



genesis

literary & art magazine of IUPUI

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Letter from the Editors

In every issue since its inception in 1972, *genesis* has provided a window into the minds and hearts of its contributors. Flipping through its pages gives insight into what IUPUI students are thinking about, what is angering or exciting them, and what gives them hope.

This semester, we sent out a special call for submissions across the U.S.—a first for *genesis*—in search of writing and art inspired by the work of Ray Bradbury, the prolific American Midwestern-born author whose books such as *Fahrenheit 451* and *The Martian Chronicles* have captivated the imagination of people throughout the world. Bradbury’s work contains key elements that are relevant now more than ever: exploration of what we do not yet understand in the universe, pursuit of life’s wonders, advocacy for intellectual and creative freedom, and an overall love for the written word.

Appropriately enough for this special issue, the work in this collection (both from students and from contributors across the U.S.) also shares in this fascination with what it means to be human and to inhabit this world while also dreaming of other worlds. In Bradbury’s book *Zen in the Art of Writing*, he wrote, “We are cups, constantly and quietly being filled. The trick is knowing how to tip ourselves over and let the beautiful stuff out.” This collection of work reflects this idea. We each contain multitudes. We are filled with grief, anger, the desire to know the truth shielded from us, the love of those gone too soon, and questions about aging and how it affects our identity, self-image, and relationships with those closest to us. Out of that complex fullness, life spills over—terrible and wonderful—and gives way to something remarkable.

We would like to give special thanks to the Ray Bradbury Center team for collaborating with us on this project. We are so grateful for everyone who made this issue possible, from our staff to our faculty advisor, Sarah Layden, to the writers and artists who poured themselves out onto these pages. These contributors have all let some beautiful things out. We are honored to be the ones who collect and present them to you.

Shannon Kucaj and Monica Simmons

Managing Editors

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Philanthropy

Kayla McVeigh

This is how you see the forms and know they are flat. Do they seem to take the shape of man? Pale and tall, dressed for the ritz. They dazzle you.

This is how you see the shadows and know there is a fire. An amber glow from rising flames. There is no scent of cedar or smokey bonfire. When you get too close it smells of fumes. This fire is stoked from the bones of strangers, somewhere halfway around the world. All for your benefit.

This is how you break the chains you called your own. For the first time you see the damage to your ankles, black and blue from tightly clasped shackles. This is how you walk away from the others you were once in agreement with. Here the cave is cold, but it is better to freeze than to burn your flesh blindly. They call out to you. “Generous donation! Quality of life! Humanitarian!” Do you hear your own words leaving their mouths? They are shouting and shouting, but their chains stay locked. Why celebrate them for giving back a mere fraction of what they stole? It’s a drop of blood as a tax for exploiting human life. This is clear to you now. These men shit in the place where they eat.

The cave floor glimmers with scatterings of platinum, gold, rhodium, and silver. Whose fingernails split and sweat poured to produce these? Moving through the passages you find a gallery. This chamber preserves the arts. Here they throw lavish fund-raising events as an act of private initiative. Is the red carpet underneath your bare feet flowing? They herd and corral musicians while the ticket holders applaud. Poets slip through the cracks, the fractures, and the breaks of the cave walls, only to return with eulogies for the last trees. How sorry they are. In their words, the pain is authentic, which is why it fetches such a high price. You bow your head as you pass under stalactites dripping with crude oil. You feel sick. You want to close your eyes, but you know there is more to life than shadows.

This is how you refuse to turn away. They manufacture their comfort in green bottles. A familiar bitter-sweet black licorice tang. You keep your mind clear and weep.

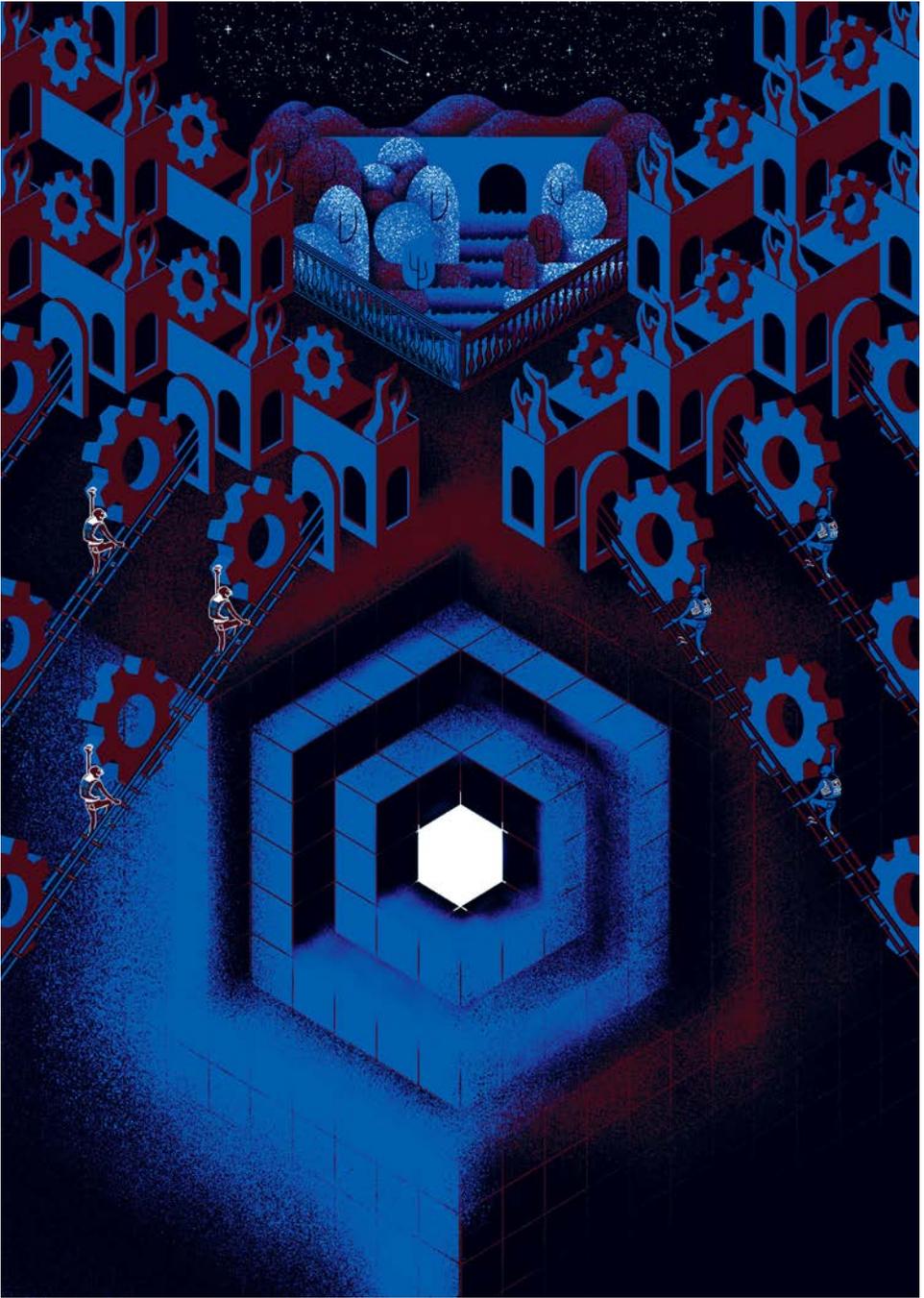
This is how you grow the human nature philanthropists only pretend to have. This is how you explore the depths of the cave but still feel the warmth from the surface above. Stretching up you can almost reach the gemstones they used to build a ceiling. Quit reaching.

This is how you leave the flames and search for the sun. Crawl through the mouth of this cave.

This is how you leave the same way you started off in this life. On all fours, humbled and crying as true light floods your retinas and burns your eyes.

This is what you do once you reach the sun. Leave the cave, but don’t ask them to.

This is how you won’t let them kill you.



Liminal

Kyle Battin

Digital; 2700 x 3600 pixels

Desecrating the Giants' Corpse

Ben Grimes

Indiana is a state molded by glaciers. Even in the south, where the great ice giants could not reach, their melted waters carved the landscape. Before the loggers and industry barreled through, the glaciers had created a territory with millions of acres of swamp. A fourth of the land that would be dubbed “Indiana” was bogs, fens, marshes, wet prairies—swamp. And the swamp would resist that human domination as much as a landscape can, using malaria, sinkholes, impossible farming conditions, and providing no usable waterways for boats. But the land fell. It was drained, paved, and made to fit the new human mold.

