



Aquila

Review

Aquila Review

Volume 12
Fall 2019

Texas A&M University-Texarkana

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Aquila Review is a nonprofit arts journal that Texas A&M University-Texarkana publishes. Funding for this publication comes from ads, private donations, and subscriptions to the journal.

Communicate with the staff of *Aquila Review* using the following contact information:

Aquila Review
Texas A&M University-Texarkana
Department of English
7101 University Avenue
Texarkana, TX 75503
(903) 223-3022
www.theaquilareview.wix.com\
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A Dispiteous Dissertation on the Effects
of a Poisonous Society
Cody A. Minks

I find it unnecessary to need to prove our society is in poor health
because we have starving children while others bathe in wealth:
fathers that drink and abuse or simply are not there;
mothers that belittle and tell their children they don't care;
a media that changes "perfection" by the hour;
celebrities that shame instead of empower;
a Justice System that seeks convictions instead of truth;
and a day-and-age where intelligence and chivalry are uncouth.
Undisputedly, our society is fundamentally sick as a whole,
and it has devastating effects upon the human soul.
Our society has turned parenting from love and protection
to an abhorrent obligation or even flat-out rejection.
Instead of our attention being on things like nuclear war and its short fuse,
We're more concerned with whom the current Bachelor will choose.
Not to mention our youth, who feel exiled and outcast because
so few try to reach them.
Instead, they're labeled, medicated, and forgotten; no one to teach them.
That youth grow up feeling broken, worthless, and alone,
dependent in a disturbing automation, like a clone.
A generation satisfied with laziness, sex, money, and greed;
no love, no respect, no morals, values, or creed.
Society presses upon our minds and is creating a mold,
turning warm, compassionate people into something cold.
The people who are in the most need of compassion
are surrounded by cruelty worn like it's in fashion.
If I've left you unconvinced of the toxic society in which we live,
imagine what kind of life this broken generation will give
to their children, whose minds are impressionable and unable to defend.
It begs the question, "Where does all this end?"
Will we soon be playing Hunger Games or something more like the Purge?
These are not far-off concepts; we are, in fact, on the verge.
So while we may not yet be at nuclear war, we are at war of a kind.
We're fighting for our sanity, our happiness; we're fighting society for our minds.

Life in a Cage

Joe Howard

Sometimes, I feel like I am in a cage.
I am filled with all kinds of rage.
My life is slowly being depleted.
Oh, how I feel that I am being cheated.

I have spent over ten years in prison
because years ago I made a bad decision.
I committed a crime
that earned me a lot of time.

Living in this place is a real battle.
Sometimes, we are treated like cattle.
To some, I can do nothing right,
so it is better to keep out of sight.

I still have years to go.
Time seems to go by so slow.
I try to find things to do,
but some of my days still feel blue.

That is my life's story.
In it, I can find no glory.
Someday, I will get out of this place
and reenter the world's great rat race.

Pulled Over: A Monologue in Verse
Sharnell James

I was thankful.
I was scared.
I was frustrated.
I believe he let me go out of kindness.
Why did he tell me to stop shaking?
I couldn't help that I was scared.
He didn't gently ask me to stop shaking;
He didn't kindly ask me to be calm.

He probably thought I was dramatic.
Was I?
He probably thought I wanted to create a problem out of thin air.
Did I?
He probably was scared himself.
Was he?
He probably felt sorry for me.
Did he?

Honestly, Mama, I know cops face danger every day.
I know people face danger every day, but
Specifically, I just want people to stop and consider what black people face.
I want people to understand the depth of our fear.
I am reminded that I am black every day, and when he pulled me over,
I thought, *What if this cop is racist?*
What if he's angry and tired of what black people "represent"?
What if he sees danger when he sees black skin?

I wonder if he knows that I was shaking because of
Dontre Hamilton, age 31,
Michael Brown Jr., age 18,
Eric Garner, age 43, who was choked illegally for fifteen seconds and shot,
John Crawford, age 22,
Dante Parker, age 36,
Tanisha Anderson, age 37,
Akai Gurley, age 28, and
Tamir Rice, age 12.

I wonder if he knows what it's like to live in fear of the police.
I wonder if he knows that these are just some of the two thousand
and fourteen police killings.
He probably doesn't.

Thankfully, whether kindness, guilt, or pity . . .
He let me go and let me live.
That sounds so weird to say out loud.
These tears are not for pity or comfort.
There's no comfort in a country that doesn't regard the loss of black lives
As a priority.
When he told me to stop shaking, I wanted to ask,
"Why? Why should I stop?
Have I lost the right to shake, to tremble, to openly fear?"
Dramatic questions, yes, but who is he to think his words,
His command, would give me comfort?
These tears are my fears, my burdens, my sorrow, and my frustration.

Mama, I was so embarrassed to shake in front of him.
He wasn't mean, but he couldn't relate.
Mama, I was frustrated that I couldn't control my body.
He wasn't angry, but he was annoyed.
Annoyed . . . like I desired to be scared.
How could he know what I feel?
I didn't want to provoke him or anger him or even guilt-trip him.
I only wish I could have made him understand how scared I was
Simply because I was black,
And he was a cop,
A cop that I did not trust but feared.

Police brutality.
Police killings.
It goes beyond how they are trained.
It goes beyond what they experience daily.
It goes beyond their call to protect.
The individual in the suit,
How does he see black people?
This goes beyond their *fear*.

It's unfair.

There are so many white people who have shot up schools,
Who have robbed stores,
Who have been pulled over and disrespected policemen.
Are they not a greater threat to unarmed black Americans?
There is a list of armed white Americans who have not been shot.
They are now in a prison or a jail cell.
They are *comfortable* and alive
And Dare Not Speak their names.

Mama, I tremble for my children who are not yet born.
Mama, I cry still for strangers, black like me,
Who no longer breathe air,
Who no longer see their children,
Who no longer get to graduate high school or college,
Whose skin *threatened* the life of an ignorant,
Who died for being black on the wrong day.
He, She, They . . . could have been me.
You know, Mama, the other day on campus, we had a discussion
On police brutality.
They played the movie *The Hate U Give*.
I say to everyone that I am scared to have children,
That I don't want to bring them into this world,
That I don't want to carry on the black tradition
And sit them down at an age of innocence
And explain the do's and do-not's,
The mission to survive when encountering a policeman.
There was silence.

This white lady comes up to me after the event and says,
We are all scared for our children.
I reminded her that it is a different fear.
She tells me to pray
Mama, they could never understand.
Why do they try to connect our hurts, our fears, our oppression?

If that cop could only understand why I was shaking.
Mama, I wanted so badly to explain to him
Why I could not help it.

What I See at Night
Sydney Smith

It's dark . . . extremely dark. The room was almost completely pitch black. Only the light blue glow of the moon shining through the window was visible. It had to be at least midnight by the time Raiini opened his eyes. He wanted to look over at his clock on the desk, but he couldn't move. At first, he thought he was just tangled in the bed sheets, as he often ended up while pretending he was a burrito in his sleep. But, no, not only could he not move his body, but he could not move his head, either. His eyes were the only thing that jerked back and forth, darting around the dark room. He knew what this was. He didn't like it, but there wasn't really anything he could do about it. All he could do was wait for the time to pass. He wanted to scream for Blu to come help him, but his voice had seemingly been ripped from his throat, tugging at his vocal chords until it practically hurt to swallow. He remembered the last time this happened. Blu had taken him to a specialist about a day later to see if there was anything they could do to help him, but they only gave him meds and told him to stay calm and wait it out. It would go away soon. Everything would be normal again soon.

For a long moment, Raiini swore to himself that he could hear something moving around the empty, dark room. First, it moved above him on the ceiling, then under the bed, then on his pillow. The sounds tickled his ears. He followed the sound with his eyes, but even then, it wasn't enough to catch it. He'd learned to attempt telling himself in his mind that none of it was real, but it seemed impossible when it all appeared so real. He couldn't only see and hear them, but he could feel them touch him—their gusts of air blew against his face, the only thing that was ever revealed from the bed sheets. He could also feel a mass of warmth lying next to him, but his body refused to allow him to take a peek, and neither did his eyes wish to adjust to the lighting.

There was another light source illuminating the room from the doorway; a tall, scrawny figure coated in black and grey was standing there. The figure had no features other than long, skinny arms and fingers; one hand balanced on the golden doorknob. Raiini couldn't tell where the light was actually coming from; it only seemed very heavenly. Maybe he was slowly dying in this bed. This deathbed. Was it a deathbed? Or did he want it to be? He did; he wanted to die. As he did every night, he felt like he was dying. His breath had been stolen from him; it felt

like a grown man had collapsed onto his stomach and was refusing to let him catch his breath.

“It hurts . . .”

Every time his eyes came back to the figure in the doorway, it inched its way closer. All while this and the sounds around him were happening, he could feel something dripping onto his face. His first thought was that it had rained and his apartment had a leak, but it didn't have the consistency of water. It was much thicker. He tried shifting his eyes to look up, but they could not go so far as to see what the source was. More dripped onto his cheeks, and he felt it roll down to his chin and drop onto his chest and roll down his shoulders, making a moist puddle on the mattress beneath his back. He heard a soft creaking sound as the dripping ceased. The creaking became louder; it sounded as if it was behind him. He kept his eyes focused on the lumps in the sheets, seeing another pair of feet, one sock off of a foot as they hung out of the covers. He was indeed sleeping next to another person, but what he didn't know was if they were real or a figment of his sleepless mind.

Out of the corner of Raiini's eye, he saw a long, skinny black object, very bony, rise over him and rest on his stomach, as well did the rest of a bony mass until it was clear to him that the thick sticky liquid on his face was not water but blood. Yet it was not red but black. It had been secreted from the mouth of a scrawny, grey creature with beady black eyes. Its body was deformed, almost like it used to be a person but failed even at that. Its head looked too big for its small body with arms projecting out like an ape's might. Its mouth was the most horrific sight. The lower jaw looked to have been ripped from its socket; it was hanging down by loose grey skin that was almost translucent in the dark lighting. Its mouth was covered in bloody, yellow sharp teeth, none of them proportional, jagged and overlapping one another. The tongue inside the creature's mouth looked like that of a chameleon; black ooze was pouring from it and dripping down the hanging chin and onto the covers. Raiini glanced away when he found the courage only to see the figure in the doorway now standing at the foot of the bed; its eyes were more visible and glowing a faint white.

The humanoid's long fingers stretched out toward Raiini; he blinked a few times. He tried shutting his eyes to block out the sight, but with the image still burned into his mind, he felt those cold bones sliding up against his cheek and down his neck until they reached the collar of his V-neck shirt. He could smell the

stench of rotting flesh; the smell told him that the creature's mouth was inches away from his face. He refused to open his eyes, at least until the smell went away.

"Raiini?" He heard a gargled voice, almost as if he were underwater.
"Raiini, are you okay?"

Though Raiini could tell the voice calling his name was Vai beside him, the image staining his mind in front of him prevented him from hearing him correctly. Vai could tell that Raiini was in distress; he knew about Raiini's sleep problem. However, every attempt to help Vai had made in the past never worked; it only resulted in Raiini's going into an even bigger panic. Maybe showing his face to him wasn't the best option, seeing how he hallucinated the things around him.

Vai remembered the first time this had happened. It had been the first time he and Raiini had slept in the same bed (let alone the same room), a little after they had started dating. He hadn't known about Raiini's sleep disorder . . . nor had Raiini mentioned it at all. Vai recalled waking up in the middle of the night to go to the restroom and seeing Raiini's eyes wide open. He remembered attempting to get Raiini's attention, but he'd just stared. For a moment, Vai had thought Raiini was dead, so he'd waved his hand in front of his face until he'd blinked. Vai had been relieved to see that Raiini was breathing. Looking right at him, though, he hadn't seemed to recognize him; he'd looked traumatized out of his mind.

Vai hadn't known what to do, so he'd tried calling Blu since he was Raiini's older brother and knew him the best. Blu hadn't been surprised to hear this news. He had informed Vai that Raiini had a bad issue with sleep paralysis. All Blu had for advice was: "Just be with him. It doesn't even have to be something huge. Just stay next to him. Without showing him your face, let him know you're there with him and that he's okay. Let him know without words that it will all be over soon." And for the following nights, Vai did just that; he had stayed beside Raiini, his body pressed to his.

He was holding him right now, by his waist. Below his arms, he could feel Raiini's breathing very slowly rising and falling. Every so often, his heart would skip a beat or even double one, and his breathing would follow the pattern. Vai could tell he was having difficulty, so, to make it easier for him, he loosened his grip. Though Raiini couldn't move or speak, Vai thought he heard a small whine after he loosened his arms' grip around him. He took that as a sign not to let go,

so he tightened his arms once again; he lightly pressed his lips to the nape of Raiini's neck and began quietly hushing him.

Raiini had enough physical consciousness now to know that his boyfriend had been lightly pecking at his neck; still, his disorder refused to let him believe that. Every movement felt like needles poking at his tender skin. He was trying to cry out for help, but the tears that were leaking from the corners of his eyes would not pick up their speed. The creature that loomed over him had crawled off of the bed after Vai had wrapped his arms around Raiini, almost as if his arms acted as a dangerous barrier that protected Raiini. Maybe that's what they were.

Slowly, Raiini began to regain his senses and could finally move a little. The figures standing around him, the sounds in his ears, the feelings crawling all around him—they all seemed to stop abruptly, like he'd been woken from a nightmare. He didn't shoot up out of bed like he normally would. This time, the process was much calmer, smoother, and quieter. He felt a pang of relief hit his mind and body, and he rolled over on his side to face Vai. His eyes had stayed adjusted to the lighting in the room; he could see every detail on Vai's face as his eyes were still closed. He could tell he was still awake by the way his eyelashes twitched here and there. They fluttered open when he felt the movement in his arms, and he smiled at Raiini, who was cuddling himself into his chest to stay warm. He kissed his head, and that was all Raiini could remember from that night before falling asleep.

Crosshairs

Thomas Waylon Boyd

I don't want to provoke the silence
don't want to provoke the shadows,
 want to provoke the whispers,
 to provoke the tension,
 provoke the paranoia,
 the madness!

I've let my guard down at this calm. Always after the downfall. I've already told you once, it's not the monster that makes you, it's the monster inside that I've always wanted to become.

I don't want to fear the animosity. I can't stop looking into its abyss.
don't want to fear the agony. It just always leads to this.
 want to fear the paranoia. That's when you're not welcome, the point
 of no return.
 to fear the presence, because you don't know me
 fear! The monster you've become.

Because the madness caused your downfall and trapped us inside its haunting.

I don't want to be scared
I don't want to be wanted
I don't want to be blocked out
don't want to be locked in
 want to be released to be free

Because. It's what it takes to be me. From within there are no more apologies. I don't want to be. But you can't see. If I were the monster, you couldn't stop me. I wonder if I am right where you wanted, writing where this reads.

P.S. The Monster.

Fifteen-Word Poetry Challenge
Randall Cobb

Lovers
Will
Linger
As
They
Do.
In
After
Smile
Eyes
Are
Closed
Impossible
To
Move.

I've got three days until I am fist-deep in blood. All the old wives' tales ring true: my breasts feel like round lumps of hardened flesh, my back aches as if I had dragged a fifty-pound weight behind me, and a boiling rumble of emotions silently waits in the tears behind my eyes. Everything calls for the watery tension to break and release a flood of fear, annoyance, anger, sadness, and loneliness. But at least I won't be pregnant on top of the world's dying. Or I don't think I will be, but they say a virgin gave birth once, so who's to say I can't create life on my own?

The last man I saw was a few weeks ago. We exchanged terror-filled eyes after the Mindless began to rock the trailer we took for a safe haven. They were always faster than expected, rotting flesh and ligaments controlled by some force stronger than death itself. I didn't know him, but he had heard my gunshots and come investigating.

I was having a nice stroll killing things amidst the falling pine needles. On the other side of the trailer park, a short blond man turned the wrong corner and was immediately surrounded by Mindless. He wasn't that bad of a shot, but he picked the wrong patch of trees to emerge from. Dangling jaws with strips of rotting flesh stuck in between teeth. Even from across the park I could hear teeth knocking against one another, biting at the air and smelling for warm blood.

