies in pathology at Tulane University, and he later founded an independent pathology lab in Austin, Texas, where he worked for many years until retiring to Shreveport, Louisiana. He is still looking and listening and walking and talking.

**Hollis Thompson** is the artistic director of the Biblical Drama Institute (BDI) in the Texarkana area and an English faculty member at the University of Arkansas at Hope and Texarkana. He completed his undergraduate work at Texas A&M University-Texarkana and received his MA in English Literature from Stephen F. Austin State University. He is currently working on an academic investigation into the intersection of Biblical studies and superheroes.

**Thomas Tye-Cornelius**, a lifelong resident of Texarkana, works as a college and career experience coach. His academic interests include American and British literature, creative writing, drama, theatre and its history, linguistics, sociology, psychology, multimedia communications, and emerging media. After graduating with his Bachelor of Science degree from TAMU-T in December, he plans on pursuing a Master of Arts in communications. He hopes to earn a PhD or EdD in

the future while pursuing a career in higher-education administration. His writing often draws on his own experience as a young boy raised by a single mother in the 2000s, but he is not afraid to explore fun and fantastical ideas.

**Sandra Wassilie** believes storytelling in all its traditions nourishes our humanity. Her first book, *The Dream That Is Childhood: A Memoir in Verse* (Cirque Press, 2020), depicts wilderness life in interior Alaska. More of her poetry appears in journals, anthologies, and a chapbook (*Smoke Lifts*, 2014). She is the recipient of the Ann Fields Poetry Prize from San Francisco State University (2011) and the first Celestine Poetry Award from Holy Names University (2014). She is a mom, a grandma, and a partner who has been living in Oakland since 2007. She currently manages her apartment building and edits manuscripts.

**Joshua Zeitler** is a queer, nonbinary writer based in central Michigan. Zeitler is an MFA candidate in poetry at Alma College whose work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Cutthroat*, *Black Fox*, *The Bluebird Word*, *Do Geese See God?*, *Wireworm*, and *Dark Onus*.