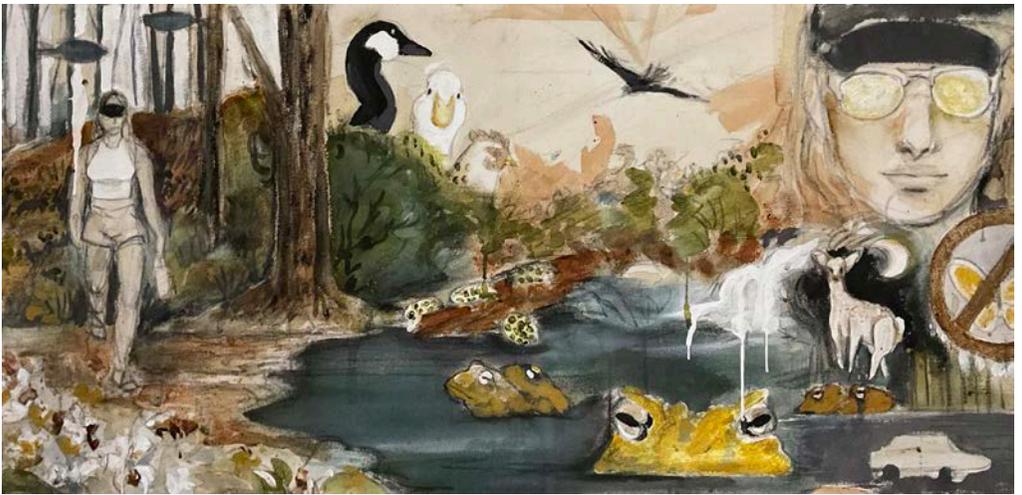
In the midst of this defiant act of avarice emerged the preeminent America writer of her time: Gene Stratton-Porter. The early 1900s were the end of westward expansion. Apparently, everything had been claimed. Yet 13,000 acres of swamp had remained unsullied in Indiana. This was called the Limberlost and it was Stratton-Porter’s home, the basis for her scientific writing, and the setting for her most successful bestselling novels. nIndiana had somehow kept the will of its glacial creators alive this long, and Stratton-Porter thrived in its murky wilderness. From 1895 to 1913 she lived in the swamp. Until it was gone.

Gene had married a man named Charles Porter, a druggist by trade, and an enterprising mogul by deed. It was not long before he found oil in his wife’s beloved Limberlost. Gene was an environmentalist, preaching against oil drilling, while her husband owned and operated oil rigs in what was essentially her backyard. The final days of the Limberlost were depressing for the author. She eventually left, when it was clear there was nothing left. How did she reconcile this? Was it greed? Stratton-Porter was already a wealthy woman—her books sold millions. Was it love for the man who exploited the land that had brought her so much joy and success? Hypocrite though she was, her hand in the destruction of the massive swamp speaks to some aspect of “human nature.” Whether love or greed or something even less noble, it seems we have an endless capacity for destruction. With it comes little foresight. We should fear the future much more.

Fort Wayne, Indiana was wracked by devastating flooding twice, once in 1913, and again in 1982. Martial law was declared in 1913, and both times it cost thousands of people their homes and did millions in damage. 1913 was the same year the last of the Limberlost was drained, thus losing a massive part of the local watershed and a vital part of flood management for the city of Fort Wayne, since the swamp was in the county just south of Fort Wayne. The dead swamp’s reverberations were felt again in 1982 and continue to haunt the entire state.

Does this story mean anything to us 21st Century layfolk who have never sold a bestseller and never lived in a swamp? We could be living in a swamp. Maybe we should be living in a swamp. Maybe if one turn-of-the-century celebrity held those around her to the same standards she espoused, we would be

living in a swamp. We can try to make it a swamp again, if for no other reason than to avoid the devastating impacts of our own hubris. It seems we are the great formative giants of our own era, and what we've wrought is not life. Perhaps that can change, or perhaps the movement of the arctic palms of our glacial predecessors can never be replicated. Maybe we just have to cling to what's left and try not to drown.



Autumn Adventures 2021

Alexandra Napers

Natural paint on canvas; 38" x 18"

Self-portrait in a thunderstorm

Ashley Wilson

The rain patters against my flesh,
The sideways slant creating a curtain
against the blackness.
I relish in the feeling as it rolls down my skin,
Creating rivulets on my cheeks.
I watch in wonder as lightning strikes,
A mere mile from where I stand,
Ensnared by the thin glass of my balcony
And no more.
Seconds later comes the thunder,
Roaring through the sky
Like a beast who missed a few meals.

I want the rain to consume me,
Soaking through my clothes,
Skin and bones,
Ravaging my body
Until there is nothing left.

Until the scent
Of the rain wafting up from the cement underneath my feet
Becomes my new favorite perfume.
Until I become the lightning,
A brilliant spectacle
Which lights up the dark.
Until I feel the thunder,
As it permeates my soul

And swallows me whole.



Major Depressive Disorder

Jasmine Bailey

Digital; 9" x 12"

the patience of grief

Lio Patrick

When I was fourteen, my uncle Bear was killed by his friend, a man I never met, in a drug dispute.

I am fortunate enough to say it was my first encounter with death. I didn't know what to do, how to understand. I didn't think it was real at all. He was not dead. For long after the funeral, I did not believe in death. I absolutely did not believe that anyone could die.

My uncle was twenty-one. I have officially lived longer than him. A few years ago, before I turned twenty-one, I began to think a lot more about his funeral, as if it had finally dawned on me. While some lighter feelings float, grief settles at the bottom. Details washed back up after so long in the deep: conversations, people laughing and crying at the same time, my suit-adorned father, who did not speak the entire day, and whom I had not lived with for at least six years. With deep embarrassment, I recalled the pair of funeral home workers staring at me as I had a panic attack on the bench next to the front door. I'd written a melodramatic poem that I wanted to put in his casket, but had lost my nerve and asked my mother to place it inside instead. I couldn't look at him, and when I did I couldn't see him. After they closed the casket, we were given permanent markers to write final farewells across the wood. Now I can appreciate the sentiment. Back then all I could think about was my proximity to a dead man. My mind blanked and I spelled "remember" wrong. Somewhere in the ground, there is a wooden box with the word "rember" shakily crossed out.

It was funny, and yes, I do mean that kind of funny. Before we drove to the funeral home, Bear's father kept telling jokes and yelling obscenities. There was cake, which was called "better than sex," but which my pious aunt rebranded "better than video games" for my brothers and me. In the funeral home, we sat next to one of our favorite cousins as he related sensational stories about his brother. We all saw so little of each other. We celebrated way before we cried.

Only a few months before, when one cousin told a different uncle that he was her favorite, he thanked her but said, "It's not like I have much competition. I mean, *Bear*?" At the funeral, he was a pallbearer, the first to grab the box, one of the few who understood just how much it weighed.

What I mean to say is that we never know who it will be, and when. This is a reminder, however insufficient the words are at reaching over a wall of incommunicable feeling.

I don't know at what point I knew that Bear was dead. It wasn't when I felt the first step down into panic as I approached a full coffin, an open coffin, and was not able to see or breathe. It wasn't as his brothers lowered him into the ground, as his sister said with visible breath, "Of course it's only when we're out-

side freezing that I start crying.” It took years of not seeing him at holidays and of hearing about what it would be like if he were there. During some of those years I wanted to be like him, even though I still didn’t altogether comprehend what that meant. I never spoke a word to any of my family about it. I don’t know how many of them felt it too. We never know.

My immediate family stopped going to see most of Bear’s side of the family years ago, for various reasons. Other people have been born, others have gotten hurt or sick, others too have gone away forever. There are so many things and so many people to think about. I can’t regret the fact that I don’t remember them all.

The Confessional

Danielle Harrell

My heart beat pulses
through my twitching fingers,
the folded paper
gaining more creases
in my sweaty hands.

A shaky inhale and a breath,
my voice mumbles out,
“Forgive me, Father,
for I have sinned.
It has been four months
since my last confession.”

Wood whines beneath
the priest’s shifting shoes.
The walls let out a symphony
of bending and cracking,
closing in on all sides
of the closet-like room.

Paper crinkles hastily
as I open my scrawled list.
My shaking thumb
leads the way,
leaving a trail of indents
as evidence of my faults
and failures.