I was going to leave, but he looked like my brother. Three bullets sunk through five heads made a path that I kept up as he sprinted to the safety of the aluminum trailer I was already hiding in. It was hot for autumn, even in Texas. Inside the trailer was even worse with two people's hot breaths mixing with the humid air. My sweating everywhere was making the grip on my gun slippery, but I kept it pointed forward, sweeping across the door and windows, waiting for the glass to break. His friends saved us, rolling up in an armored jeep with spikes attached to keep the dead from surrounding the vehicle. They made jokes about being in confined corners with a woman for five hours. This was the apocalypse, wasn't it? One stared into my eyes, joking about all the Mindless we would have attracted during our confinement. I stayed silent but returned his stare; they were giving me a ride to someplace with clean water.

The man I saved remained silent; he had pale blue eyes that were tinged red from sleepless nights. The others congratulated him on breaking me into silence already, and I remember glistening tears rolling down his face as he shook with fear, one hand clasped tightly over his mouth, not even trusting himself not to scream with fright. We arrived at a three-building outpost with a tall security fence and a well. They let me refill my canteen, and I left the catcalls and blue eyes behind me.

But that was the last man I saw, and the intimacy of shared near-death experiences does not equate to sex. So . . . I have three days before my body, not realizing the immediate danger of current life, will revolt from my denial of sperm access.

I'm driving down the highway weaving in and out of the cars abandoned on the road and checking for supplies. The Mindless are scarce here—just a few dotting the road. A blue Prius looks promising, and I crack it open like a peanut. The crowbar sinks into the rubber air seal and peels back the plastic exterior with a satisfying pop as the lock breaks. The car smells bad, and then I see the small plastic cage that once held an unfortunate guinea pig. I slip into the driver's seat and pop the trunk and hood. There are so many places to hide things, and I check each one. When you live from day to day, even the smallest finds can be monumental. The Prius gives me hope as I pull the fluffy pale pink packaging out of a unicorn-and-rainbow-bedazzled backpack. Three large overnight pads, probably from a young girl still new to her period. I need more. Pads can be modified for quantity, but I prefer the sterility of packaging.

It wasn't always like this. I didn't fish for menstrual products in the backseats of minivans hoping some other woman had thought of our natural plight as the world collapsed around her and then been unfortunate enough not to use her pads. I used to have a cup for monthly dispersal, but a pack of the Mindless surprised me in the woods as I was preparing to leave, and I lost everything. Waking up to a body falling on your tent and a face biting against the slick nylon of your tent is never a good way to wake up. Luckily, the door was free, and I was able to trap the body by wrapping the tent around it, but there were more coming. I could hear them knocking into pinecones and needles, a shuffling army too close for me to grab anything but a weapon. I used to wear suits and heels. I went to dinner parties with people I didn't like, and, afterwards, I would stay up until three in the morning in my underwear massacring virtual people on my computer.

After a charity dinner for brain cancer, I took an Uber home. The driver pulled up in a black Buick. He handed me a tiny water as I drunkenly slumped into the seat and gazed out of the window to watch the streetlamps pass as bright halos reflected on the windshield. Groups of people trickled into the streets as we drove back toward the city; they huddled together like meerkats seeking warmth and shuffled in units. He had the music on a Middle-Eastern channel that flooded the car with the sharp guttural sounds mixed with heavy twangs from a guitar. The radio cut out, and it was silent for a moment before the loud screech of the emergency alert started. In the rearview mirror, the driver and I made eye contact; his eyes were hooded and a deep chocolate brown.

The screech broke into static before a male automated voice crackled to life: "This is an Emergency Alert Broadcast. A citywide curfew is in effect until further

notice. Please seek safety indoors and away from others. Langston Avenue and the Medical District are now under quarantine. All medical professionals are requested at this time.” The driver looked back at me, pushed the ON/OFF switch, and turned the car around.

I turned back in my seat and looked at the skyline of the city retreating behind us. The eastern portion of skyscrapers was bright white; all the hospitals shined like beacons in the night. On the top left corner of the largest hospital, a red flame shot upwards in an arch. The building was fifty stories tall with a blue neon trim. The Rod of Asclepius flew off and smacked into the adjacent children's hospital. A rescue helicopter pilot spun to the ground head over toe. You could already hear the sirens zooming around cars and people to look for those in need of help.

The first few hours of any tragedy were always about helping, in those days. *Help the people who are hurt. Help my family. Help, I've always needed a seventy-inch HDTV.* The driver helped me. His wife helped me nurse my pounding headache after I woke up hours away from the city. I was in a complex of houses where the families were loud and kind. In the early days, I helped people, too. It was a result of our communal lifestyles; we were thinking that more bodies meant more power. When their baby caught a cold, I made a homemade syrup to soothe the child's pain. I saved the child from a sad fate at the hands of a tall man who couldn't speak English. He was obviously the leader, and he was prepared to act. We didn't know how to exterminate the Mindless in those days, and the crying was attracting more animated bodies hungry for flesh. The tall man was ready to stop the crying by any means necessary.

That was a long time ago. I lost track of the actual date at some point after a few too many weeks of dulling my brain and body with opium. It was surprisingly easy to find the man who led me into a red-curtained room where people on pillows slept peacefully. That's what he promised—a trip so transcendent that the pain of the past would wash away . . . for a price. I gave him a flask of the apple cider I had made from an orchard. I had to kill my dog there. The drug was amazing, and Anthony didn't charge after that first time. The refugee camp crumbled after some selfish idiot decided not to leave the camp after getting infected. So now I live off of my natural calendar. Twenty-eight days of trekking across the land from one sleepless night to the next followed by a week of blood, pain, mood swings, cravings, and the desperate search for supplies. By my approximation, it's been five years. There was never enough.

I'm trying to find a home base for the week. The suburban neighborhood I'm driving through is two hours away from any major city. It was a small town with a courthouse and jail combined, a pizzeria, a general store, a post office, and a liquor store. Nature encroaches upon all the storefronts. A grocery cart is outside

of the liquor store. I park and pick the cart up and over the broken-glass doorway. Almost all the shelves are bare, but I find a sixty-year-old bottle of wine in the back office. The general store yields five cans of baked beans, four boxes of instant mashed potatoes, a bag of dark chocolate cooking melts, and a tampon dispenser that, after some crowbar work, gives up enough tampons and Advil for three months. I take my haul out to the car just as the sky begins to turn from the bright blue of day. The orange of sunset is just beginning to take hold of the upper segment of the atmosphere as I climb the roof of the courthouse and look for the nicest house. A large brick-covered house with a tower connected and a privacy fence stands out among the cookie-cutter homes.

3467 Redmond St. is a nice home. The privacy fence is locked with a large chain wrapped around the wrought iron. From outside the gate, I see a few Mindless shuffling along. I easily dispose of them. Even from this distance, I can hear the arrows crack their skulls, sink into the gray matter, and cut off the final persistent bursts of electricity. I hop the fence and check the perimeter before breaking the back door. I walk through the doorway while swinging my bow left and right, but the house is silent. My shoes click against the marble flooring as I shake a can of rocks, but nothing appears growling around the corner. The master bedroom has a large circular bed that feels like a cloud. A simple brown door opens to the spiral staircase of the tower. The walls are covered in books—a small, diverse library. A red ottoman and armchair sit next to the balcony doors. Through the wide-open doors, I can see the entire town. In the center, downtown rises above the cookie-cutter homes. The courthouse is the tallest building, but I can see above it. In the distance, a dust cloud is forming.

Time passes. I haven't seen many of the Mindless, which is odd since most towns, even secluded ones, usually have a few bobbing their heads listening and smelling for anything with a pulse. The thought of exploring the past few days has sounded horrible. Two days ago, my headache started along with my period. Since then, the library has become my den, where I've spent hours reading and watching the red dust cloud come closer. I thought it was a legitimate dust storm at first until I woke up the next day and the rolling dust still gathered on the horizon. An actual storm would have passed.

It must be a herd of the Mindless—thousands by the size of the cloud. Beyond the valley of pine trees, the red clay cloud of dust almost obscures the dying sunlight. But they're still off in the distance, and they can change direction at any time. Maybe, it's time to think of this place—Redmond—as a semi-permanent base. If that herd is in view, I don't feel safe leaving this place with its metal-and-brick fence and doors that I can barricade. I feel a lot safer here than I would hurtling down the road with only a thin shell of metal and plastic to protect me.

I must get my car inside the gate today. If the Mindless arrive before it's moved, the pressure from thousands of bodies squeezing past will kill the old beater for good. The pain from my body has been too much for anything productive. My abdomen feels as if an old crooked witch has thrust her clawed hand inside and is churning my organs looking for the glossiest flesh. In numerals, the pain is a nine out of ten, but only because I'm saving ten for my deathbed. If I never admit to the ten, does that mean I can never die? I'm having a hard time standing, and a cold sweat is bubbling on my forehead. I can feel the cramps in my thighs as the pain radiates from my uterus. I feel lightheaded. It's hard to tell the difference between pangs of hunger and pangs of pain.

In the garage, I find bolt cutters and another chain and lock with key firmly in place. The bolt cutters do their job, but the effort is exhausting, and I just want to nap. The car idles for a moment before the familiar pop and bang shake the hood, and the engine purrs. I languidly check Redmond for supplies when the desire for movement arises within me. Shuffling around with a blanket cocoon, I pull useful things into full view. I take forever—any large steps send a jolt to my head and body. My reflexes bring me to the ground before the wave of dizziness washes over, and I let the ground support me. I need supplies, but I didn't know for how long.

This town has been lucky. The rest of Redmond Street has large houses all in a similar design—two-story buildings with three bedrooms on the top floor. I find a few guns halfway removed from their hiding places and plenty of scrap wood for boarding up windows. I grab everything else that looks useful from tools and cans to medicine—expired but likely still to work. The wood quickly fills my car, and the windows are boarded before the sunset. I catch the last few rays of sunlight glinting off the dust; it is less than ten miles away. There is no denying it now. The herd is coming toward me. I look around at the streets to note possible escape routes.

I bring the bed into the tower; it fits perfectly well without the table. I'm lying down surrounded by pillows, which are all I could find. They press into me like so many benign warm bodies. I can hear the growling now . . . like the old hum of electricity. I do not want to look yet. I want to double check my to-do list from the safety of pillows.

The gate is locked, and the chain is pulled so tightly that not even a rabbit could get through. The car is in the garage and refueled, but I can still feel the slight burn of gas on my uvula. The front and back doors are locked and barricaded. A wooden china cabinet fully blocks the double front doors; the only thing left inside is a broken teacup handle. The kitchen island is flipped vertically to fit snugly between the back door and the refrigerator. Every window is boarded and blocked with remaining furniture. A few weapons are downstairs ready for

action. The escape ladder is curled and ready to drop. I have an emergency pack ready by the balcony doors.

I stand and open the doors; the growling is louder now. I can see the cloud clearly now as it sweeps over the courthouse and rises a hundred feet higher with red wispy tendrils disappearing into the sky. To the left and right, the cloud extends so that all I can see from the balcony is dust above the trees, and it is moving faster now. I quickly turn and shut the doors behind me. My head feels heavy, and I sit down roughly as the smack of pain begins again. All my muscles ache, so I lie down; the pillows feel so nice on my face.

The clanking of the gate wakes me from my deepest sleep since childhood. I have never seen so many of the Mindless. They move so tightly together that the bricks shift toward the house. They are so loud, roaring to each other about the endless hunger.

The gate is creaking, and the wrought iron has bent. I go back inside, and the pain still resonates from before. As a wave of pain hits me with renewed vigor, I screw my eyes shut tightly; eliminating one sense relieves some pain from the other. I flop down onto the mound of pillows and curl into the fetal position. I cannot stand. I cannot shoot. I cannot defend myself. I cannot live with this pain. But they are coming, and the gate is down.

To a Spider
Danny Henington

O tiny machine of living destruction!
Man never perfected such a contraption!
O eight-wheeled tank of the ages,
little acclaimed by the sages
Thou six-eyed demon, o terrible speck,
ought I not wring thy blood-thirsty neck?
I applaud when thou siphon nasty flies,
tho' there is murder in thy sextet eyes;
but thou hast killed a butterfly,
and what harm had it done to you or I?
But that is fate—how sad, how true.
Thou must sip blood to pull thee through
This bitter life of mortal strife!

Spider at Rest
Alethea Patterson



Trick-or-Treat
Daniel Fansler

Sucker saw only darkness—heard only moans and muffled crying as those around him panicked about what was coming. He was scared. He didn't know exactly how long he had been in the darkness, but it felt like an eternity. He missed the happy times, the times before he was taken and stuffed away with many of his neighbors never to see the light of day again. He felt his heart pounding in his head, and he closed his eyes—hoping, wishing, he would see the light again . . . see his home again.

He was back in his old neighborhood.

“Mr. Hershey! Mr. Hershey! Today's the day isn't it? My mom and dad won't admit it, but I can tell by the look on everyone's faces that it's today. It's the Day of Picking, isn't it?”

Mr. Hershey looked at Sucker and flashed a toothy grin. “That's right, Sucka. Today's the Day of Pickin', the day when everyone's gone crazy with worry—not that I'm worried, though.”

Mr. Hershey was old—which was rare for Sucker's neighborhood—and he was a sort of idol for the children. The Day of Picking always ensured that the population took a significant plunge. This was the day when people in the neighborhood wondered if they were next to be sacrificed.

“I don't understand, though,” said Sucker as he walked with Mr. Hershey to the Gathering Crater. “If people don't like to be sacrificed, why don't they just fight back?”

Mr. Hershey gave a rattling laugh. “It ain't that simple, my boy. The hand of God literally comes down from the sky and grabs you. Ain't no way to fight somethin' like that.”

Sucker felt his feet lift off the ground as Mr. Hershey hefted him on top of his shoulders to get a better view. He saw his parents far to his right and waved at them. They waved back with little enthusiasm. In a day full of fear, that was to be expected.

There was no warning as the hand of God began picking sacrifices. Before he even had a chance to register what was happening, the giant hand descended like a hawk and picked off Sucker's neighbors left and right—sometimes individually, sometimes in large groups. The Picking continued for what seemed like hours, and the neighborhood's population slowly disappeared.

“I'm not likin' this,” muttered Mr. Hershey. “It shoulda stopped by now.”

Sucker was about to ask why when he felt air rushing past him. He looked down and saw the ground leave him. He could see his parents' eyes widen, first in shock then in sadness. Within seconds, Sucker realized what was happening.

God's hand had chosen Mr. Hershey as a sacrifice . . . and Sucker was still on his shoulders.

He looked at his parents again, now only distant dots in the Gathering Crater, and then he saw only darkness.

Sucker felt a hand on his shoulder that brought him back to the present.

"It's the way of the world, Sucka. Ain't nothin' we can do about it 'cept hope it's a quick end," Mr. Hershey said.

There were worried shouts as others noticed the sense of movement they had felt since being engulfed in darkness had stopped. Bright light flooded the area, and Sucker once again felt himself being lifted. He held on to Mr. Hershey as tightly as he could as they were transported to wherever they were being taken.

They hit solid ground and were roughly separated. Sucker looked up to see Mr. Hershey with a sad grin on his face as his clothes were torn off and ripped to shreds by the giant hands. His chocolate-brown skin gleamed under the light of the giant room they were in.

A hand wrapped itself around Mr. Hershey's body and lifted him out of sight. Sucker thought he heard a scream, but it had been so short he wondered if his nerves were getting the better of him.

The hand came back, and now Sucker screamed. Half of Mr. Hershey's body was missing. It looked like it had been ripped apart; jagged marks ran across his lower half. Sucker didn't know if he owed it to shock or disbelief, but the only thing he could do was stare with his mouth open as Mr. Hershey's remaining half disappeared once more—this time forever.

A few minutes later, the hand returned. It snaked its way through the crowds of people Sucker had been trapped with moments before and stopped in front of him. Once again, and for what he knew was the last time, he felt that unmistakable feeling of being lifted. His clothes were ripped off as Mr. Hershey's had been. He shivered, naked, as he waited for what would happen next.

The light vanished, and Sucker was again plunged into darkness. He could feel some sort of liquid burning into him and melting his hard skin away as it moved about his naked body. He screamed in agony, pure agony. He wanted to run, to hide, to crawl away and escape, but he didn't know how. He was held in place.

A thick, soft something slithered next to him and shifted him into a different position. He had thought he was held in place before, but now he couldn't even move his head as he felt two hard walls press against what remained of his body. He felt oddly comfortable despite the burning.

Then the walls began to close in on each other and, before Sucker could even start screaming, he shattered.