My quavering voice follows
until my thumb
finishes its descent,
and all that is left is
my heart’s incessant pounding,
and the splintering of the walls.

I give myself one breath. Two.
I finally lift my gaze
to meet his gray eyes,
creased by a gentle smile.

The priest lifts a steady hand
toward the crown of my head,
and absolves me
from all of my sin,
through the Father, the Son,
and the Holy Spirit,
and lets me go in peace.

The walls are silenced
as I slowly begin to stand,
and they do not utter a word
as my hands grip that paper
and tear it into shreds.



Sins of Daughters

Kira Humes

Graphite on an illustration board in a crosshatch style; 15" x 20"

The Problem with Funeral Plants

Kim Kile

I have a peace lily in my dining room,
a reminder that you left too soon
and I'm still here trying
to keep this damn plant alive.
I see it every day—the drooping, withering leaves,
the brown, crispy ones peeking from beneath.
I can't make myself give it water,
to quench its soil and be the hero daughter—
the one who keeps your memory alive
by caring, watering, and fertilizing
a plant while you nourish a strip of grass
in a cemetery too far away from my grasp.

Poppies

Christopher Cassetty

Bloody constellations—and patterns—
lay beneath my woeful nepenthe,
strewn by fate across my bed, and floor,
where they dry and wither, and turn
brown, almost—almost as if to say
no joy may last longer than it takes
to feel satisfied, and I'm not satisfied.
I watch these stars stir amidst the
bleakness of dried tears, and virgin
stars join, occasionally, as old ones are
blown away like dust when they grow too
old to keep themselves whole, and when
will I join their fate? not long, not long,
I watch her droop, as if there is no amount
of love and care that could be given to
force these dying cells awake—and I weep;
I weep at my bedside while these stars
burn my feet, and in some ebbing measure
of hope—for the chance that a tear will
bless this earth and heal my burns—I will
not surcease. The curtains sough through
open windows, and feels my grieving face
the virility of Spring—and I see through
watery eyes my nepenthe drowned, and
only then do I realize that it is possible
to love something too—too much.

Slipping Away: Frank and Mattie

Jane Bowman

Mattie sits in a rocker knitting while Frank leans back in his old Lazyboy recliner and stares through glazed eyes at a 60-inch HDTV standing about five feet in front of them. Now overpowering the small living room in their small bungalow, the TV was a gift from the kids.

Frank sits up to get a closer look at the TV. He looks confused, but then a light seems to come on in his eyes.

“I know how this show ends. That guy there, he gets killed—shot, I think. Have we seen this before?” says Frank.

“Yes, Frank,” says Mattie. “You know these are summer reruns.” Mattie doesn’t lift her head from her knitting.

“Well, when the he...um heck did that happen?” Frank frowns and slides a sly look at his wife of 55 years.

“Frank, you’re doing better, but that swear jar is going to fill up fast if you keep slipping. It’s May, Frank. The TV season is over sometime in March or early April.” Mattie lifts the tiny jacket and counts rows of knitting. Sure enough, on TV, “that guy” gets shot and apparently “bites the dust.” He lies there and doesn’t seem to be breathing.

“Well, I’m going to bed. Are you coming?” Frank gets up and walks to the front door and opens it.

“Frank, that’s the front door,” says Mattie and points to the stairs.

“Oh yeah,” chuckles Frank and climbs to the landing. He pauses, looks at Mattie, and says, “I’m going to bed. Are you coming?”

“I’d like to finish this sleeve,” says Mattie as she holds up the small garment. “It’s for Elyse’s baby.”

“Who’s Elyse?”

“She’s Naomi’s daughter, she’s having a baby.”

“Who’s Naomi?”

“She’s your sister, Frank?”

“Naomi’s having a baby?”

“No, Frank, Naomi’s daughter, Elyse. It’s her first, and she’s not that young. I think she may be 42.”

Frank looks up the stairs. “I’m going to bed. You coming?”

“Well, I need to water Snuffy.” She leans down to scratch the head of Snuffy, a little Yorkshire Terrier sitting beside her rocker.

“Damned worthless dog,” grumbles Frank.

“Frank Johnson, that’s a dollar in the swear jar. And add 50 cents for the almost-swear earlier.”

Frank climbs back down and digs in his pocket for money. “What’s this jar for?”

“We’re supposed to go to Hawaii for our 60th wedding anniversary.”

“Gonna need more than this jar of money.”

“Well, I have faith in you, Frank. And at least, I’ll get to go.”

“You’d go without me?”

Mattie gives him a rueful look over the top of her glasses.

Frank strolls to the stairs and looks up them. He seems to be thinking very hard, and then says, “I’m going to bed. Are you coming?” He pauses.

“Your name’s Mattie? What’s that stand for?”

“It stands for Matilda.”

“And we’re married? How’d that start?”

“Well, I’d say in the back seat of Bill Fuller’s ’49 Mercury.”

“Old Bill, wonder where he is now?”

“Believe he’s been gone about 30 years now.”

“Where’d he go?”

“Now that’s a good question.”

“He was a he...heck of a guy.”

“Frank, the swear jar! No, that can wait.” Mattie sighs and looks back at her knitting.

Frank stands on the landing looking at his feet. “I’m going to bed. Are you coming?”

Mattie puts down her knitting; turns off the lamp and the TV. The room turns inky dark.

“Turn on the stairs’ light. It’s right behind you.”

“Where are you?” Frank’s voice is querulous.

“Right behind you, Frank. Turn on the light.” She hugs Frank and gently pushes him up the stairs.

Snuffy jumps onto the rocker and settles down in Mattie’s warm spot.

Sandstone

Kayla McVeigh

An index finger meeting the earth, rolling, and swirling. Our wrists draw lines in the sand. Dreaming of the pressure, the pain that shapes it into something crystalline and desired. We teach the star-struck to manifest their love through the rose quartz of this pressed sand. The forceful birth of crystal.

I'm supposed to hate the lines forming at the peeked corners of my eyes and the ones drawing down from the edges of my lips, left from a life of dynamic expression.

I'm supposed to hate the cushioned layer my body has wrapped around itself to hug my frame. Keeping my bones safe and everything in between. The runoff of blood traveling through veins, dendritic or braided, rushing to press rose coloration into the skin and soft flesh. I'm supposed to hate this softening, it opposes the tightness and resistance I'm told to crave.

I see grace in the strands of silver hair. Secrets in the folds of my skin.

My body carries fragments of history and my lifetime of loving awareness.

I do not find the *rigid stiffness* of *resistance* beautiful.

I find beauty in the softened hearts of those moved by migrating wings. In the longing for the shoreline. I see it in my oval shape complexion, spun in the likeness of my mother. I have seen her bloodied by the sickly thin hands of those starved, seeking beauty in reshaping her form.

I find beauty in the padding that cradles bone and frames the palms of my hands, a lingering reminder of soft baby pink. Plush and rose-kissed, cushioned from cruel pressures placed on matured bodies. They forget how no one thinks to correct the perfection of an infant while they attack the loveliness of a woman, a being. A being tangled in English ivy, roots binding her together as they twist through her fractures. A being called to life through moving bodies of water.

Deep, blue to black, alive.

I'm supposed to scrub away the earth from my skin, the very clay from which I was made. My shape, thrown from between the joining palms of my parents. Tangled, in a moment, their bodies brought together as the hands of Christ creating life through prayer.

If it is my nature to be sandstone then I do not wish to harden so that I fight the weathering that is just as much a part of my being as any other point in my life, as any other part of my body.

Perhaps I will meet with wandering streams where I will dissolve down to soft silty earth.

Mixing with the stirring current, breathing, alive.

I would be just as beautiful.



The Sun

Veronica Breach

Digital; 8.6" x 4.7"

Making Arrangements

Kayla McVeigh

You can take my body and have it bound in strips of linen
You can dye the strips with turmeric or beet juice
Do this so it will be vibrant and uplifting
Allow the color to invite you to sit with me
To whisper what you can barely speak

and then

I'd like to take rest in the earth
To retire my bones in soil
To be composted down
You know for me there would be no greater ceremony
Do this to help return what I have borrowed in this life
Allow me to spark life like whale fall
Know better than to think these wishes speak against my contentment with life
You know my joy in all phases
You know my being present is what moves me to make these arrangements
To be here, but taking note of each rotation around the sun
See every stage as intentional
Shouldn't this include our most transparent surprise
The flesh of my body and feelings of my experiences are temporary
But my continuation will be endless

Dirt Town

Truitt Anweiler

My siblings and I had already turned my mom's garden into a dinosaur excavation site, so when it changed again, my parents were prepped in a way, but we children weren't in the slightest. It seemed to happen overnight in the mind of a child. One day it wasn't there, and the next day it materialized before us.