Eye Candy
Javan and Macaira Patterson



Venus in Common

Randall Cobb

Sit and stare
States apart
Yet the same
State of loneliness.
Emotion self-imposed
Situated slightly
Off the center mark.
Two southern romantics
Watch blue sky
Turn black sky.
Separate single hearts
Spin in lost orbits.
In these hungry minutes
Venus appears.
Lover's starlight
Wished on planet.
I witness here the perfection of my imperfections.
Crickets call and streetlamps buzz.
My thoughts are of common exchanges
Of land outside evening windows
And how that land was wilderness
A short and timely century ago.

Idle Hands

V. R. Winders

Joanne sat on her floor unwrapping the canisters of fresh paint she had just bought. Beneath her feet, a ten-foot canvas spread out. It was already covered with her latest piece: a rather large abstract representation of a spring river. A large blue swirl was the painting's main focus with mixed greens and purples accompanying it as the foliage.

The cans were popped open, and Joanne dipped her large horse-hair brushes into them. Standing up, she splattered a light mint green in tiny spots over the corners. Stepping back to admire her work, she picked a new brush and splattered the painting once again in a green teal.

The doorbell rang. Joanne wiped her hands on her apron and approached her front door. The bell rang again, filling the large open house with its echo. There were many windows and open rooms, but they all faced the back, where the sun shone through in the morning. The front of the house didn't have any windows by comparison, so Joanne had very little clue as to what waited on her front porch. She slid open the peephole of the door and saw that it was the mailman. He carried a large package under one arm and tapped his foot impatiently. Joanne closed the peephole and undid her lock, but she left the chain. (One could never be too careful.)

"Ms. Gloski? Package from . . . um . . . sorry, can't read the sender's writing," the burly man said. His clothing was rumpled, and he reeked of body odor.

Joanne bit her tongue so as not to comment on the man's greasy hair and beard. It appeared he had not showered in days.

"Could you show me the label? You may have the wrong address." Joanne was trying to find a way out of having to touch the package in the man's hand. It was old and crumpled and looked like someone had spilled a drink on it.

"Oh, I know I've got the right address. Joanne Gloski is printed clearly on the side. It's the return address that doesn't make any sense," he said, scratching his rear right in front of her. Joanne frowned and tried not to slam the door. She still needed her mail.

"All right," she said. "Do I need to sign?" She was recoiling behind her door.

"No, I can just leave it here," he said, and he left the package by her door. Joanne nodded and waited until he was near his van. Then she hurriedly opened the door and snatched her package. She was a bit of a recluse, and any time spent outside of her house agitated her.

Carrying the crumpled box as far away from her body as she could, she set it down on the kitchen table and chose a knife from the butcher block. Touching the box with her bare hands as little as she could, Joanne opened the box and used the knife tip to pull out the packing material.

Another box was inside; it was made out of wood and painted red with gold accents. Joanne raised her brow and set her knife down. She didn't remember ordering anything, and it wasn't like her relatives to send her things. She had cut ties with them when she realized they only stayed in touch with her in hopes of getting a slice of her wealth after she had made it big. They all knew how she felt about them and kept their distance. Joanne took the wooden box out of its packaging and tossed the crumpled cardboard in the trash, but she saved the return address. She set the little box on the table next to the knife and opened the lid with her fingertips.

The inside of the box was padded by felt with ten long indentations and two wide circles pressed into the bottom. It looked as if it had held something once but was empty now.

Joanne puzzled over the box. She flipped it over but found no manufacturer or label. She didn't recall seeing any notes or cards; it had all been plastic wrap. She looked again at the return label.

Like the postman, she couldn't read it. It looked like sloppy cursive written by a child. Tired of straining her eyes, she set the label down. Joanne, at this point, was fairly disturbed by the strange box. Despite her popularity among the art world, she received very little fan mail. Not once had she ever been gifted by any of the museums or collectors who owned her pieces.

Joanne was pondering what the box could mean when she heard a crackling. She felt dust settle around her shoulders and float in front of her face. Blinking, she turned her head up toward the ceiling and saw a large crack stretch itself further over her head. Frozen by the absurdity of it, she didn't move when the high-rise ceiling gave way and crushed her. A memory lodged itself into her mind that day—the sound of cracking bones and a pungent odor. She would repress those memories and try never to think of them again.

Joanne woke up in the hospital to the sound of a heart monitor. She felt pain all over her body and gazed down at her hands. They were cut up but thankfully not broken. One of her legs was hoisted up in a cast, and one of her arms hung limply at her side. A dull pain throbbed in her head, which was constricted by bandages tightly wrapped around it. Shallow cuts and large bruises covered her body, and the pull of some stitches under her cast told of deeper cuts. She breathed heavily through her mouth in a sigh of relief when a doctor entered her field of vision. Her body ached with the effort, and it took a moment for her to concentrate on what was in front of her.

“Good morning, Ms. Gloski, you gave us quite the scare,” he said, his voice old and croaking like a toad. She didn’t stop the glare she sent his way at his amphibian-like voice. The doctor just smiled again and wrote something down on his clipboard.

“How long have I been here?” Joanne tried to make her voice sound level. It was hard, and she felt her lungs protest with every breath she took.

“Careful, Ms. Gloski, you’re still recovering,” he said in his toad voice, grating Joanne’s ears again. She glared at him and asked once more how long she had been hospitalized. The doctor gave her a dry look and then smiled while cupping his hand to his ear.

“Speak up. You sound like a toad,” he said with a slight giggle to himself.

Joanne felt herself flush red with indignity and croaked out, “How long have I been here? Answer me, you old fart.”

The doctor frowned but finally gave her an answer. “About three days. You suffered a concussion, broke a collarbone and a leg, fractured your upper right arm . . . and you have some internal bruising.” He said it all a bit gravely.

Joanne committed his list of injuries to memory and flexed her left hand. She turned away from the doctor and looked out the window. She saw a drab courtyard filled with overgrown gardens and patients being led by the hand like children.

She recognized this place. It was the kind of hospital where people dropped their family members off to be forgotten. The shabby hospital was named Concord Health and Mental Care after a vineyard a few miles away. Concord had a reputation for always being understaffed and in shambles. Joanne suspected that she had been taken there due to its proximity to her house, and she wondered if the mailman or a neighbor had called for help. She didn’t register that she was now alone in her room for some time now, Toad Voice having left to give her privacy with her thoughts. A knock at her door pulled her from her musings.

Joanne’s family stood there looking both guilty and a little wary of her. Her mother pushed to the front of the group and boldly walked up to her bed.

“Joanne, how do you feel? The doctor said you were quite rude with him.” Mother had an accusing glare in her eyes.

Joanne scoffed and leaned back into her pillows. “He has the voice of a toad, and he had the audacity to joke with me when I asked him a simple question.” She shot back the words in a snappy voice.

Mother rolled her eyes and took a seat by the bed. She waved the rest of the family out and turned back to face Joanne. “He saved your life, Joanne. You should show more respect to Dr. Francis. You’re lucky to be in such good condition considering what happened.”

Joanne didn't stop her laugh as she flexed her left hand again. "Like anyone in this dump of a hospital knows how to properly treat the sick and injured. You do realize we're in the Looney Barrel, the worst hospital in the country."

Mother scowled at Joanne and raised her hand as if to slap her.

Joanne laughed again. "Go ahead. Do your worst. I won't stop you." She turned her face to give her mother a better target.

Her mother lowered her hand; she wore a sad look on her face as she faced her youngest daughter. "No point. That roof should be enough to teach you a lesson. For a while, at least."

She got up and turned to leave the room. Joanne scowled at her back. Before her mother was out the door, she turned over her shoulder and spat out, "I hope you suffer just like Carter."

Joanne didn't have any more visitors for the rest of the day . . . except for Dr. Francis, who had the gall to ask her why she insisted on calling him Toad Voice. She slept restlessly that night. Her dreams were filled with spilling paint that flooded like water and boxes that tried to swallow her whole.

She woke up the next day in a cold sweat only to find Dr. Francis leaning over her with a worried look on his face. She snapped at him, and he gave her that dry look again.

Joanne heard him reading his notes aloud to her: "Darn miracle. No broken spine or permanent brain damage. Not a single break in any of the fingers."

They spent the day talking about Joanne's health. Dr. Francis asked the questions, and Joanne responded in short, clipped answers. More doctors came by to see her and marvel at her survival of the collapse.

That night, Joanne asked Dr. Francis a question, "Francis, has there been anything said about what caused the roof to collapse?" She drew shapes with her left hand on her right cast as she waited for a response.

Dr. Francis looked at her, puzzled. He had gotten tired of trying to get Joanne to call him by his title and had settled on anything other than Toad Voice. "Your roof was completely rotted through. Cleaners were called in to handle all of the mold. I'm surprised someone as wealthy as yourself hadn't repaired it yet. It was so old."

Joanne froze. Her hand was shaking. "My house was constructed last year. I had it inspected only a week ago by the health department when I thought I heard rats in the attic." Joanne tried to keep her voice steady. Mold in her attic? Impossible.

Dr. Francis gave her his dry look again, but this time Joanne felt like an impertinent child under his gaze. "Ms. Gloski, your house had a large amount of mold. It would have taken years to get to that state."

He went back to his notes, and Joanne ignored him until she had another question. “How long do I have to be here?” In her mind, she tried to explain the mold that was found in her new home. One thing came to her, but it was an impossible explanation. She bit her tongue so she wouldn’t go to the psych ward yet.

“A week, possibly. We want to keep you for observations and make sure we didn’t miss anything.”

Joanne frowned. Her snippy attitude returned. “If there’s nothing else wrong with me, then send me home. My head’s clear, and I can move just fine.” She spat and tried to sit up. A slight panic started to shadow the back of her mind. She had not worked on a painting in five days.

Dr. Francis pushed her gently back into the bed and instructed her not to move. He left her alone that night, and in the morning he found her on the floor by the window with a twisted ankle.

These little spats between Dr. Francis and Joanne continued for a few more days. In that time, Joanne became more agitated . . . almost paranoid about something. She kept insisting upon the need to paint and draw. The doctors became worried about her and consulted her family (who had yet to visit her again).

Dr. Francis spoke to Joanne’s mother over the phone. “Her recovery seemed almost a miracle. Upon arrival, we were certain she would remain in a coma.” He flipped through his notes while he talked.

“Thank you for not telling her how close she came to dying,” Mother Gloski said, her voice hoarse from a cold.

Dr. Francis gave an exasperated sigh. “I understand the concern for your daughter’s mental health, but she’s starting to show signs of mental illness. We suspect she’s taking pencils and papers from staff. I’ve found one drawing of a janitor drowning himself in a bucket. Ms. Gloski, are you positive that Joanne isn’t disturbed? We may need to move her to our psychiatric ward or, better yet, to a hospital that can monitor her at all times.”

A psychological evaluation for Joanne sat on Dr. Francis’s desk along with his notes. It showed that Joanne was completely stable despite the radical changes in her recent behavior. Mood swings, as Ms. Gloski claimed.

“I don’t understand it, either, Doctor, but please don’t let her go. I wish I had answers, but I don’t. It scares me . . . the unknown.” Mother Gloski cried over the phone.

Dr. Francis sighed again. He had been pushed to the limits by both Joanne and her mother, but if Concord lost such a famous patient, it could make the reputation of the hospital even worse.

“This is very strange,” he interrupted. “From what you’ve told me, Joanne isn’t acting out of character, and I will not diagnose a patient with mental illness just because she’s disruptive. It truly is a miracle, her recovery, but wouldn’t it be wise to move her to a better-equipped hospital?”

“I can’t. I wouldn’t be able to afford it.” Mother Gloski cried again. She had yet to tell Joanne that all of her savings had disappeared the same day the roof caved in.

Dr. Francis let his notes fall to his desk; they buried the evaluation paperwork. “She’s been asking for her paints or a sketch pad. Her hands are well enough for drawing.” Dr. Francis shivered as he remembered the sketch of the janitor. “But I wouldn’t advise that. She may strain herself too much. As her mother, what do you feel would be best for Joanne?”

Mother Gloski was silent as she pondered Dr. Francis’s question. Finally, she answered, “Don’t let her. She’s a workaholic, and she needs the rest. Promise me you won’t let her touch anything art-related while she’s there. Her craft destroyed her once before, and I won’t stand to see it happen again.”

With that, the doctor and Mother said goodbye and set off to their respective tasks.

Joanne was twitching in her bed; she had not done any painting or drawing in over a week now—not since the janitor had found her special piece about him. She felt her hands start to cramp and found bruises she couldn’t explain. While her body healed at a healthy pace, her hands seemed to degrade. Dr. Francis had informed her of the decision to start monitoring her mental health and that she would be staying longer than intended. This news resulted in further mood swings and a fight in the canteen.

Dr. Francis called Ms. Gloski and the police to inquire about the investigation into the accident.

“No leads,” the officer said.

“We can’t move her. We have no money,” Ms. Gloski said.

So Joanne stayed at Concord and continued to have nightmares about drowning in paint while drawing her frustrations on tiny, hidden scraps of paper.

After two weeks, Joanne asked Dr. Francis a very strange question: “Did they find a box?”

The doctor, confused, looked up from his papers. “What box?” He clicked his pen. It was attached by a chain to his clipboard now. (The secret stash of disturbed drawings and broken pencils had been found and removed.)

“At my house, before the roof caved in, I received an antique-looking box in the mail. It was on my kitchen table.” Joanne looked pale. While her body was full and shapely, her hands had taken on a gnarled appearance . . . like that of an elderly woman.

The doctor excused himself and called a contact to inquire whether an antique box had been found at the house. The police officer said no such thing had been found and that the ongoing investigation for Joanne's money was at a standstill. It was as if all of her wealth had vanished into thin air. The doctor thanked the police officer and hung up. He returned to Joanne's room.

"What did they say?" Joanne was gazing out the window again. Dr. Francis told her that no box had been found, and Joanne began screaming.

"No box! No box! What are you people? Blind? It was right there on my kitchen table. It had come in the mail only that day! How did you not find it?" She thrashed in her bed and tossed her sheets to the floor.

"Calm yourself!" Dr. Francis yelled back. He summoned the nurse to sedate Joanne.

These screaming matches became quite common as Dr. Francis tried to treat her. As Joanne's body recovered at a healthy pace, her hands were a different story. The doctors had no explanation for their sudden, concentrated deterioration.

Dr. Francis was called away on important business, and he left Joanne with a rather inattentive nurse who would rather do her nails than her job. Joanne had complained about her to some of the staff only to be ignored. She stabbed the nurse in the hand with a piece of broken pencil she had hidden in her bed. From then on, Joanne was only allowed to eat in her room under supervision.

Joanne often heard them whispering, and she felt her anger boil inside of her.

That night, she heard their voices again. The voices were laughing, mocking her. "At this rate, it'll fall off. All off. And all you'll have will be stumps for wrists."

Joanne screamed for the voices to silence themselves, but they didn't. They never did. By the third week of her captivity, she couldn't take it anymore. Joanne was seen talking to herself and pinching and clawing at her bandages. Dr. Francis still refused to allow her pencils or brushes. He said it was too dangerous.

There was talk of moving her to Concord's psychiatric ward as more of the staff refused to go near her. In response, Joanne clawed holes into her palms and used the blood from the wounds to draw her rendition of the view outside her window onto the glass.

She stepped back to admire her work. The dull faded greens were covered over with vibrant reds. The painting was an abstract . . . like the one that had been destroyed when her house caved in.

Dr. Francis walked in and found the floor and wall covered in bloody handprints. Joanne was pressing her face to the glass with a contented sigh.

He moved her to the psych ward after that and had her strapped to her bed.

Joanne fought back and continued to claw at her hands. A week after the blood-window incident, Joanne couldn't move her fingers; they started to show signs of decay and smelled like death. She refused to eat or speak.

Dr. Francis asked to be left alone with her. He feared she would soon cave into insanity and felt she deserved the truth.

"We don't know how or why, but after you arrived here, the bank called and reported that your entire account had been wiped clean. The police suspect that you were robbed. We didn't move you to a better hospital because you couldn't afford it."

Joanne was facing away from him. Her cheeks were hollow now, and her bones poked through after days of refusing to eat. Her eyes were glazed. Her hair had started to fall out.

"I know. That's how it happens. It takes all your earthly possessions. Then it drives you into the ground. Slowly."

Dr. Francis looked up quizzically at Joanne. "Ms. Gloski, do you know what is causing your symptoms?" He felt scared. He had never been scared by a patient before. Then again, he had never had to deal with anyone from the psychiatric ward.

"Yes. The Devil."

Joanne started to see a different psychiatrist every day. She eventually accepted being hand fed as the problem with her hands started to take over her lower arms and restrict her movements. After the fifteenth psychiatrist, she asked to speak to Dr. Francis again.

"You wanted to see me?" He had not seen her after the therapists had taken over completely.

"Yes." Joanne was looking at the wall again, but at least she had gained some much-needed weight, and there was color to her hair again. "You look different, Doctor." She was facing him now. While her body may have been recovering, her eyes were still haunted. "You look healthier, and your voice doesn't sound like a toad anymore."

Dr. Francis scoffed and tried to think back to the time when he had thought Joanne would be out of this place by the end of the month. "What makes you say that?" He tried to relax.

"I think I saw the world as one might see a broken toy. Something to be thrown away. I tried to escape it. The world. I tried to escape into my painting. But the more I painted the world in my image, the less I saw the real beauty of the world. You're beautiful, Doctor, and I refused to see that stuck in my own pride."

Dr. Francis set his pen and notes down. Just this once, he chose not to document this moment. It was the first time she had called him by his title.

“I disowned my family,” Joanne continued. “They were concerned. I had a cousin, Carter Gloski, who had cancer, but my aunt was too poor to pay for his treatment. She asked me, but I refused . . . so he died. My mother called me a greedy and selfish pig. She said I had lost sight of who I was. I hit her, and she hit me back. I fell down the stairs and twisted an ankle. That was a year ago. I cut off all ties with my family after that. When I moved into my new house, the one that fell on me, Mother sent me a package of my old things. Back in high school, I started practicing the occult. That’s what the box was filled with—my books and ritual objects. I had done a spell as a joke back in high school. It was a ceremony where I traded part of my soul to evil for something. I sold my hands. As long as my hands were working, I would be successful. When my hands stopped working, they would die with that part of my soul.”

Dr. Francis was silent. Joanne’s voice had rattled him. The conviction with which she spoke only came from one who told the truth. “A while back, you asked about a box, one made of antique wood?”

Joanne smiled, but it was forced and strained; it made her look older than she was. “Yes. The deposit box. That’s where I’m to put my hands when they fall off. I tried to deny and ignore it, but I know for sure that’s what that box was—my warning that my payment would be collected soon.”

Joanne tried to sit up, but her wrists were caught by the straps that held her down. Slowly, she raised her wrists. Her hands were little more than shriveled-up bones wrapped in skin. They fell from her wrists. Joanne and Dr. Francis were silent for a moment, and then they heard the creak of a box opening.

The antique box was suddenly there on the bed; it sat open and in one piece. Joanne used her stumps to pick up her hands and lay them gently in the box. Slowly, she closed the lid.

The box disappeared, but a whisper trailed in the air: “Thank you for your business.”

Joanne leaned back with a contented look on her face as she closed her eyes.

Dr. Francis was admitted to his own hospital’s psych ward after that. He and Joanne never spoke to each other for the rest of their short lives. Joanne was found in her room. She had removed one of her prosthetic hands and painted a detailed and beautiful portrait of Dr. Francis on her window. A puddle of blood spread beneath her from a hole in her abdomen, and a painted smile was on her face.

Dr. Francis was found drowned in the courtyard fountain. No signs of a struggle were found. Both he and Joanne were cremated; their ashes were returned to their families, and they were never spoken of again at Concord Hospital.

A Family Heirloom
Christian Pippins

Characters

ANTONIO FERNANDEZ, 18, DANTRELL and LINDSEY's friend visiting
from college

DANTRELL RUGLEY, 18, visiting his mother for Thanksgiving from college

MARY RUGLEY, 50s, DANTRELL's mother

LINDSEY MULLINS, 18, ANTONIO and DANTRELL's friend visiting from
college

Setting

The action takes place in November at Mary Rugley's house in Longview, Texas.
The time is the present.

Scene 1

(Lights rise on a living room. LINDSEY is lying on the couch CS flipping through a magazine. DANTRELL drags onstage a Father Scarecrow figure from SL and stands it upright.)

DANTRELL: What are you doing?

LINDSEY: Lounging! What do you think I'm doing?

DANTRELL: I thought you were going to help me set this up before my mom gets home.

LINDSEY: I don't do manual labor, and this is Thanksgiving break. We're supposed to be relaxing.

DANTRELL: Then why did you come?

LINDSEY: It's not like we get to see each other all of the time. We haven't seen each other since we left for school, and I came to see the scarecrow family with my own eyes. Why does your mom pull that thing out every year?

(DANTRELL sits beside LINDSEY. HE props his feet up.)

DANTRELL: I'm not really sure. I guess she likes to decorate for every holiday. She puts it up every year right before Thanksgiving.

LINDSEY: Where are you going to put them?

DANTRELL: I usually put them in the corner until mom gets home, and then she usually decides where she wants to put them.

LINDSEY: So what are you guys having for Thanksgiving?

DANTRELL: The usual: turkey, sweet potatoes, dressing, and, of course, my mom's famous pecan pie.

LINDSEY: That sounds delicious. I've heard that your mom's pie is the best. I love turkey. It's definitely my favorite. Most turkeys taste better the day after; my mother's tasted better the day before. Thanksgiving wouldn't be Thanksgiving without my mother's turkey.

DANTRELL: I know, right? I'm going to call up Antonio and see if he'll help me drag the rest of the scarecrows out.

(DANTRELL goes to the phone and calls ANTONIO.)

DANTRELL: Hey, Antonio, can you come by and help with setting up the scarecrow family before my mom gets here . . . if you're not busy? Okay. That works for me.

(HE hangs up the phone.)

Antonio will be here in a minute. Lindsey, can you please help so there isn't that much for us to do?

LINDSEY: Okay, okay. I guess I can help.

(LINDSEY and DANTRELL walk off SL. Blackout.)

Scene 2

(Lights rise on the living room. DANTRELL and LINDSEY are dragging on the Mother Scarecrow and one of the Scarecrow Children. The friends stand the scarecrows up beside the Scarecrow Father. There is a loud knock at the door. DANTRELL walks SR to the door and lets ANTONIO into the house. DANTRELL and ANTONIO hug each other.)

DANTRELL: What's up Antonio? I'm so glad you came. Man, it feels like it's been forever.

ANTONIO: I know, right? We haven't seen each other since we left for school. It's not a problem. I know how your mom gets when the decorations aren't set up on time. Hey, Lindsey.

LINDSEY: Hey, Antonio.

ANTONIO: So I see you guys have made some leeway. Let's go on and grab the rest of the scarecrow family. You still haven't asked your mom why she's so crazy about the scarecrows.

DANTRELL: No, I haven't asked her. I've really been racking my brain trying to figure out the story behind the scarecrows. There have to be some clues in the storage room because that's where she keeps everything.

LINDSEY: Maybe there's a photo album in there, so we can at least see how long she's had these things. They look so old.

ANTONIO: Let's grab the last two children, and maybe we'll come across one of the photo albums and see what we can find out.

DANTRELL: Let's do it.

(DANTRELL, LINDSEY, and ANTONIO walk off SR. A few beats later, ANTONIO and DANTRELL drag out the last two Scarecrow Children. LINDSEY is following them with a large photo album under one arm. DANTRELL and ANTONIO set down the scarecrow children and sit down next to LINDSEY.)

LINDSEY: Your mom keeps everything. There was so much stuff back there.

DANTRELL: I know. I'm glad we found the photo album, so now we can know how old the scarecrow family is.

(LINDSEY opens up the photo album while ANTONIO and DANTRELL move closer to her so that THEY can see the pages better.)

DANTRELL: Wow! This picture is from 1929. Look. It's the Scarecrow Family, and I think that's my great-grandmother with my grandfather in this picture. He looks so young in this picture.

LINDSEY: That Scarecrow Family has been around for a long time. I can't believe that your family has kept it in good shape for this long.

ANTONIO: Being around that long, it has to have sentimental value.

DANTRELL: I know. My mom keeps the whole thing wrapped up, and whenever the weather even looks like it's going to be bad, she makes us bring them into the house.

(LINDSEY continues to flip pages, but SHE stops on one particular page. SHE taps DANTRELL to get his attention.)

DANTRELL: It looks like either a story or a letter.

(Examining the page more closely, HE begins to read silently.)

ANTONIO: What does it say?

DANTRELL: The scarecrow family was originally created by my great-grandfather as a gift to my great-grandmother. I guess they couldn't afford expensive gifts, so he made them for her. So much of her family had been taken away over the years, but this was a way for her to always be able to have the family that she lost close.

(HE flips to the next page.)

The scarecrows have been in the family for years as a symbol of how strong a familial bond can be even if people aren't together.

LINDSEY: That's so amazing. I'm so sorry that I ever thought anything bad about the scarecrows. They're like a family heirloom.

ANTONIO: This makes me want to go home and ask my mom about all of the things that she brings out every year and find out what they mean to our family.

(Tears have started to stream down DANTRELL's face. HE wipes his face and clears his throat in order to hide that HE has been crying.)

DANTRELL: Well, let's put them outside. I want them to be the first thing that my mom sees when she pulls up.

(THEY put the scarecrows outside. THEY have just walked into the house and sat down again when MARY RUGLEY enters. SHE gives each of them a hug.)

MARY RUGLEY: Thank you so much! The scarecrows look amazing! I'm so glad we got them out on time.

DANTRELL: No problem, Mom.

LINDSEY: Mrs. Rugley, can you tell us more about the scarecrows? And can you explain to me why one of the children could be a girl or a boy?

MARY RUGLEY: Well, first of all, Lindsey, instead of saying that gender is any one single thing, let's start describing it as a holistic experience. The Scarecrow Family isn't set in specific representations; it is a reminder of members of your family who aren't with you. They can be whoever and whatever you want them to be.

LINDSEY: I understand.

DANTRELL: Mom, can you tell us more about the Scarecrow Family? And also tell us about the pictures in the album?

MARY RUGLEY: Okay. Let me put up my coat, and I'll tell you all about Great-Grandpa Lionel and how he created our Scarecrow Family.

(MARY RUGLEY finds a place to hang her coat. SHE sits on the sofa CS as DANTRELL, LINDSEY, and ANTONIO sit around her. SHE picks up the photo album and turns to the first page.)

MARY RUGLEY: Great-Grandpa Lionel met your great-grandmother Regina when they were very young. Regina was an orphan. She was raised by her aunt after her mother had to give her up. After marrying Lionel, Regina finally got her wish of having a family that she could call her own.

DANTRELL: Why did her mother give her up?

MARY RUGLEY: Her mother was so young when she became pregnant, and many people say she was forced to give her up. That's just one of those many family secrets that we may truly never really know. So after being married a year, Lionel noticed that at times Regina would get really sad, especially when she would look at pictures of her mother and other family members who had passed on. So Lionel got up one day and came up with the idea of the Scarecrow Family. He wanted to give Regina something that she would always cherish and a way to feel like her family was always there even if they weren't. He truly believed in having strong familial bonds.

LINDSEY: That's so sweet. He must have really loved her.

MARY RUGLEY: He sure did.

ANTONIO: So he made this not only as a gift but as a symbol of family?

DANTRELL: That's so cool.

MARY RUGLEY: It's very cool, and, yes, the Scarecrow Family has always been a symbol of family and love for generations in our family.

(SHE looks at DANTRELL.)

I know you always wondered why I made you drag them out every Thanksgiving. Thanksgiving is about family, and it wouldn't be right not to bring the Scarecrow Family out every year.

DANTRELL: I understand, Mom . . . and thank you so much for sharing that story with us.

MARY RUGLEY: You're welcome, sweetheart.

(SHE hugs DANTRELL.)

LINDSEY AND ANTONIO: Thank you so much, Mrs. Rugley.

MARY RUGLEY: Let me get you guys some tea before you leave for helping us get the scarecrows put up.

(SHE exits. DANTRELL, LINDSEY, and ANTONIO continue to flip through the photo album. Lights fade out as ANTONIO, DANTRELL, and LINDSEY get up and look out of the window SL at the Scarecrow Family.)

Scarecrows at Home
Macaira Patterson



The Week before Thanksgiving
Amber Frady

Characters

ALISSIA, 19, friends with CAMBRESHA and KENNEDY
CAMBRESHA, 20, friends with ALISSIA and KENNEDY
KENNEDY, 19, friends with ALISSIA and CAMBRESHA

Setting

The action takes place in the living room of Alissia's apartment a week before Thanksgiving break. The time is the present.

Scene 1

(Lights rise in the living room of ALISSIA's apartment. A wooden, light-up turkey hangs on the wall US. ALISSIA and KENNEDY are sitting on the couch talking while waiting on their friend CAMBRESHA to arrive. It is the week before Thanksgiving break and the week of final exams.)

KENNEDY: Hey, Alissia, thank you for having me over tonight. My apartment's rather boring these days. All the studying I've been trying to cram in before finals has me all crazy. I honestly feel like the walls of my apartment are closing in on me. Your place is a breath of fresh air before I go home for Thanksgiving break.

ALISSIA: Girl, I feel the same way. All this studying is driving me nuts. I have one more exam tomorrow, and then I'm not picking up a book or pencil for two weeks.

(KENNEDY begins wandering around the room.)

KENNEDY: Your place is so homey and relaxing. I honestly would rather stay here for Thanksgiving break. My family can be a bit overbearing and loud.

ALISSIA: Girl, my family can be loud and overbearing, too. I'm not at all prepared to go home. I'm just glad we could get together before we have to tackle the chaos of our families. I invited Cambresha over, too. Hopefully, she'll be here soon.

KENNEDY: Your family cannot be anywhere near as bad as mine.

ALISSIA: They're probably worse. My aunts constantly nag me about getting married and settling down. My dad still treats me like I'm twelve. And my mom constantly asks me when I'm moving home. I feel like they're never quite satisfied with what I am trying to accomplish in my life right now. Like, I love my family and all, but can we just get together and eat till we can breath and enjoy the time we have together without all the questions.

KENNEDY: Girl, tell me about it. I love my family and all, but the nagging has got to end. My grandma's the one who nags me about marriage and settling down. My mom cries every time I tell her I'm not coming home. And my brother thinks I'm strange because I don't date around every weekend like he did in college. And, well, my dad . . . he always thinks what I'm doing isn't good enough. I know they love me and all, but I wish they'd let me be me. I guess that's what happens when you grow up and move on with your own traditions.

ALISSIA: Wow. It sounds like we come from the same stuck-in-their-ways-type family. Thanksgiving and Christmas used to be some of my greatest memories, but things have really changed.

KENNEDY: Yeah. I agree. Holidays used to be the moments I looked forward to. Now I just pray to make it through them. I wonder what Cambresha's Thanksgiving traditions are like. Does her family even celebrate Thanksgiving?

ALISSIA: Well, I bet her family isn't as overbearing as ours.

KENNEDY: Yeah. She probably looks forward to traveling home for the holidays even if her family isn't traditional.

ALISSIA: Would you like something to drink while we wait?

KENNEDY: Sure. What all you got?

ALISSIA: All sorts of stuff. Let's go dig through my fridge and find out what you want.

(KENNEDY and ALISSIA exit. Blackout.)

Scene 2

(Lights rise in the living room of ALISSIA's apartment. ALISSIA and KENNEDY enter drinking cups of punch. THEY sit on the sofa.)

KENNEDY: Alissia, this punch is so good. Where'd you buy it from?

ALISSIA: Oh, that old stuff is a secret family recipe. My dad makes it every year for Thanksgiving and Christmas. We usually have it with our traditional family appetizers.

KENNEDY: My family doesn't have traditional appetizer and drinks. We just cook up whatever's in the cabinet.

ALISSIA: Well, despite my family's nagging, we do have some fun traditions. My dad's always cooking. My mom's always decorating. And my brother is usually hogging the television watching football.

KENNEDY: Your dad cooks? Like, is he a good cook? Does he cook turkey with the fixings?

ALISSIA: Girl, he cooks all that and more. Just like the famous Erma Bombeck once said, "I come from a family where gravy is considered a beverage." We love home-cooked meals!

KENNEDY: What other traditions does your family have?

ALISSIA: Too many to name. But those traditions are treasures of mine. We do have some good times.

KENNEDY: So that silly wooden, light-up turkey . . . is that one of your traditions?

ALISSIA: I guess you could call it a tradition.