I remember my siblings shrieking and squealing with excitement as I waddled out. As the piercing voices reverberated in my eardrums, they beckoned and pushed me out into our yard. Obliviously, I was ready for one of our adventures outside. I was ready to take up our stick swords and swashbuckle on our familiar island of grass surrounded by seas of wisping corn and country roads.

My parents watched through the kitchen window as their children braved the Midwestern yard on the journey there. Waving from the window, they knew that the adventure was set to begin and that we would not return for some time.

I could feel the sockets of my arms pulling as my sister, Carolotta, dragged me past our playset. My older brothers, Gabe and Nate, continued to bicker and chatter as I desperately squealed for answers. Hands gripped under my armpits and swung me forward like a puppet being staged up front. That's when I saw it towering over all of us.

It stood taller than our house, piling what seemed like miles into the air. This, this mound of dirt, was our new world. The earthy scent wafted all around us as it radiated from the deep brown mass. A cool draft danced off the edge of the mound. It offered a natural comfort on a sweltering day. It smelt like a fresh rain even as the ocean blue sky and sun bore down on us.

My parents didn't realize, when they were constructing an addition to the house, that under the ground of that old yard laid something far better than any tile room or porch. They could have dug up a new mansion to live in, and we still would have been more enthralled by the mound of dirt they left in our yard. What was once my mother's garden, then our excavation site, was now our very own mountain!

Beams of summer sun flooded into our eyes as we attempted to gaze upward to see it towering over our small bodies. Awestruck, I watch as my sister and brothers made the tentative first barefooted imprints onto the freshly pulled dirt. I took a breath, letting my lungs remain full with a puffed up toddler chest, and followed after. It felt like we were stepping onto the moon. Our feet sank as dirt wrapped around our heels. The chilled soil was foreign territory. We were stunned, nervous even, and yet boisterous glee followed. We raced to the top, and clumps of dirt flew through the air as our hands and feet dug deep with every step. I reached the summit shortly after the rest, smudging all the dirt they kicked into my face till it looked like I had kissed the dirt rather than climbed it. I turned

to face the yard and we could see everything. We could see all the possibilities from this mountaintop. It was anything we wanted it to be.

This dirt took us to faraway lands and shifted our world into something entirely different. With every different world we visited, the dirt changed, and we changed with it. We were kings. We were outlaws. We were superheroes. We were soldiers. We were builders. We were anything we needed to be, because we could be, and there was unadulterated freedom in that. Worlds and stories were crafted by simply beginning to climb.

In my mind, I never questioned whether the dirt would go anywhere. I had assumed it would eternally sit in the yard and forever be an escape from reality for my siblings and me. I know now that my parents hadn't originally planned on keeping it, but it was after day after day seeing us trail out and climb up that mound together that they changed their minds. They saw their oldest, Carolotta, helping pull up the youngest. They saw their sons Gabe and Nate wide-mouthed in laughter rather than insults. Inside the house things would turn sour fast, but out there it was different.

We spent countless days outside on top of that dirt. We would climb each day to find new stories. Where others saw a chore of digging holes, we found joy. Tunnels, caves, beds, castles, and even thrones that looked oddly closer to toilets were shaped. We all had nearly permanent dirt crescents resting under our fingernails. Over time, the name *Dirt Town* was coined. It was our own sanctuary; no one else had anything quite like this.

It seemed nothing stopped us from finding joy there. On sunny days, our bony hands would white-knuckle around a branch as we charged into battle. Our arms and legs would ferociously pump through the humid air as our army would press up towards the peak of *Dirt Town*. Even on rainy days, we found a way to enjoy it. We had dug our own holes in the top of *Dirt Town*, then we waited. The gray sky swirled into a deep, endless blue. The wind whistled through ears as a heavy drop of water plinked against my forehead.

Downpour ensued. Gabe gleefully hollered, squinting into the sky as each of our personal dirt bathtubs began to fill past our legs. We jumped from hole to hole, splashing each other, trying to catch our fleeting breath that left with every belly laugh. The mud filled each hole till the murky water bounced and rippled with every drop of rain. I remember plunging my head under, baptizing myself into the dirt. Sitting under the water, I could still hear Nate and Gabe, even through the pitter patter of rain. Joyous yelps and cackles pierced through water, dirt, all of it. *Dirt Town* made those moments louder than any bickering.

The wind then began to dry out the mud as it caked around our bodies and tightened up. The dirt cracked and split, leaving scale-like patterns riddled across our bodies. Why my parents let us take mud baths is beyond me. Maybe it was for the laughs they got as we comically shivered under the garden hose, cleaning us off with icy water drawing any breath out of our small lungs.

We had years going up and down that dirt. The worms got to know us on a personal level as we made our way out as frequently as possible. The soil packed down and was much lighter than before. The lumber-like brown was more desert-like, harsher. Time passed; Dirt Town eroded a bit after Carolotta eventually stopped adventuring out with us. Our mountain was a bit smaller now. The dirt was dryer, much tighter-packed into the ground around it. Dirt Town had changed, and so did we. My younger sister Mei had begun to journey out with us, and new games began!

There were days we dug for hours, building up our ever-changing world. Gabe led us on adventures fending off invaders from attacking Dirt Town. We'd stand as mightily as our kiddish builds could muster. "Charge!" Gabe would call out as we'd echo in suit. Stick sword in hand, we would charge down the mound, kicking clouds of dust high into the air behind us. Gabe was invigorated to keep playing, and it felt as if it would never end, but as we grew, he spent less and less time there. He then stopped all together. Nate loved it but didn't have the same zeal Gabe shared to fight for it; he pulled away soon after that.

The dirt was dry and cracked, but our much smaller group would venture out now and again. Our shoes would scrape and scratch against the beat-down ground, it seemed our shovels even had a hard time breaking it. The blade of the shovel found more rocks than dirt as metallic clangs rang out. Dust would kick up in the air and you could see it swept off into the yard aimlessly. Our time became dwindled out there. Slender weeds twisted through the breaks in the ground where footprints used to be; my siblings and I planted our feet elsewhere. Slowly, one by one, they left.

I later stepped outside and strolled towards the backyard. It was a walk I remember taking more time in younger days. There was no mass in the sky. I didn't have to look up at all anymore—it had been packed level with the rest of the yard surrounding it. Walking towards Dirt Town, it was harder to discern where grass gave way to our old escape. The lush grass and thick weeds hugged each other so tightly it was a struggle to see if any dirt was even left.

I remembered the eternal summer days spent with each other. Sweat beads would roll off our smudged faces, taking any worries racing away with them. My siblings and I would create worlds from literal dirt, the same dirt that is packed away now. It sometimes felt like I saw my siblings about as easily as I could still see our old dirt, not very much. Yet even though we didn't get to see each other much, conversation would always find its way to Dirt Town. Mud baths, battles, tunnels—whatever it was, it was joyful. Time with my siblings is more limited than ever. The pestering weeds of life have overgrown for each of us in different ways. But Dirt Town was a place where none of that mattered. Underneath all the weeds, that dirt is still there.



Rainbow Fish

Danielle Harrell

Craft felt, fabric paint, and embroidery; 15.5" x 12.5"

Zapatos Nuevos

Nya A. Gaines

Monday

I twirled on my toes, watching the *folklórico* dress flutter upward like the colorful wings of a scarlet macaw. The vibrant dress stuck out among the neutral tones of the bedroom I shared with my older sister. In fact, it was the one of the only things that had more than two colors and wasn't colored either brown or beige, the other being the Mexican flag I had hung above the bed.

"How does it fit?" Irene asked.

"Is it supposed to be this long?" I responded. I hadn't hit my growth spurt yet, so at twelve I only stood at four foot two inches. The fabric trailed as long as a jaguar's tail, covering my feet. I was sure I would stumble while dancing.

Irene merely laughed. "It used to be mine, so of course it's a little big, but we can have Abuelita hem it for you."

After she unzipped the back, I shrugged the dress off. It pooled at my ankles in a heap of rainbow cloth. I put it back on the hanger and set it on the bed.

"How do your shoes fit?" my sister asked.

"Fine," I answered a bit too quickly. "They're old, but they work."