KENNEDY: So what's the story there? I don't think I've ever seen a light-up turkey. It's kind of creepy, come to think of it.

ALISSIA: Well, it all began one evening while my mom and I were shopping.

(The doorbell rings. ALISSIA runs to answer it.)

ALISSIA (CONT.): Hey, Cambresha! We're so glad you finally made it. We've been waiting on you to get started. I've got plenty of appetizers prepared and plenty of drink choices.

(ALISSIA and CAMBRESHA make their way to the sofa and join KENNEDY.)

KENNEDY: Hey, Cambresha. I'm glad you made it. Alissia and I were discussing our Thanksgiving traditions, and we were wondering what your traditions are like? Does your family even celebrate Thanksgiving?

ALISSIA: Kennedy, don't be so rude. She came here to relax, not to be questioned to death.

KENNEDY: I'm just curious.

CAMBRESHA: It's okay, Alissia. I'm used to these types of "curious minds."

KENNEDY: See there, Alissa? I can ask my questions. Now let's get back to it. Does your family celebrate Thanksgiving?

CAMBRESHA: In Poland, Thanksgiving is not a traditional holiday, but now that I have been in America for the past two years, I have been privileged to bring traditional American holidays to my family. It's been very humbling to share American traditions with my family . . . and somewhat comical at times. Overall, I have really enjoyed my time in America. It's provided me and my family with so many opportunities. Traditions are a sacred union for my family and me.

KENNEDY: So your traditions aren't in any way similar to ours? I mean, Alissia's traditions involve gravy and a wooden turkey that lights up.

ALISSIA: Leave my wooden turkey alone. That's my version of a sacred tradition.

KENNEDY: Let's get back to that wooden turkey. What's the story?

ALISSIA: Well, one Thanksgiving when I was fifteen years old, my mom gave my brother and me wooden turkeys. We thought it was the dumbest gift, but my mom was so thrilled to give them to us.

KENNEDY: What's so great about them?

ALISSIA: My family had a rough year that year. To brighten the mood, she bought those turkeys. She said, "If those turkeys can shine, so can our family." So that particular Thanksgiving, she made me and my brother hold the turkeys and share five things we were thankful for. Then we each passed a turkey onto the parent of our choice. Then our parents shared the things they were thankful for. After that year, the light-up wooden turkeys just became a tradition.

KENNEDY: Why did you bring it to college with you?

ALISSIA: About three weeks ago, I called my mom wanting to quit. I was so tired of school, my job, and, overall, my responsibilities. My mom talked me down—like she always does—and I thought that was the end of my crisis. Three days later, I received a package in the mail. In that package was my turkey.

KENNEDY: Why in the world did your mom think that turkey would make things better?

ALISSIA: Moms just kind of know, don't they? At first, I thought it was silly, and I threw it aside. Then I began to think about all of the memories associated with that turkey—all those Thanksgivings when we gathered around the table and rambled off the things we were thankful for. Somehow, my crisis became void. I picked up the turkey and began rambling off what I was thankful for . . . and I experienced such peace. I know. I know. It's kind of cheesy, but it's my family's thing.

KENNEDY: Can I give it a try? The turkey?

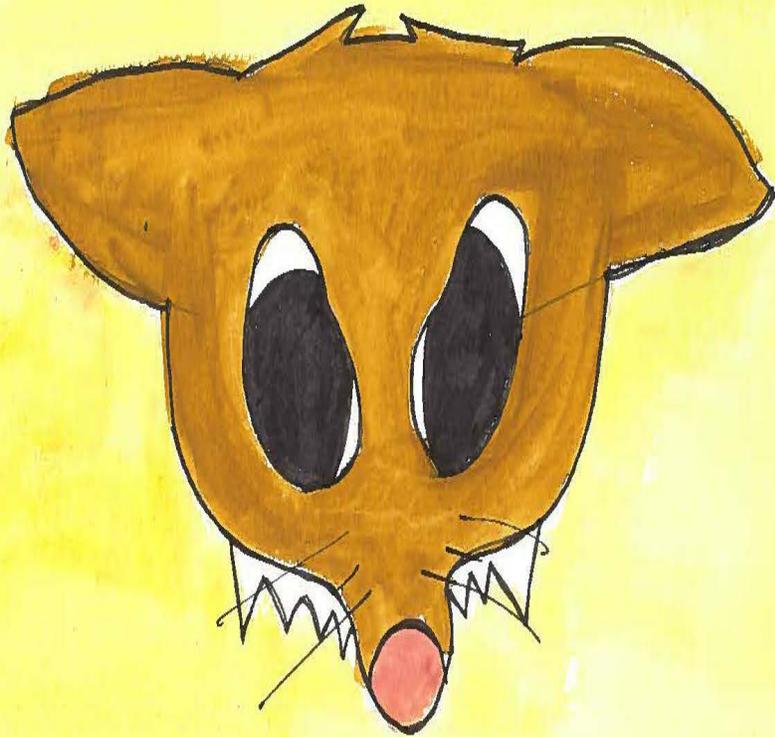
ALISSIA: Yeah, sure. I think he's still got some peace left in him.

(KENNEDY crosses to the turkey and takes it off of the wall. SHE turns to her friends.)

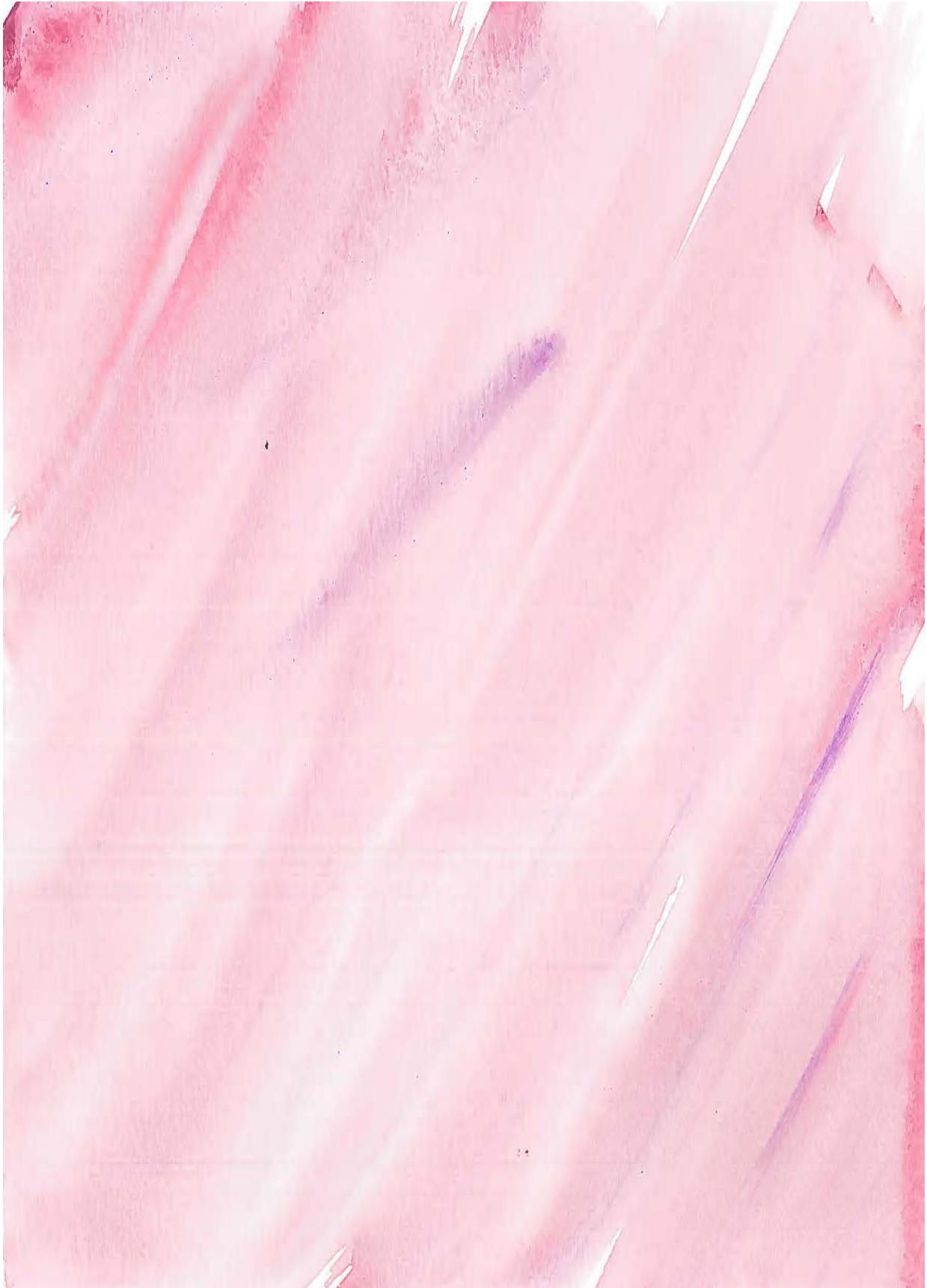
KENNEDY: Here's to a peaceful Thanksgiving.

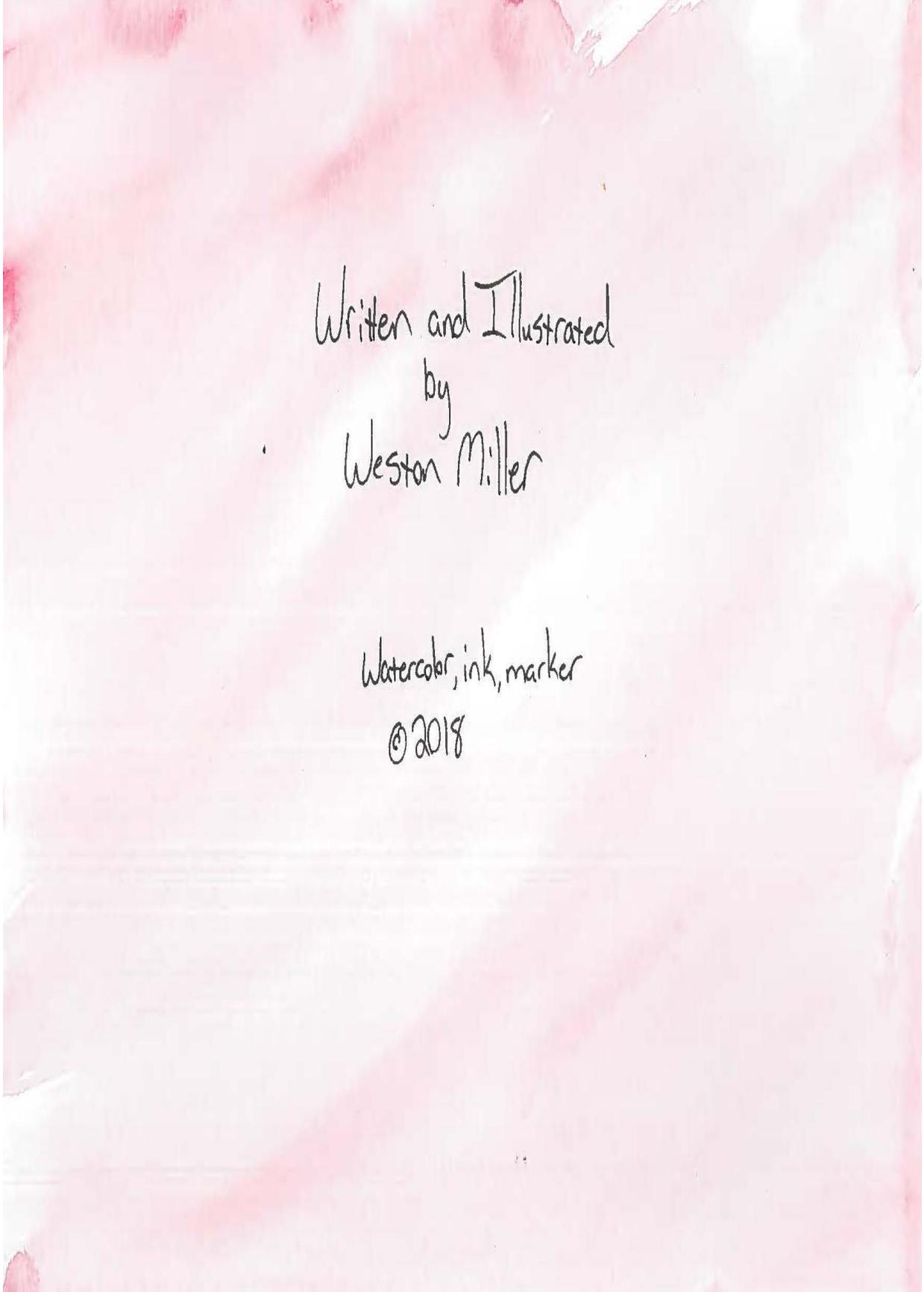
(SHE closes her eyes, grips the turkey, and takes a breath to speak. Blackout.)

Buster



and
the
Fuzzy Nation





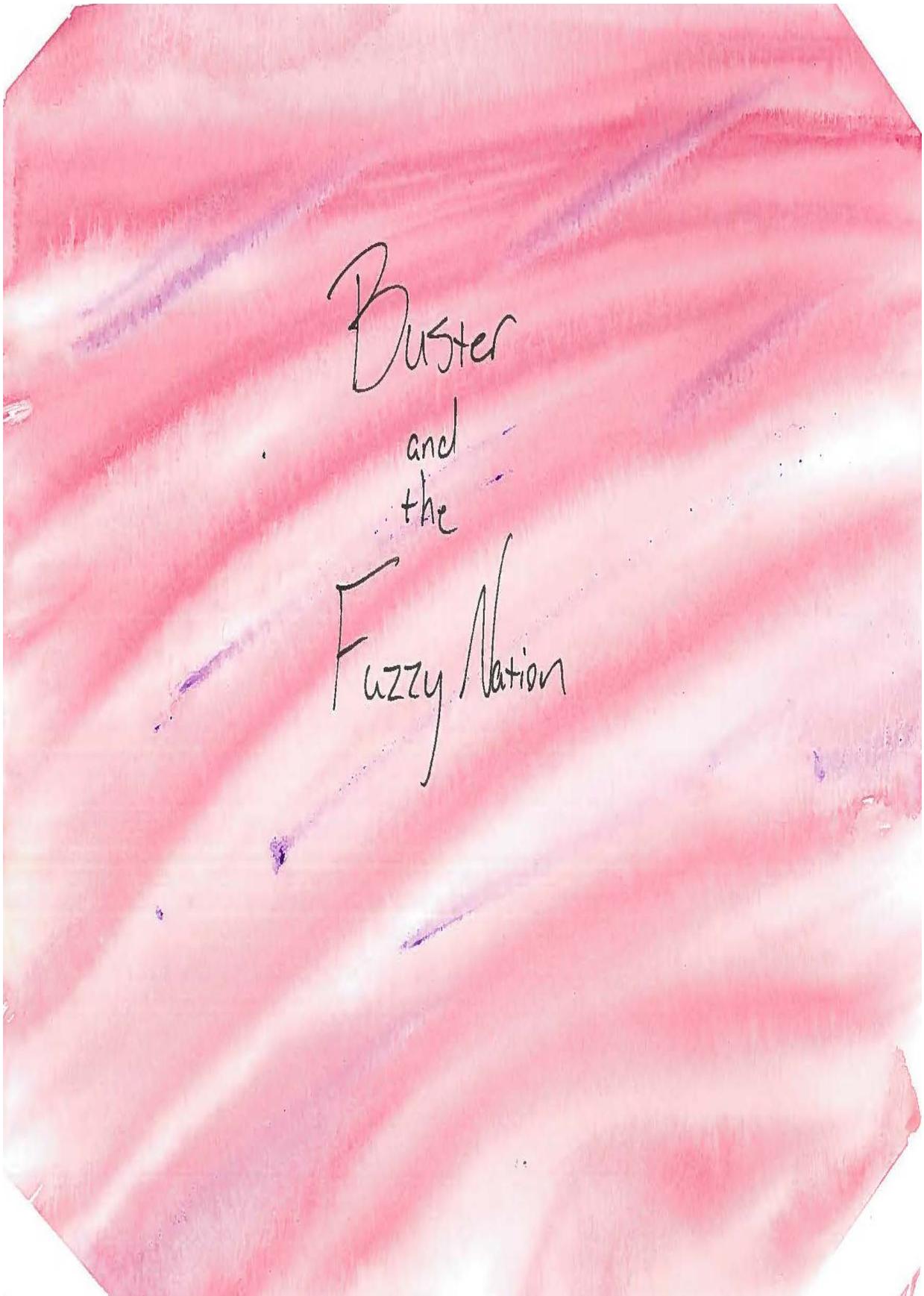
Written and Illustrated
by
Weston Miller