Irene frowned, but before she could comment on it, our two youngest siblings, Claudia and Fernando, burst into the room. While Irene tried to stop the argument between the two on whose turn it was to play with the train set, I made my escape by slipping out the door.

With the traditional folk dance celebration coming up, my poor *pies* ached more and more each day after twirling on them round and round like a carnival carousel. Our dance academy, *Ensembles Ballet Folklórico de San Francisco*, hosted the upcoming event. My older sister and I spent several hours each day learning the ballet-style dance with the other kids in our class. Our choreography was coming along smoothly for the most part. The little ones stumbled through the moves, but their cuteness would make the *abuelitas* and *tías* fawn and overlook their mistakes. My *abuelita* had always said that Fernando's round cheeks were so adorable that she could take a bite out of them. The viewers would be too focused on how cute the little children looked in their traditional dresses to worry about critiquing them too harshly. The most pressure fell on my big sister, Irene, and me.

The dance itself was quite difficult, with overly exaggerated movements that required perfection. Not only did the dance have crazy footwork, I had to fan my dress around in sync with the other girls. One mistake and I would look like a clumsy llama instead of a graceful ballerina. Through the dance, I was supposed to show how beautiful Mexican culture was. My biggest nightmare was making a fool

out of myself in front of others by making mistakes. It would make me look like a phony Latina who didn't know what she was doing.

I collapsed on the living room couch, glad to finally have my weight off my feet. "*Ay dios mio! Me duelen los pies!*" I complained. My feet were still swollen from practicing. The constant spinning and practice had worn a hole into my thin heels which were already a size too small. The sole had begun to split from the base, and it was only a matter of time before they fell apart completely. But, money was tight right now, so there was no hope to get a new pair. It would be greedy of me to ask.

"Oh, Araceli, *mija*," Mamá's voice came from the kitchen. I threw the couch blanket over my lap, hiding my feet, right as she entered the room. She still had on her work uniform: dirty baby blue scrubs with a permanent stain of what I could only assume is either vomit or coffee. Her name badge was still clipped on her breast pocket.

"Hi Mamá," I said. "How was work today?"

Mamá collapsed on the couch beside me, letting out a tired sigh. Her grays were starting to become more vivid along her hairline. Hints of wrinkles began to crease along her once ageless skin. She had been working a lot of extra overtime lately to pay for Papá's medical bills.

"Well, Señor Martínez wouldn't take his meds, because he thought I was *La Llorona* and Señor Castillo went on another tangent about how his wife left him for a Spanish matador. Let's also not forget that I had to translate for a new patient who didn't understand why her son's medical expenses were so high, since all the white people at my job are incompetent and didn't pass second year high school Spanish."

It was difficult to tell if she was trying to be sarcastic or funny. I bit back my laugh so that I wouldn't aggravate her even more. "So another typical day?" I asked.

"If by typical you mean *loco*, then yes," Mamá said. Her body slumped, the exhaustion finally catching her. She had never looked so worn down before. Between my parents, my mother was the energetic parent who always wore a bright smile. Every weekend, Mamá was the one at Fernando's soccer games, cheering him on despite the numerous times he scored on the wrong goal. Early Sunday mornings, she would style my sisters' and my wild hair, making it look neat and presentable for Jesus Christ. Her excellent cooking drew in people from each corner of the neighborhood. Although she complained about Tía Teresa's ill-mannered children most of the time, she loved having gatherings and was an excellent hostess. Back before work started to take up most of her time, Mamá hosted weekly cookouts, inviting most of the neighborhood, including people whom I never met.

Lately, her smile seemed more and more forced instead of genuine. She sometimes fell asleep on the couch still in her work clothes, forgetting to prepare dinner for her four hungry children and useless husband. The laundry would pile

and pile until I couldn't see the floor. Bacteria would make themselves at home in the unclean bathroom and the overflowing trash in the kitchen would burn my nostrils each time I passed by.

Irene took it upon herself, as the oldest, to do the household chores. I tried to convince her otherwise. Being the mother was not the job of a fifteen-year-old, but my sister dismissed me, always claiming that as the *hermana*, it was her responsibility to look out for her siblings. She knew enough recipes from Abuelita to make us *arroz* and *frijoles* for every meal. When Mamá did have a chance to make it to the grocery store, Irene would change up the menu and make *tamales* for special occasions, such as my birthday. It did get tiring eating the same meal, but I couldn't be picky. After all, what she cooked tended to be healthier and more filling than the small meals I ate at school. *Arroz* and *frijoles* tasted better than the greasy chicken nuggets and strange mashed potatoes with gravy my middle school usually served. It was almost a relief to come home to an authentic meal after long hours at school and an even longer dance practice.

Unfortunately, if Irene didn't run the house, no one would. Papá had suffered a stroke the year prior, so he had lost feeling in his left side, which happened to be his dominant. He went to physical therapy until insurance stopped paying for it. The little strength he regained wasn't enough to perform the laborious tasks of entry-level jobs for someone with no college degree required. He bounced from work to work, bringing in barely anything in each paycheck. What little change he made was spent on cigarettes and painkillers. I didn't hate him for having a stroke, but I did hate how he'd given up on trying to have a normal life. He was content letting his fifteen-year-old daughter play mom and letting his burnt-out wife pay the bills.

By now, Mamá'd fallen asleep on the couch. She was rigid when she slept, shoulders tense, body on edge. I took my blanket and carefully sprawled it across her. Mamá finally relaxed. I went to the kitchen where I saw Irene making dinner. Again, rice was in one of the pots, but a new scent filled my nose.

"Is that chicken?" I asked.

"No." A smile spread across Irene's face. I get a closer look at the skillet. "It's beef."

"Since when can we afford it?"

"Tío Miguel brought some by," Irene explained. I just nodded. Tío Miguel was Mamá's older brother. She was the youngest out of her three siblings, Tía Teresa being the middle child. Despite Mamá being the youngest, she was the most mature. Tío Miguel drank too much and Tía Teresa was the queen of gossip. Tío Miguel was my favorite, because he was a funny drunk who liked to bring up old drama that made his sister so mad that her veins began to pop. It was how Tía Teresa earned the nickname *yautía* for the way her veins looked like roots.

“He and Tía Rosa plan to come to the *baile* on Friday,” Irene said. My eyebrow poked up at the sudden information. Tío Miguel hated performances, always complaining about how they’re too long. At the same time, when fútbol season started, he and his buddies watched every three hour long game.

“Will Papá come too, or is he too busy bouncing from job to job that day?” I asked, not bothering to hide my dislike for my father. Irene frowned, disapprovingly.

She knew how I felt about our father. My relationship with him was already estranged before his stroke, but we only continued to drift further apart during his recovery. We had little in common, and there was no point in forcing awkward conversations. The last time I recalled having a full conversation with him was when I was ten and he asked me to get him a beer from the cooler. When I told him we were out, in a fit of rage, he threw coins at me and told me to run down to the market. He hadn’t realized that not only did he throw pesos at me, but I wasn’t legally allowed to buy alcohol.

Since then, I avoided contact with him whenever possible, unless it was to get his pain killers from the bathroom or a new lighter. I don’t know why Mamá married a bum like him. Even before his stroke, Mamá was the breadwinner. Papá stayed at home for most days, lounging around while watching sappy *telenovelas*. He was forced to get a job when Mamá could no longer cover his medical expenses herself.

“He plans to come, so please behave and drop the attitude,” Irene said, scolding me.

I managed a silent nod, not sure how to respond to my sister. It didn’t affect me one way or another by who showed up to watch me dance. All of Mexico could come and I would still need to dance *perfectly* so that I was not an embarrassment to my heritage. I had memorized the choreography, so that I could dance in my sleep. My dress was big, but still captured the beauty of my culture. Once it was hemmed, I would be unstoppable. The only thing that could potentially ruin this performance were my shoes. They just needed to last for a few more days, and I could only pray to God that they did.

Saturday

Friday came sooner than I’d liked it to. The last few days of practice were brutal on my feet. The largest blister on the sole of my right foot finally tore, leaving an open sore that ached with excruciating pain each time I put pressure on it. It brought tears to my eyes when I tried to clumsily wrap it by myself in the bathroom.

“*Nieta*, are you dressed yet?” Abuelita called from the other side of the closed bathroom door. “I already did Irene’s hair. You’re next.”