Watercolor, ink, marker
©2018

To Ezra & Ella

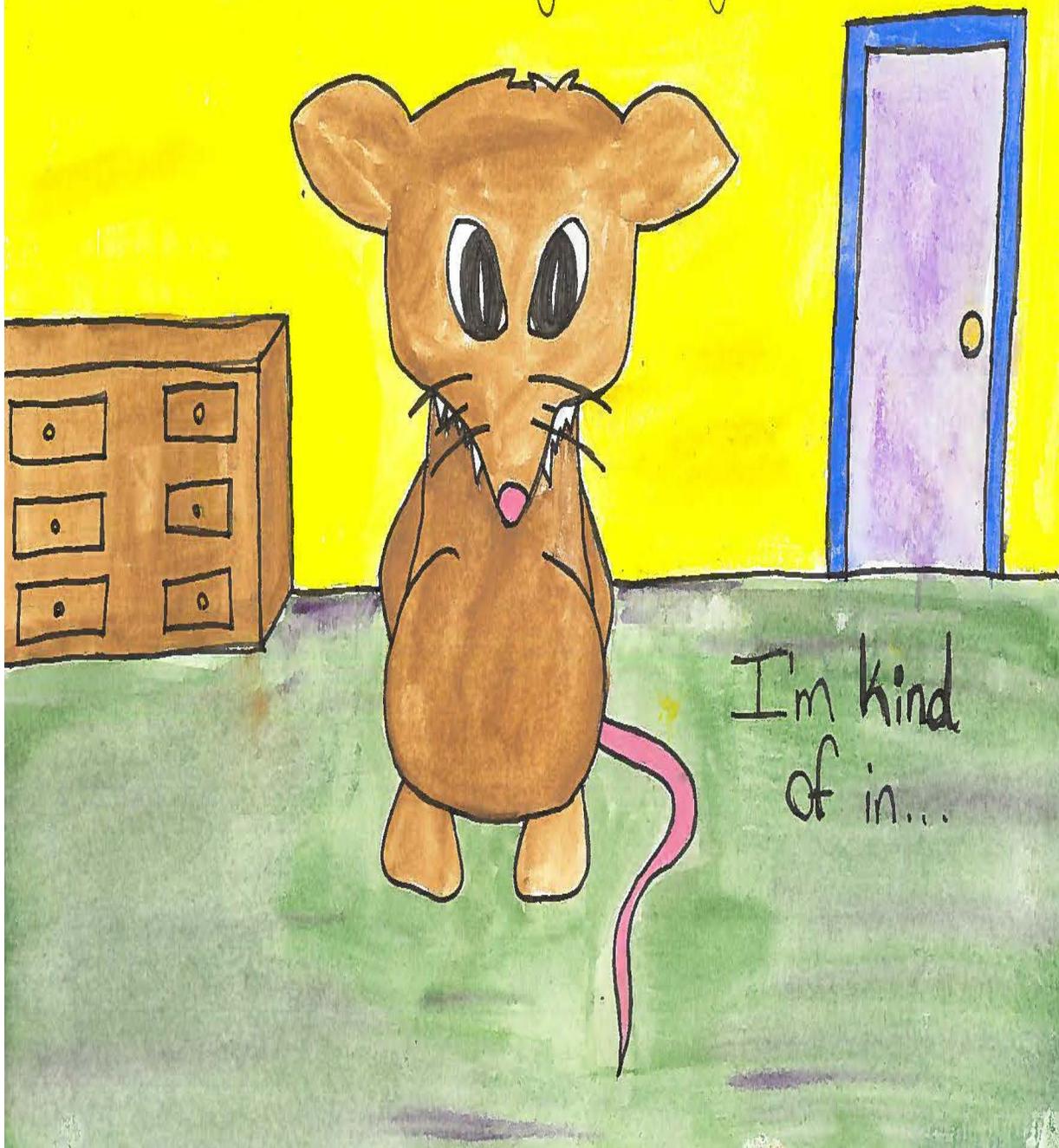
May you always stand up
for the oppressed.

May your imaginations
never
cease.

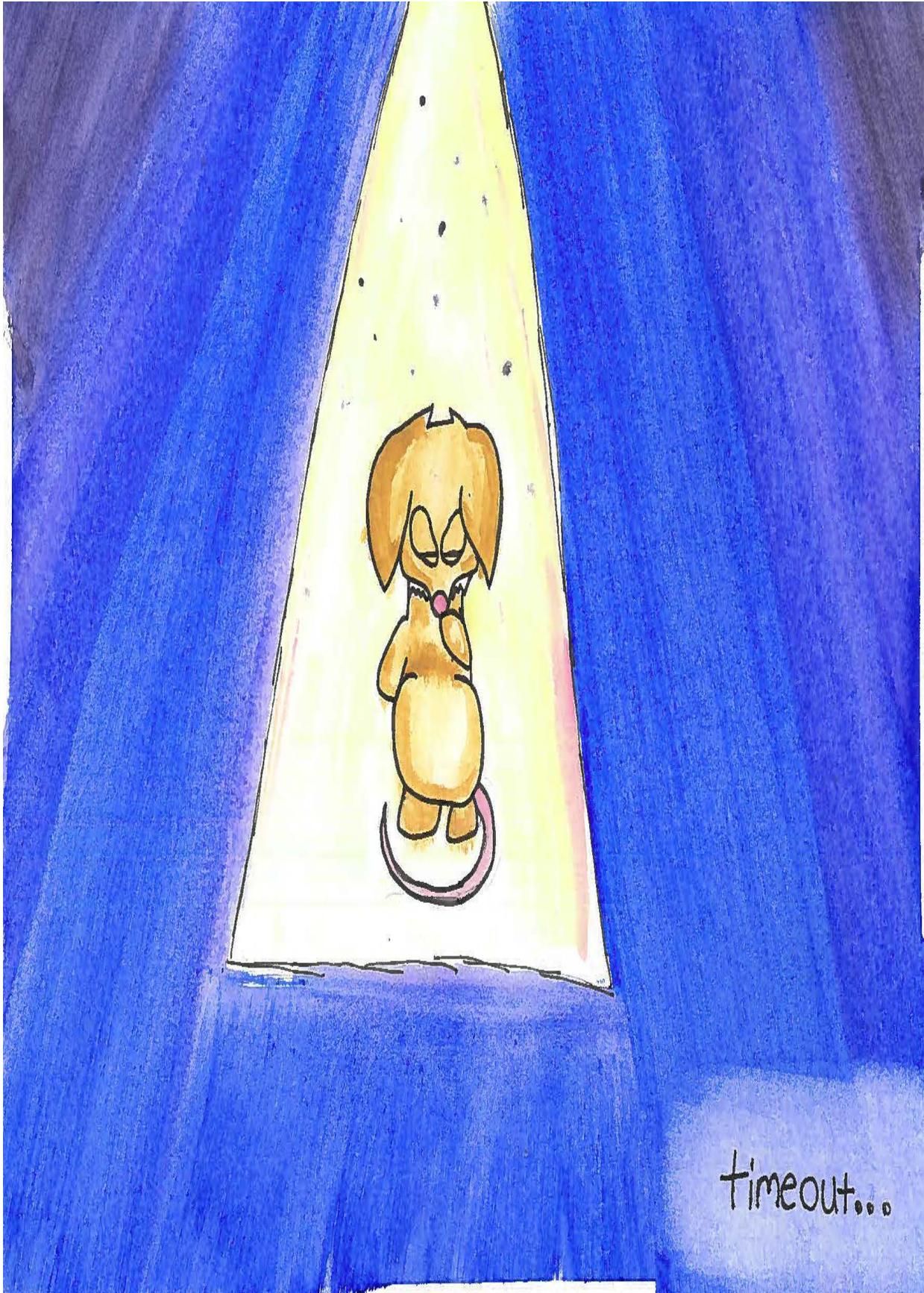


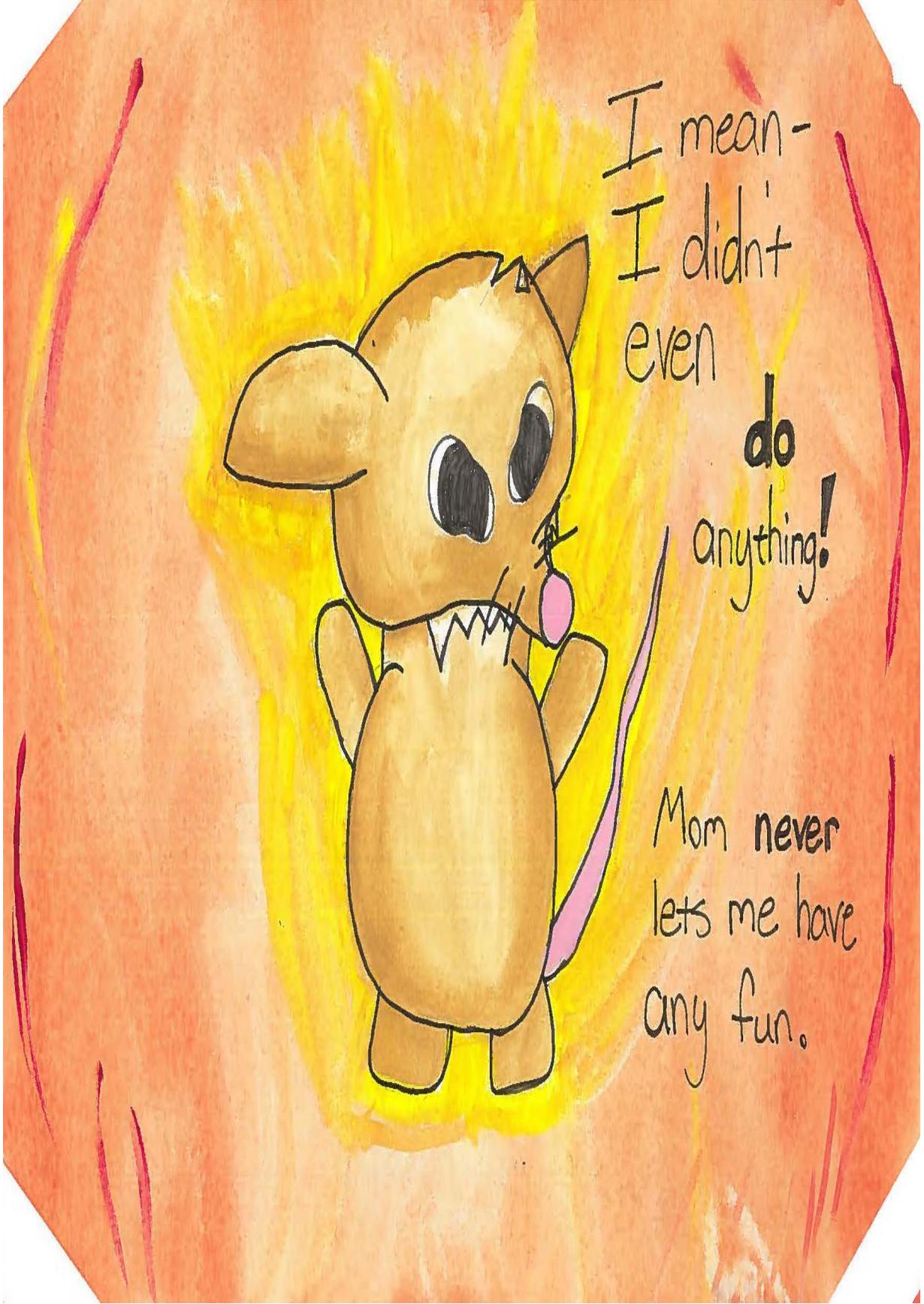
Oh! Hello there! I'm glad you came by.

I really can't play now, though.



I'm kind
of in...





I mean-
I didn't
even
do
anything!

Mom never
lets me have
any fun.

Mom's all-

"Allibaster!

You had better get
your head out of
the clouds! Your

imagination is
gonna get you in
trouble!



I HATE it
when she calls me
Allibaster.



It's
Buster.

and DON'T you
forget it.



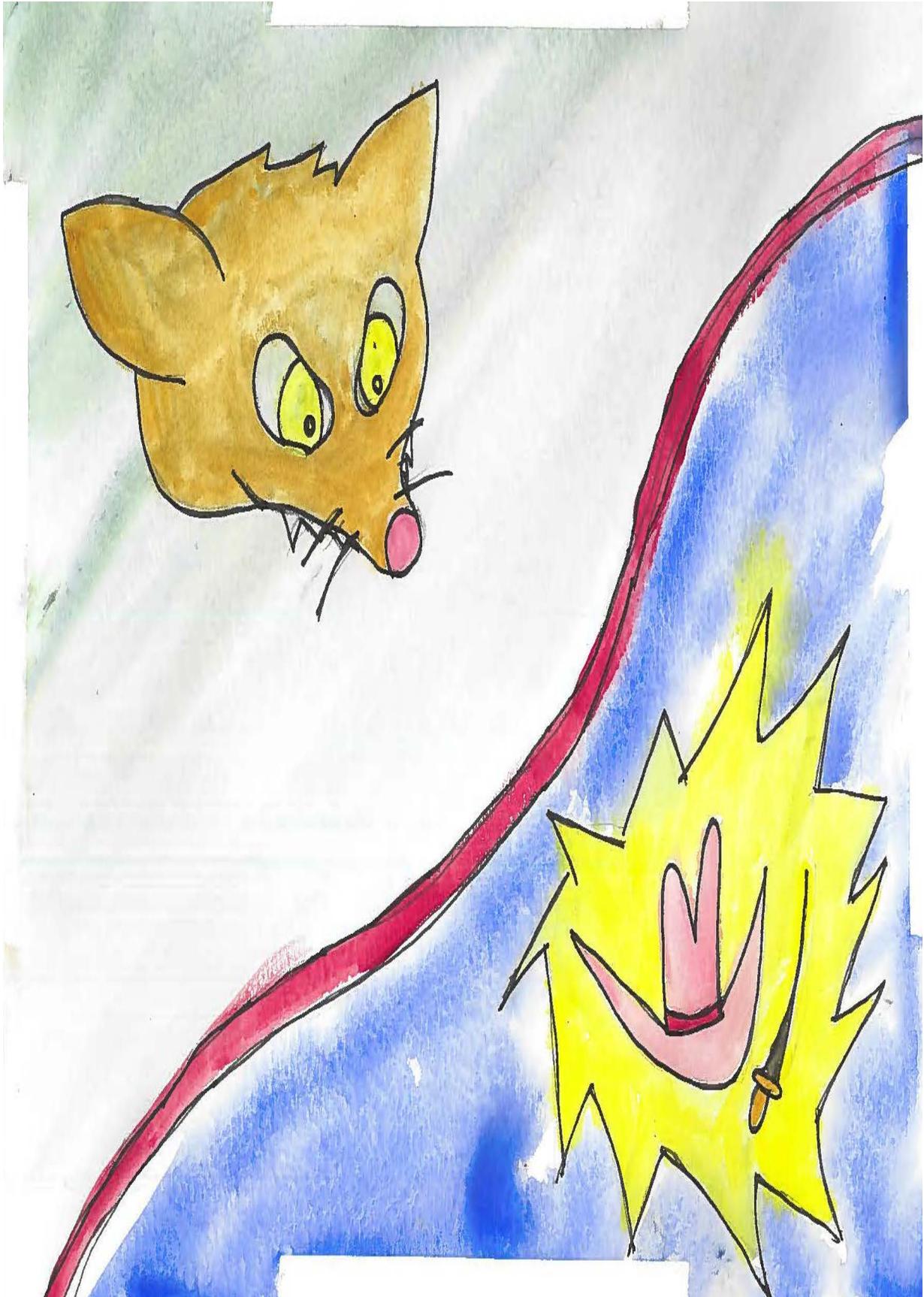


Anyway...
It's not like my
imagination is
THAT
wild.
Besides,
a little imagination
is a
GOOD
thing!



Allibaster!
I don't know who
you are talking to,
but that room
better be **spotless**
by dinner time!

Alright!
Alright!
I'm on it.



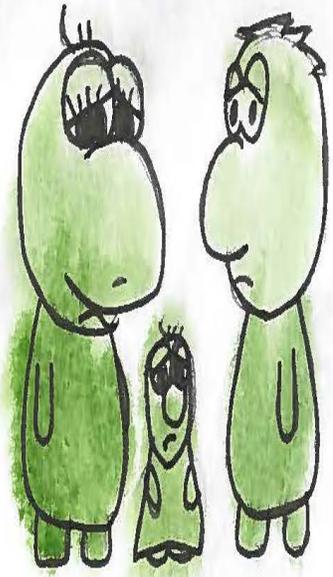


General Buster!
The Foxy Confederacy
is advancing. We
must act **NOW** to
restore the union
and free the demmings
from the Foxen!



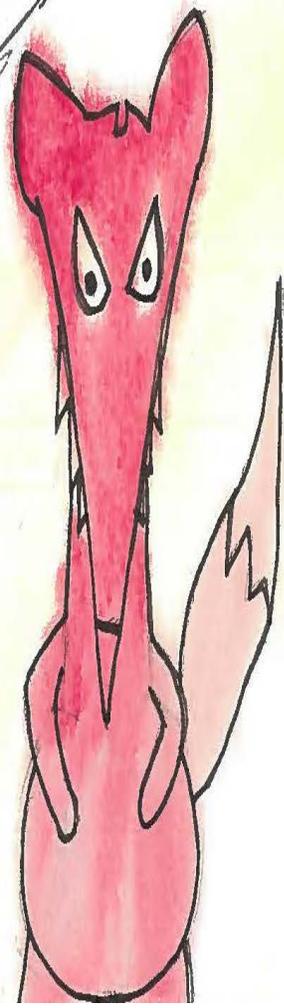


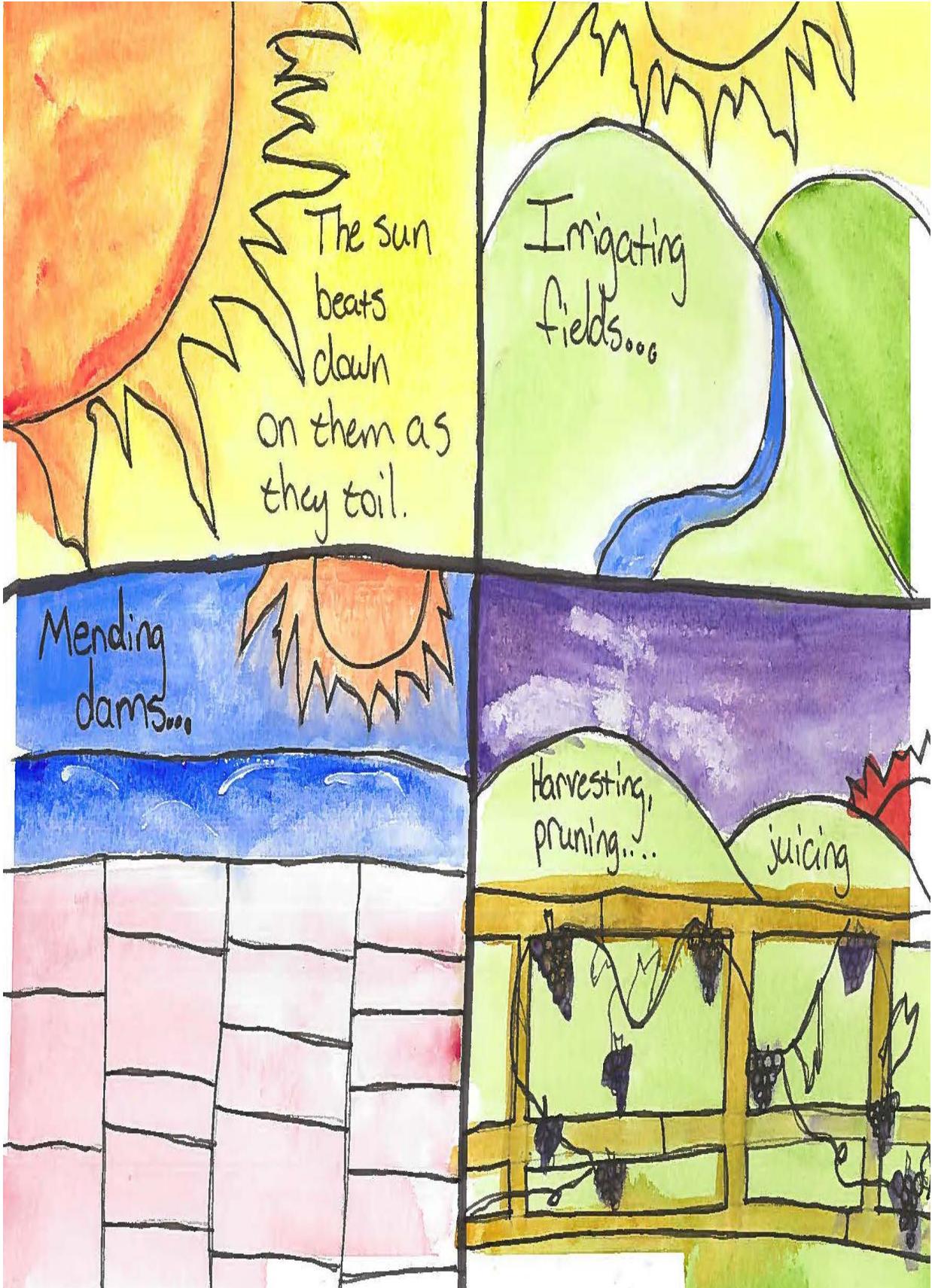
The Lemmings...
those poor souls;
enslaved by the
Foxen to work
their vineyards.



The demmings
suffer...

Just so
the Foxen
get
Fat.





The sun
beats
down
on them as
they toil.

Irrigating
fields...

Mending
dams...

Harvesting,
pruning...

juicing



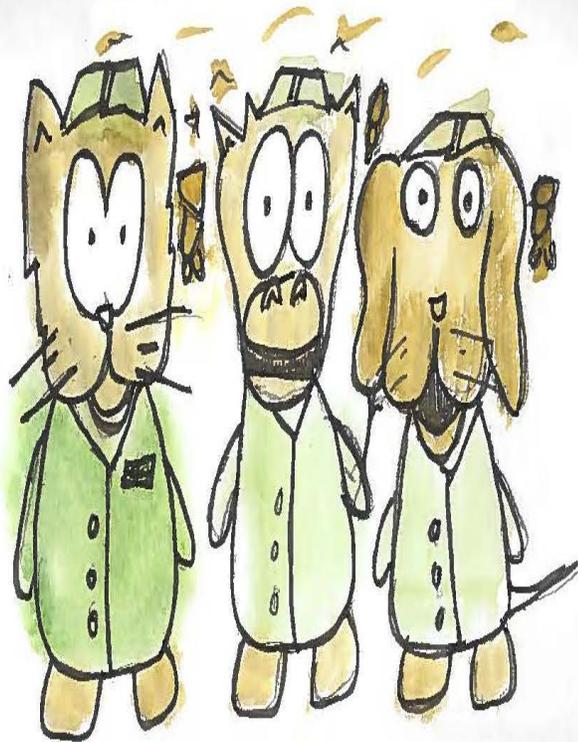
Troops! Now is the time!
Colonel Slytooth and the
Foxy Confederacy have advanced.
We **must** defeat him to return
order to our great nation.
We **must** bring victory to
ensure the equal treatment
of Lemmings as our brothers
and sisters in this great
Fuzzy
Nation!



Are

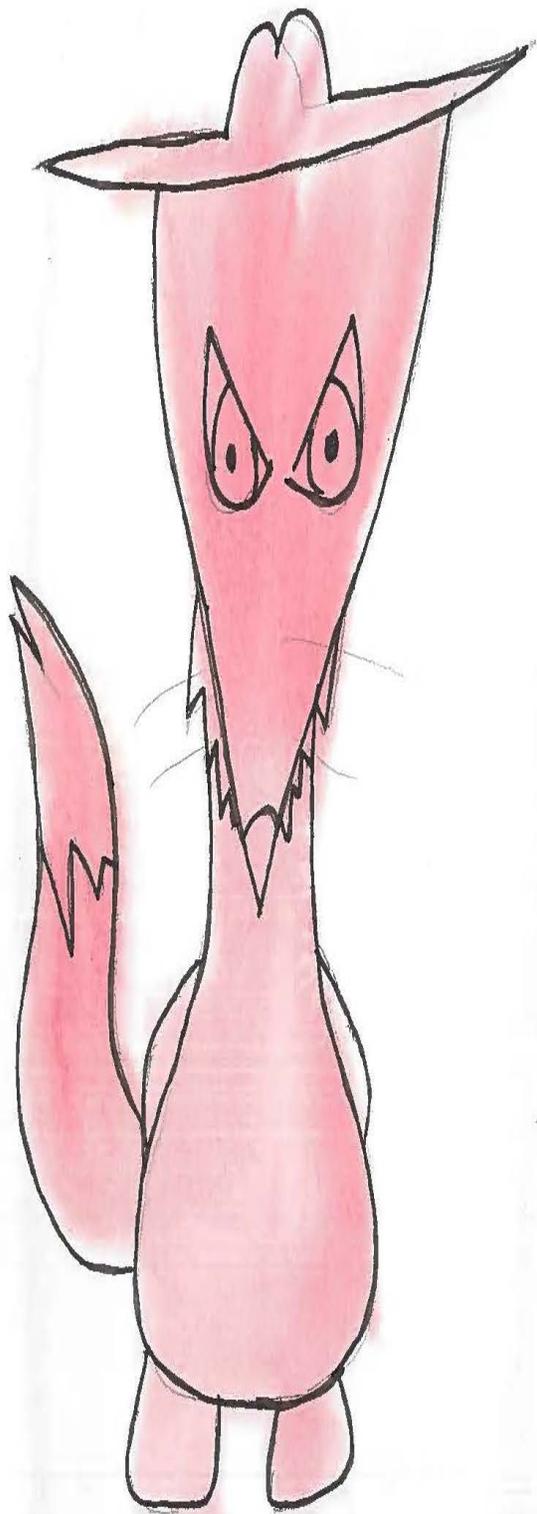
You

With me???



Chirp
chirp



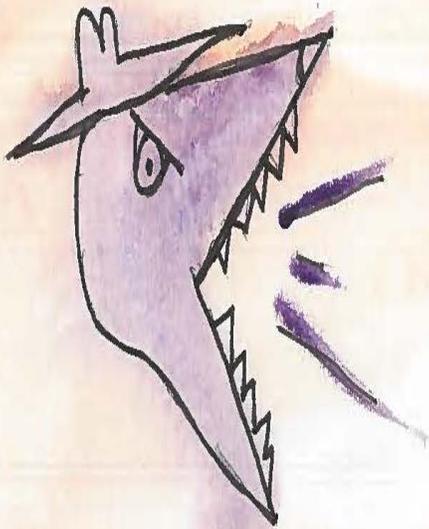
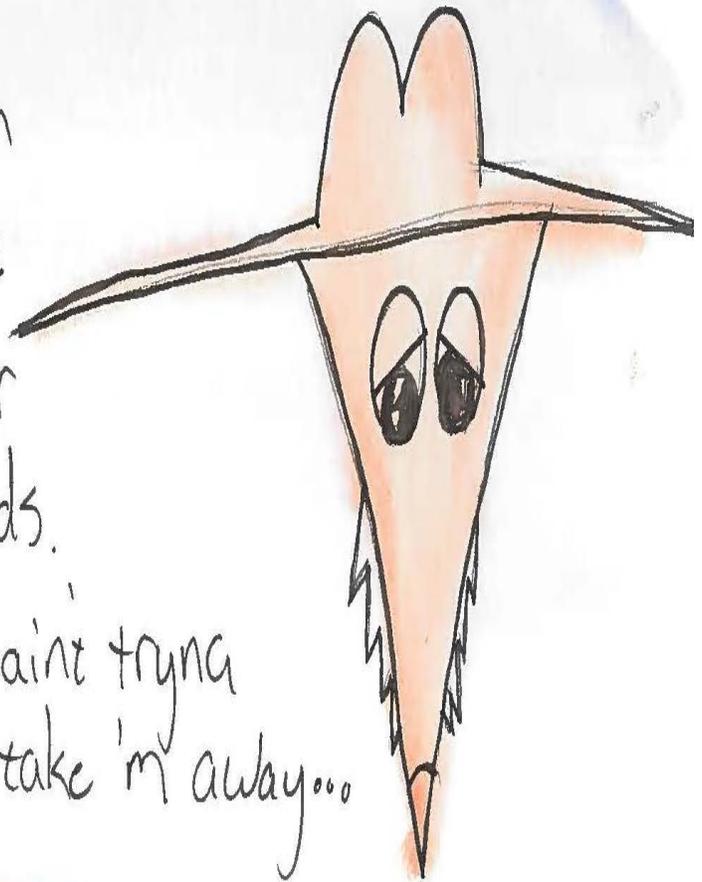


Well, well
Waaayall.
Whatta we got here?
You cute little critters
Wouldn't be tryna
Stop all muh fun,
nowooo

would ya?

Us poor little Foxen
wouldn't hardly make
it a day without our
little demming friends.

You aint tryna
take 'm away...

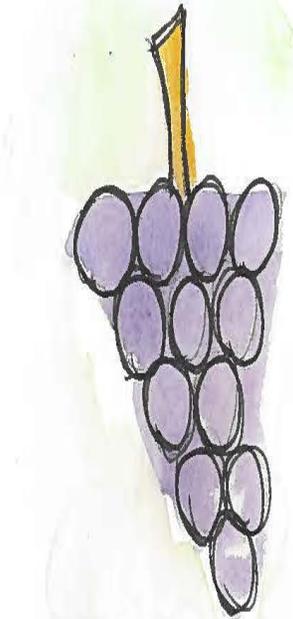
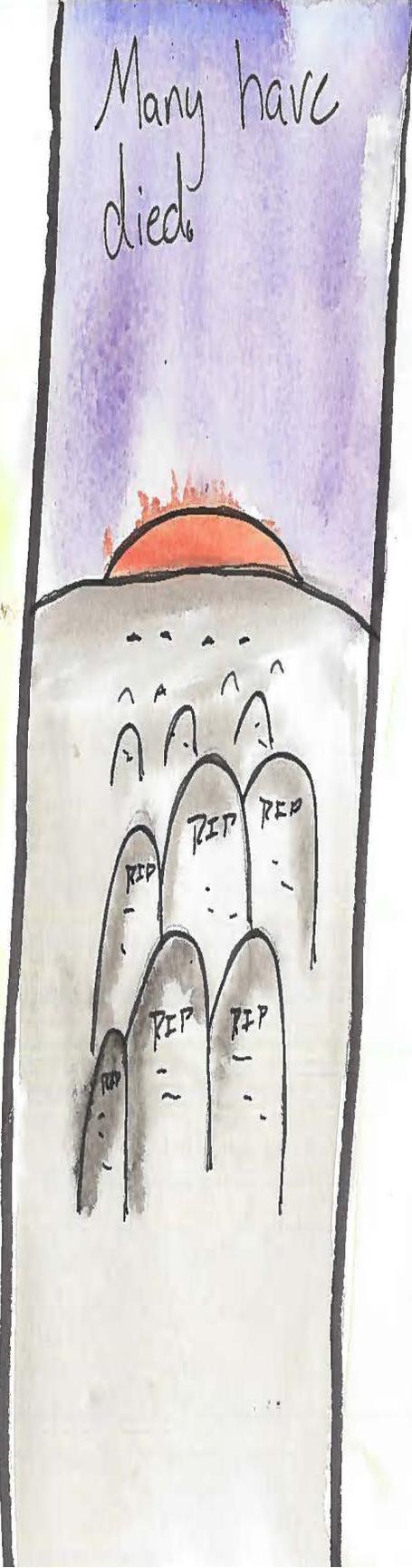


Are ya??

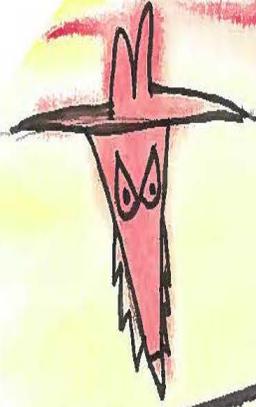




You force them
to work for
you. You pay
them nothing.
You barely feed
them.