“*Un momento porfa!*” I threw the bandages in the trash and washed my hands. Hopping on one foot, I managed to shimmy into my *folklórico* only to get tangled in the fabric and fall. I hissed as my elbow collided with the edge of the bathtub. The friction between the dress and my foot made it sear with pain.

“Araceli?” Abuelita entered the room. Color drained from her face seeing her granddaughter sprawled on the floor with a blistered foot that had begun to bleed. “Aye! *Qué pasó?*” Abuelita moved nimbly for her age, bending down like she didn’t have arthritis in her knees. She examined my foot, before shaking her head. “Clumsy *mono*. How did this happen?”

I couldn’t bring myself to answer, only managing to whimper out, “It hurts, Abuelita.”

Abuelita instructed me to sit on top of the closed toilet seat. She thoroughly washed her hands and gathered a new roll of gauze from the cabinet. Mamá always took supplies from work, so we always had a surplus of medical equipment. Abuelita first used a bit of soap and water to clean away the blood and dirt that got into the sore. She disinfected the blister with rubbing alcohol. It took every bit of energy in me to bite back a scream as the antiseptic stings worse than a hornet. However, her delicate hands that wrapped the bandage around my foot almost eased my pain.

“You can’t dance with feet like these,” Abuelita said.

“I have to.”

“You will only make it worse. You are lucky it wasn’t infected, but aggravating it more may do just that.”

I wanted to cry, because I knew she was right, but Irene and I put in too much hard work each day for me to drop out on the day of. My culture was the most important thing to me. Being born in San Diego instead of La Paz like Irene, I already felt artificial in a way. There was a bit of disconnect since I wasn’t officially “Mexican,” so I did whatever I could to engage in cultural activities to restore that connection. Cooking authentic meals, such as *chilaquiles* and *mole*. Speaking Spanish. Creating colorful *talavera* pottery to represent the artistic history of Mexico. Paying respect to my ancestors on Día de Los Muertos by leaving *ofrendas* of food, candles, and marigolds. It never felt enough though. It couldn’t change the fact that I wasn’t born in Mexico. I was American. I wasn’t a true Latina.

“I must dance, Abuelita,” I said. I wobbly stood to my feet, ignoring the pain. “It’s the only way for me to truly feel like I belong. If I can’t then I’ve let my family and my people down.”

Abuelita said nothing. She stared at me with a poker face. I never knew what she was thinking. Her age far surpassed mine, as did her wisdom. It was truly difficult sometimes to understand her, but that didn’t change the fact that I respected her highly. After all, she gave up everything after her husband died to start fresh

and bring her children, son-in-law, and two-year-old granddaughter to the United States.

“You get your ambition from your *madre*,” Abuelita finally said. She then laughed. “You get that bull-headedness from your lazy *padre*, but your *abuelo* was the same way.” Abuelita stood. She grunted quietly as her brittle joints crack and pop. “Stay here for a moment.”

She then left the bathroom. Fear filled my chest as I worried she was going to get Irene or Mamá. Mamá wasn’t explosive when angry but tended to make a big fuss. She would wail about the smallest mosquito bite and would be sure to flip if she saw my foot. Irene didn’t scare me as much as she would make me feel like crap for hiding my pain. She usually gave a look that said, “I’m not mad, just disappointed.” And being burdensome to my family hurt worse than the open blister on my foot.

Abuelita came back in a few minutes. She held an old brown rectangular box. She gave it to me, which I took with hesitation. Inside were a pair of white leather heels. They appeared as they had never been worn despite being in such a tattered box. I checked the sole for the size; it was a five, what I wore.

“Where did you get the money for these?” I asked in awe. I desperately wanted to try them on, to twirl around them in my folklorico, and to dance for hours. But knowing the price deterred the thought from my mind.

“They used to be mine when I was a little girl,” Abuelita explained. “I wore them the first time I danced the *Baile Folklórico* at my school. Irene couldn’t fit them, and she told me that you didn’t need shoes, so I planned to save them for Claudia.”

I ran my fingers along the smooth leather, collecting a bit of dust. There were no indentations, creases or smudges on the shoe. Abuelita gestured for me to try them on which I did, putting one on my good foot. It was perfect.

I didn’t have to cram my foot in just to get the shoe on. My toes weren’t cramped up against the top and my heels didn’t rub against the back. They were actually a tad big, but not so big that they would fall off.

“Abuelita...” My eyes brimmed with tears. They stung as I tried to fight them back and lost. Abuelita smiled, her eyes crinkling sweetly. Her thumb wiped a stray droplet from my cheek.

“Save the tears for after you finish dancing,” she said. “Now, let Abuelita finish getting you ready. You still aren’t dressed, and your hair needs taming. Time waits for no one.”

I had her zip up my *folklórico* while I put on the other shoe. The bandages made the shoe more snug but not to the point of pain. Abuelita sat me down, broke out a comb, and raked it through my brown locs. Her touch was gentle. As she worked, she hummed a soft Spanish tune. One that reminded me of the Mexican seaside where a young girl danced.



Sweet Dreams

Carmen Nobbe

Ebony pencil and white gel pen; 8" x 10"

What I Used to Love

Kim Kile

Were you there, Theo, when I got the call from your mama?
The one telling me so quietly the technician couldn't find your heartbeat
and they were on the way to the hospital "to confirm your viability?"
The one I answered driving on 465 to my dentist's office?
Did you see me in my navy blue and orange paisley blouse?
The one I bought to wear to your Uncle Ethan's swim meets?

I used to love that blouse.

Were you there, Theo, when I told the dentist I had to leave?
That I couldn't be in his chair reclining like I had no worries while
I waited for your mama to call me again—to confirm what I had already
denied—we had "lost" you like you were an insignificant piece of paper?
I heard Earth, Wind, and Fire singing "September" on my way out the door.
It was August 9 and you were due September 20.

I used to love that song.

Were you there, Theo, when we flew to D.C.?
Did you watch me find the pennies you left for me under my seat
and on the floor of the terminal? The ones I still have in the
ceramic turtle on my bookshelf? Were you impressed by the
Washington Monument and the Capitol building we saw from
the airplane window as we landed on an airstrip in the Potomac?

I used to love that city.

Were you there, Theo, when I helped your mama push you into
our living world? The most perfect baby in every way but one.
Did you hear me plead with you to "just breathe" - to be the miracle
I had prayed for, to be a joyous mistake of science and medicine,
to turn from oxygen-deprived blue to the healthy pink of newborn life?
Did you hear me whisper, "I love you," as I held you in my arms?

I will always love you, Theo.

For Baby Theo, forever our first



- Best of Art -

Warm Inside

Natalie Starks

Oil on canvas; 35" x 35"

Roller Coaster

Cassandra Rodriguez

I'm only partly lying
When I say I love roller coasters
Because I love the thrill
The breeze in my hair
But mostly, I love you sitting next to me

I'm feeling sick to my stomach again
I'll always hate knowing that
We're crashing down too fast
But when we go back into the sky
I forget and feel fine again

Sometimes what we have,
Reminds me of a coaster
Light, thrilling, free, agonizing
You make my tummy twist and turn
And my words can never reach you

You've even made me cry
More than a hundred thousand times
But still I smile and say "I'm fine"
For even through the ups and downs
I will love you all the same

I'm only partly lying
When I say I love roller coasters
Because I hate this one
I hate the chaos and being flung around
But mostly, I hate that you've taken over completely

Bread and Butter

LyNae Golder

It's ten o'clock at night when Nia wakes, again as she does every night, to the loud *pops!* and *bangs!* surrounding the house. When she was a child, the sounds would scare her—are they fireworks? Now, a young woman in her late twenties, she doesn't bother to distinguish the sounds. For her, they're all fireworks. They must be, she thinks as she looks out of the window. Why else do they make the night come alive? Why else do they wake everyone to hear their song?

It's eleven o'clock at night when she stops watching the window and finally gets out of bed. She drags her feet because she knows she'll be up a while; she can't go back to sleep until Zion walks in the door and she knows he's safe. He's a big, strong man, more than able to care for himself, but she still doesn't trust the world with him. He's a tall, dark-skinned man, real good-looking and smart. She hates watching him leave every day to clean in those suburban White neighborhoods, even though she's grateful because it's their bread and butter. Because even though they're free of the colorful fireworks, they're full of silence, which is worse.