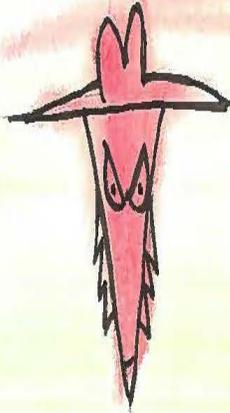


Just for
your precious
grapes.



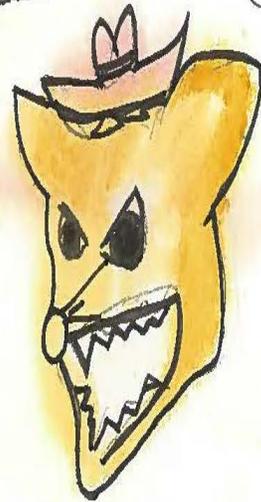
You best hush yer mouth,
Allibaster.

The name is
Buster.

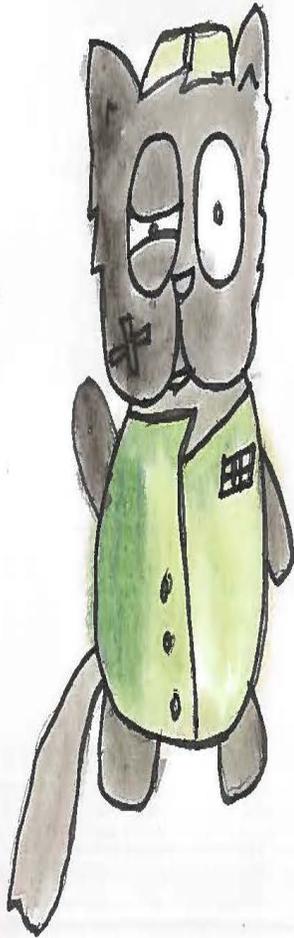


AAAallibasterrrr!

Attack!!

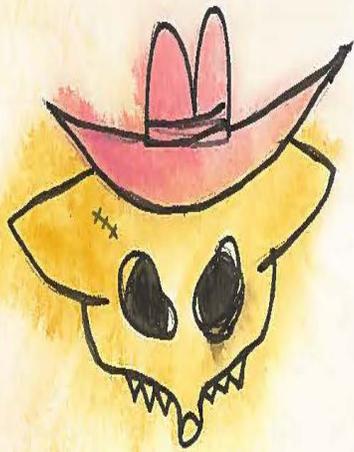






General Buster!
We are no match
for Colonel Slytooth.
He is killing us.

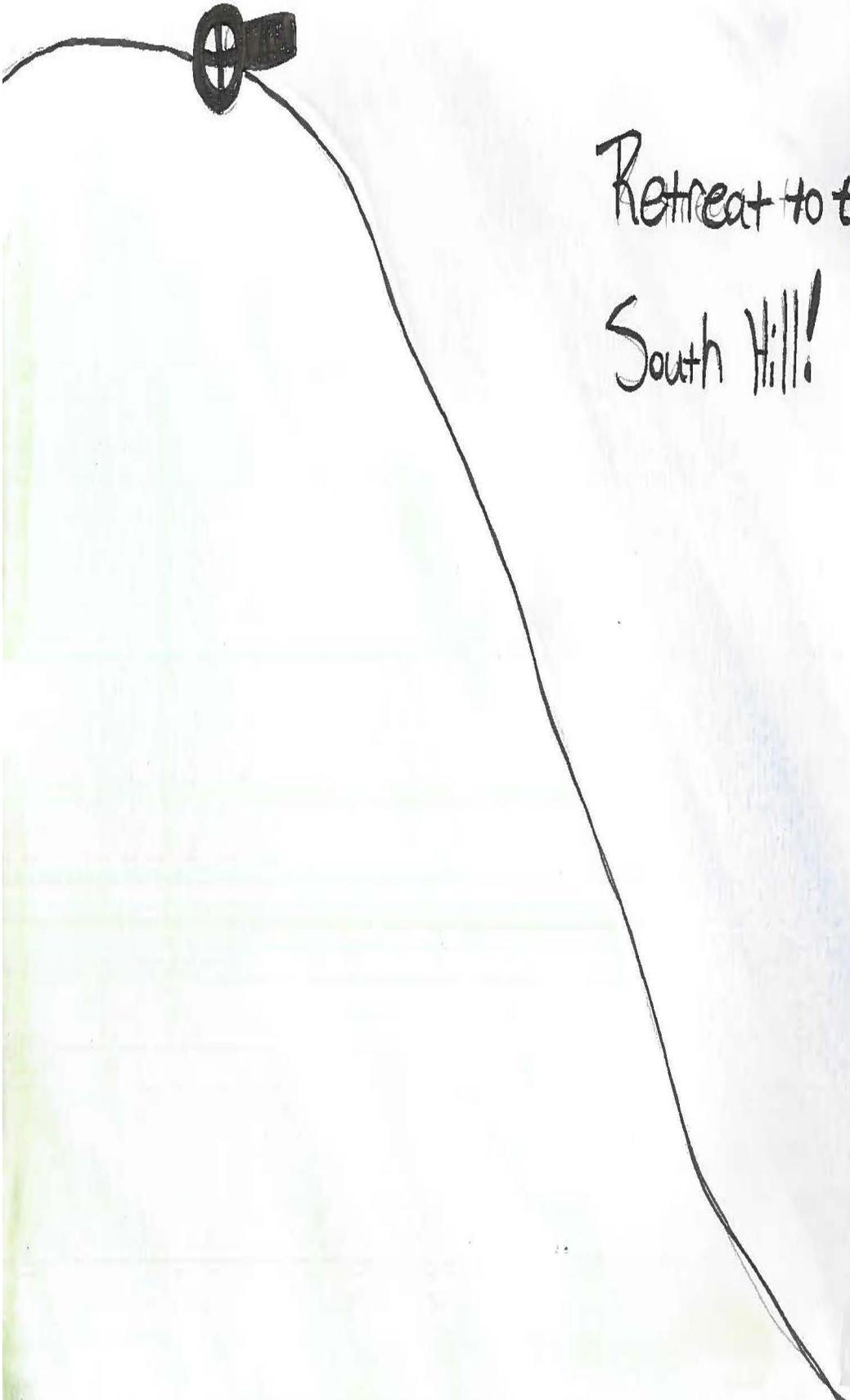
Shall we surrender?



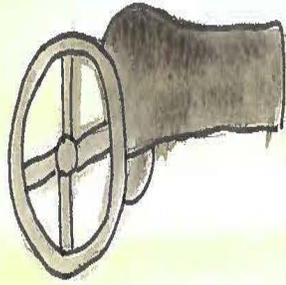
And let down
our Lemming
brothers and sisters?

NEVER!

I have a plan.



Retreat to the
South Hill!

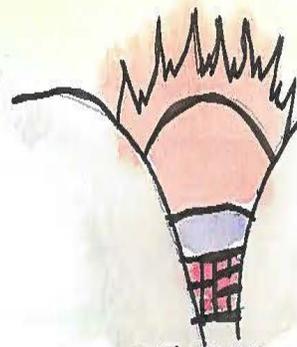


Aim the cannon 45
degrees west!

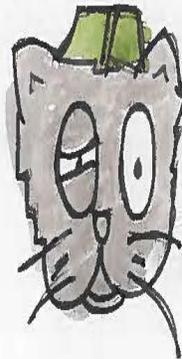
But General Slytooth is at 35
degrees east. 45 degrees west
is towards 900



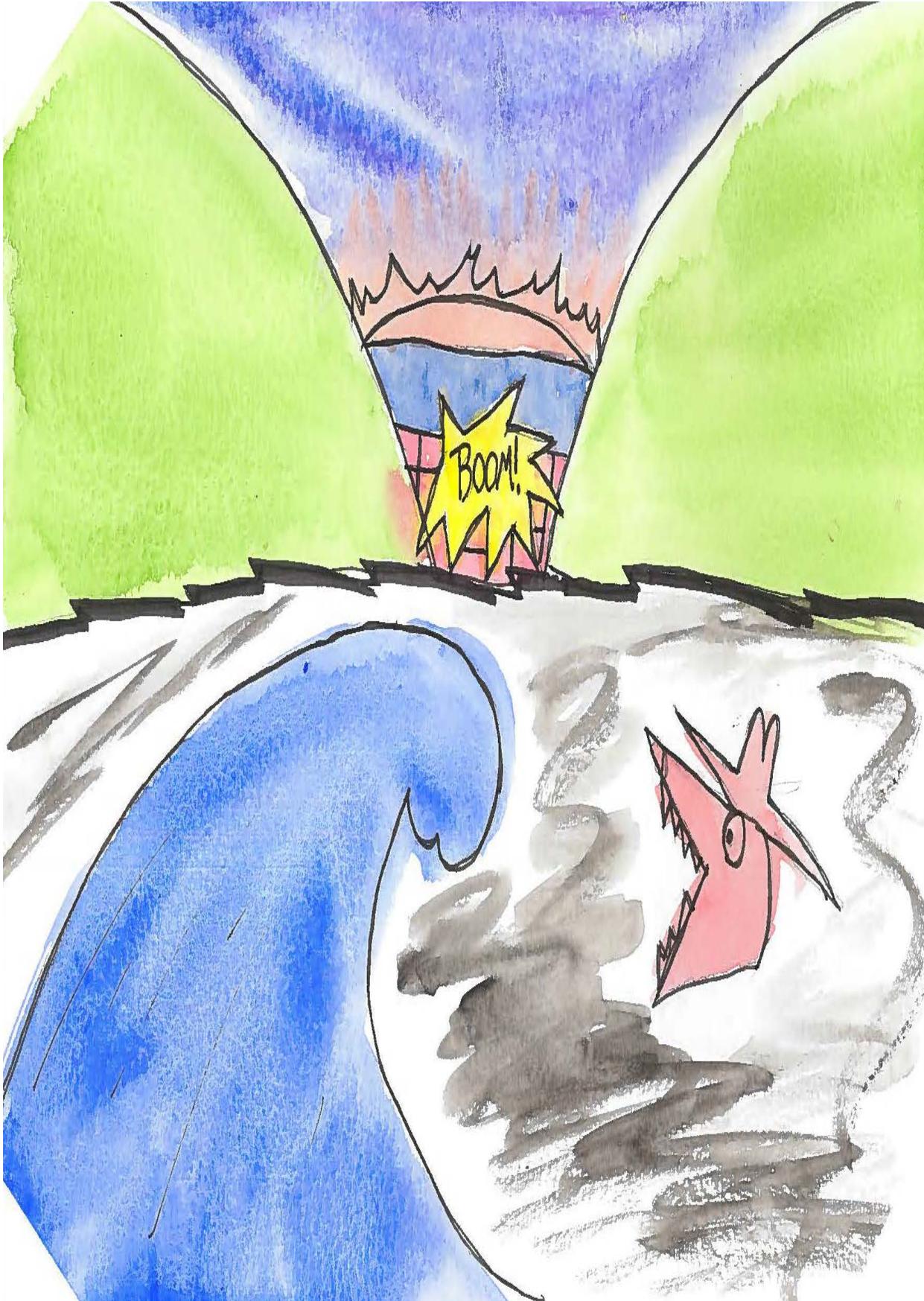
The dam!



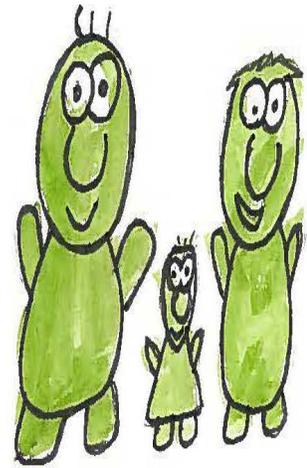
Absolutely brilliant,
General Buster!



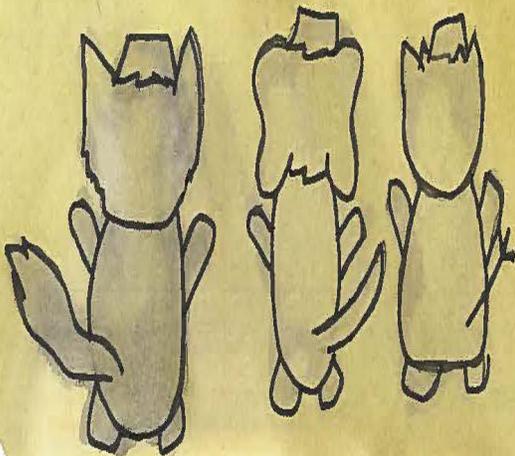




Hail General
Buster!



Hero to
Fuzzy Nation and
demmings
everywhere!







You Saw

NOTHING.



About the Contributors

Thomas Waylon Boyd is a thirty-year-old from Bodcaw, Arkansas. He is a high-school graduate who finds passion in arts and poetry. He hopes to become a college graduate, an artist of many skills, a successful business man, a family man, and a role model. He finds his inspiration in his family and friends.

Randall Cobb is a lifelong poet and A&M alumnus. He won the first poetry slam he competed in against the Hot Springs Poetry group. He is a long-standing member of what once was and now is again the Texarkana Poetry Society. Randall is a Texarkana native and believes that art of all kinds can make things change for the better. He would like to encourage all poets to find each other and get together to share their work.

Daniel Fansler graduated from Stephen F. Austin University in 2017 with a BFA in Creative Writing. With a passion for fantasy fiction, he hopes one day to have his entire saga of dwarven novels published and sitting (and being sold) in a bookstore. He is fascinated with astronomy and video games. His works have appeared in *HUMID* and *Red Mud Review*.

Amber Frady has recently enrolled in Texas A&M University-Texarkana's MA program in English. She is currently pursuing her graduate certificate in writing.

Krystal M. Heflin recently graduated from Stephen F. Austin State University. She received a BFA in Creative Writing and graduated *cum laude* with recognition as a University Scholar. Her previous publications include "Midnight Rails" (featured in SFA's undergraduate literary journal *HUMID*) and "28/7" (a winner in the Piney Dark Horror Contest).

Danny Henington is a forty-seven-year-old high-school graduate, a husband twenty-two years strong to his beautiful wife Patti, the father of three wonderful boys, and the grandfather of six beautiful grandchildren. He is a veteran truck driver by trade and an outdoorsman. He is currently graduating after earning a bachelor's degree in theology from Shalom University of Iowa. He was inspired to start writing poetry many years ago by his wife.

Joe Howard graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Manufacturing Technology in 1992 and Operations Management in 1993 from Arkansas State University. He was born and raised in Warren, Arkansas, and he is currently living in Texarkana, Texas. He is currently a GED tutor who enjoys helping other people.

Sharnell James recently transferred into Texas A&M University-Texarkana's undergraduate program in English. She is eagerly facing the new challenges that her program of study has offered her.

Weston Miller recently received his bachelor's degree from Texas A&M-Texarkana, where he is currently enrolled as a graduate student. Weston teaches sixth-grade math and serves as the pastor for young adults at his local church. When he is not spending time with his wife and two daughters, he loves to write, create, and produce music.

Cody Austin Minks is currently pursuing a degree in theology at Shalom Bible College and Seminary. He enjoys writing powerful, thought-provoking poetry in his free time.

Alethea Patterson lives in Maud, Texas. Her hobbies include photography and reading.

Javan Patterson is a graduate of Washington Academy Charter School in Texarkana, Arkansas. He is currently attending Texarkana College as an engineering major.

Macaïra Patterson is a graduate of Washington Academy Charter School in Texarkana, Arkansas, who is currently attending Southern Arkansas University and double-majoring in art and engineering. Her interests include drawing and renovation projects.

Christian Pippins is a graduate student in the English MA program at Texas A&M University-Texarkana. She is currently writing her thesis, which she hopes to defend in 2021.

Sydney Smith is a sophomore at Pleasant Grove High School in Texarkana. She has been writing for as long as she can remember and has always loved to create stories. What she loves more is seeing the feedback from others who read her stories. Most of her writing, which she posts using various forms of social media, has been freelance. In July of 2019, she completed a year's work of a fifty-two-chapter book. Writing is one of her motivations to move forward; it is what makes her happy.

Vanessa Winders is a student at Atlanta High School in Texas and has been writing since the fifth grade. Her favorite genres include horror, thriller, adventure, and comedy. Vanessa plans to pursue a career as a professional author or a professor of literature and history. She lives with her family and seven cats. (Her favorite cat is Kevin.)



Inverness
Bridge
Inverness Bridge
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