It's twelve o'clock in the morning when the *pops!* and *bangs!* are at an all-time high. It's almost melodic with its constant rhythm. *Pop! Bang! Bang! Pop! Bang! Bang!* She dances along to the beat as she sweeps the living room floor to keep her mind moving, to keep her from thinking about all the what ifs. What if he didn't use the right smile? What if he gets lost in all the silence? What if he doesn't come home? What if it's like that time a few years back, when he barely outran the White folks harassing him?

It's one o'clock in the morning when she stills her feet and sits in the old rocking chair. It was her father's, before he passed away two and a half years ago from anger and alcoholism and cardiac arrest. As she relaxes in the comfort of the worn leather, she thinks about how he hated Zion. He wanted her to marry a White man, so that her future kids would have White names and the privilege of a White future. She thinks about how wrong that was. He didn't respect that Zion grew up in a poor neighborhood just like her and was raised by a single mother, nor did he respect that Zion was a genuine, good man. She smiles. Zion's everything she wants and more. He may not work a white-collar job, but he's incredibly kind and makes sure she's taken care of.

It's two o'clock in the morning when Zion walks in. The fireworks have died down to a hum. Having napped beforehand, Nia's wide awake to greet him. He's tired and sweaty, his clothes dirtied from hours of scrubbing the floors and baseboards on his hands and knees. She rushes toward the door and pulls him in for a hug. "Welcome home, Zi, how're you?" she asks, and with a smile, he says, "I'm happy to see you."

“The fireworks have been keeping me company.”

“They’re not fireworks, Nia. You know that.”

“I know,” she says, “but a woman can pretend.”

He puts his arm around her and leads her toward the bedroom. “Come on, let’s go to bed.”

Jas

Sarah Wulf

I'm pretty sure my friend Jas is dead.

She could be in the hospital. She could be with her aunt and uncle downtown, which is what my older sister Elsie told me. During recess, the teacher told me and some of the other third graders that she's on a vacation with her grandparents.

I don't believe it. Not really. I don't know. My parents won't tell me. They don't tell me anything.

They're mumbling to themselves about electricians and bills when I walk into the kitchen.

"Is Jas dead?" I ask. My mother's eyebrows sew themselves together as she looks down at me.

"Dead? Why are you thinking about death, sweetie? That's for the adults to worry about, you go play."

I open my mouth, but she's shooing me off. I walk to the door and shove my feet into my shoes before I step out into the hall. Without Jas, I don't have anyone to play with. I walk down to the end of the hallway, by the window where we usually play, and sit down on the orangey-red carpet. Usually, I sit on the side of the window by the socket while Jas sits on the other side. But there's still a fork in the socket.

I lean against the wall and pull my knees to my chest. I want to get rid of the fork, but I can't grab it. I can't shake it either, which is how I get the chess pieces out of that plastic holder Jas has, or had.

Thinking about chess just reminds me of Jas. We always play chess when we're bored but now she's not here. I rub my hands through the thick carpet while I think about her.

She and her family live on the same floor as my family. We're both in third grade. We both play chess. We walk to the bus stop together. On Monday I was going to Apartment 19 to meet her. That's when I saw her lying on the floor at the end of the hall, right next to where the fork was stuck in the socket. Some of her long black hair was stuck up, while the rest spread across the carpet like ink out of a spilled pen. Her brown eyes stared blankly at the red and gold wallpaper without blinking. It reminded me of Travis, Elsie's old boyfriend. I sprinted down the hall and pounded on my parent's door.

"Jas is dead!"

“Don’t be ridiculous. Of course she isn’t,” my father said while he shoved me back into our apartment.

“She is! She is! She’s not moving!” I cried. My mother pushed me into Elsie’s arms and said something about taking me to the bus stop. Elsie checked the clock, and sat back down for breakfast. I curled up under a blanket on the couch. Sirens blared outside and the sound of boots thumped around the hall. Dad came back in and went into the kitchen.

“Maybe she should stay home today,” Elsie said. “That was probably pretty traumatic.”

“She’s too young to know what happened,” Dad replied. “Just take her on the elevator today. She loves the elevator.”

Elsie wound up driving me to school, because I missed the bus. I spent all day feeling like my whole body was full of water. It splashed around my mind while we did math and made whirlpools in my stomach during lunch. When I got home, I asked my mom what happened to Jas.

“That’s for the adults to worry about. Go do your homework.”

I know a fork in the socket is bad. Last year, in second grade, we watched these old, grainy videos about home safety. In one of them, a boy with a mullet pushed a fork into a socket and the film cut to black. It made me feel like I had a bowling ball in my chest that stayed there all day. When I wasn’t eating, my parents asked me what was wrong. I told them.

“He’s fine!” Mom said, “His parents took him to the hospital and they made him all better.”

The bowling ball feeling didn’t go away.

Jas could make them tell us. She once pestered her parents until they told us that the guy down the hall was sent to jail, and wasn’t just being questioned. At the very least, she’d know what to do about how empty I feel. It’s like someone went into my body with an ice cream scoop and replaced everything with oil. She’d calmed me down before, the time I found Travis.

Travis was a good boyfriend, from what I knew. He bought me the cheap coloring books from the dollar store sometimes, and Elsie could never stop talking about him. I’d found him in our living room, draped across the leather couch. I’d been going to the kitchen, and snuck by him on my tip-toes so I wouldn’t wake him. Then I saw his eyes were open. They stared at the floor, never focused on anything. His breaths were small and rattled in his throat. I got so scared, I ran to Jas’s apartment and slept in her room. She distracted me by telling me about a movie she’d seen, until she fell asleep. She radiated heat, and her breaths were deep and even.

No one had ever asked me why I slept at Jas's house that night. When I asked if Travis was alright, my father pretended to look confused.

"Travis wasn't here last night. You wouldn't know anyway, you slept at Jas's place. Travis is fine."

My sister sobbed. My parents went back to their conversation, which included the words "rehabilitation" and "Xanax" a whole bunch.

I lie on the orange carpet and tried to imagine Jas helping me. Her eyes come into view, dark brown, before they go glassy like doll's eyes. Like Travis's eyes. And then they become Travis's eyes, and I can see him, pale and limp across the couch by the orange medicine bottle before he becomes Jas again. Stiff, motionless. Words like "cardiac," "ICU," "AED," "rehabilitation," "probation," and "alprazolam" all fill the air above my head.

My eyes fly open, and I grip the carpet until strands come loose in my hands. I want to throw a tantrum. I want to rip out my hair and scream and kick walls and punch floors until someone tells me what happened to the boy in the video that put the fork into the socket and where Travis is and whether Jas is alive or not.

Jas could do it. Jas would've done it already. I kick the fork with the bottom of my shoe and it goes flying. It glints where it lands on the thick carpet.

I roll onto my side and bury my head into my arms. I can't do it. Jas is somewhere dead or alive, and I don't know where. And no one is going to tell me.

I feel sick.

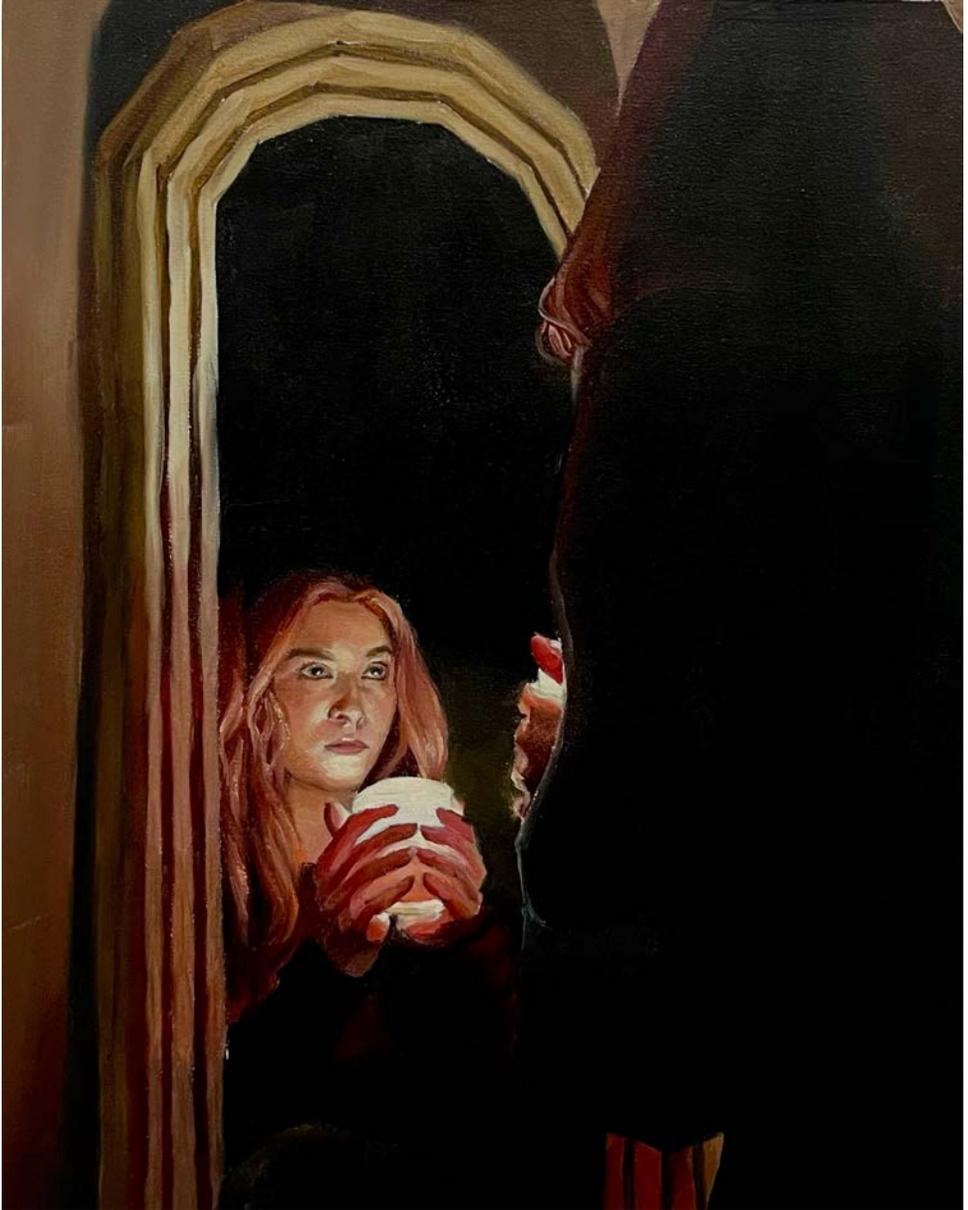
Defending Death by Overdose

Savanna Williams

How do I get people to understand an overdose is still a flatline?
Is cause of death only notable when there's no needles?
When there's no pill that reads "30"?

"He was always so troubled," someone sober said that bullshit
In a world where you tell your doctor you have a shaky hand
They hold it
And they let go with a bottle of Xanax at your disposal
In a doctor's office where you're asked a two-question survey
To determine what FDA approved prescription you should get
That's the same organization that claimed OxyContin wasn't injurious
Numbers of death by OxyContin in 2020, *76,000*.
In a world where the best advice they got about the opioid crisis is statistics
Numbers of death per year, *46,802*
Numbers of new users per year, *up 27%*

"Oh, but it was his choice," someone else said
Yet with not enough confidence for me to believe it
For they spoke with my back towards them
Spoken with not enough confidence in themselves, at that
Moments like this makes me wonder
You know that's not true, but do you hear the lie?



Bloody Mary

Natalie Starks

Oil on canvas; 18" x 24"

Taste a Little Waste with You

Ben Grimes

Flies buzzed at the meat. It was autumn, and the meat was still full of maggots. The flies were sucking their last bit of nutrients from their flesh-cradle before flying off to lay more eggs on some other piece of rot. A stream of rancid bubbles sputtered out of various pores in the decaying mass; the gas released a sickly-sweet aroma. No bones protruded from the meat; it was all flesh and blood and pus. If not for the odor and the writhing of fly larvae, it would have appeared as a peculiar boulder in a clearing in the woods. It was the only structure in the clearing. Tendrils of yellow slime oozed from its base, running into the ground around it. This rot was not fertilizing—no tree or grass or weed crept near the meat. It was monolithic and grotesque.

The buzzing of flies was broken by the crunching of leaves underfoot. Low humming accompanied the footsteps of thirteen cloaked people. A woman led the other twelve, distinguished by her ornate white and gold robes. Her eyes were covered by a featureless mask of pure alabaster, which extended from the base of her nose to the back of her head. Only her mouth was exposed, her lipstick a vibrant red on her slightly agape mouth. She breathed in the sweet smell of pestilence, knowing the way by memory and by taste. She was followed by two lines of six; those behind her wore robes of black or earthy red, humming with their heads hung low as their guide took them to the empty place where only the meat was. She stopped abruptly, and the others halted almost simultaneously. Only one robed man in the back of the left line stumbled, before righting himself and mumbling. The lead woman turned slowly, her robes billowing, as she began to address the procession.

“We have failed Her, our immortal goddess. She has gone a summer without our love. She is unwell.” The woman in white’s voice was comforting; the devotees she was addressing raised their heads to meet her covered face. Their faces were disfigured. Many were missing eyes, ears, or parts of their cheeks. The flesh had scarred poorly, leaving massive dark stretches, clearly never treated. Only the man who had stumbled was free of obvious blemish. His gaze often faltered. The woman resumed her speech, “Look how She hungers! To not care for our Mother would be to reject Her gift of eternal rot. She wants to take one of us now, to remind us why we love Her.”

The twelve formed a circle around the meat. The leader stood in the center beside the object of worship. She cupped a chunk of the meat into her hands; limp sinews and slime traced its path back to the mound as she pulled it away. It dripped; errant maggots tumbled from the piece. The twelve began humming again. The woman opened her mouth and held the oozing mass at the entrance. It was warm and wet, leaving moisture in the air which she breathed in heavily,

savoring the stomach-churning taste. A pustule burst under her finger. She took a bite. The yellow bile in the viscous mass trickled down her chin, dripping onto her chest and coloring her robes in sopping filth. She chewed, the chunk sliding over her teeth, so decomposed that chewing did little but expose her tastebuds to more of the sour bolus. She swallowed loudly, dropping the uneaten portion of goop to the barren ground. She began stumbling around the circle and heaving. She could hardly walk as the need to eject the meat debilitated her. She leaned over in front of the man from the back of the left line and erupted the contents of her stomach down his chest.

The stench was powerful, and he reeled backwards. The others gasped. The man looked embarrassed. His puke-soaked robes betrayed his lithe body. The woman in the circle let spittle slide from her mouth for a few moments as she regained her composure. She stood again.

“Come, boy. She has a taste for you now. She will take you.” The others surrounded the man, reaching at him with what remained of their limbs. He allowed them to lead him to the meat. No space was left where the woman had scooped out the chunk. The lead woman stood behind the procession now. “Allow him to enter Her. She would not take one who does not wish to join the others.”

The group resumed their posts around the circle. The man stared at the meat, feeling his breathing become ragged. He could touch it now. He felt the humidity from it on his skin, his hair standing on end, gooseflesh spreading over him. It was exciting, tantalizing. The smell made his head spin. He wanted to touch it now. He pushed one hand into the meat. Its thick, sticky texture drew the hand further into its moist warmth. There was a gentle suction inviting him further. The man groaned. He felt it take his hand completely, liquifying his flesh into itself; he could no longer escape. His hand felt like it had been absorbed by some blissful heat. He plunged his other fist into the festering gore eagerly. It was the same feeling. He shuddered. The woman leaned in his ear now, her hot breath on his neck exciting him even more. “Let Her take you completely.” The man groaned again as his arms were taken to the shoulders, his slim torso now pressed to the supple meat. “Doesn’t it feel nice?” The man nodded. “Good.” The woman grabbed the back of the man’s neck and shoved his face into the meat. He tried to pull back out, but he was stuck. His voice was muffled, screaming, and gagging through the sea of putrid viscera. A few moments passed, and the struggling and heaving ceased. The man shook and groaned again as his entire body was taken into the hot, mucous disease of the meat. He was gone in moments.

The devotees turned to leave. The meat was satiated for another season. One of them looked at a fellow disciple with their only eye. “In winter, I hope it asks for a foot or something. These body melding things take so long. And it never chooses me anyway.”

“I hear that. I mean, seemed just a few years ago the biggest ask was an ear or tongue.”

“Wouldn’t be so bad if it picked one of us that’s been around a while.”

“Always the new guy.”

“Yeah, always the new guy.”

Potato Bug

Kayla McVeigh

“I’d hit him again,” I say. The thought continues, but I swallow it. I can see Doc searching for more words to write over my own. Something to soften his report.

“Let’s do an exercise,” he says.

He tells me to imagine myself fifty years from now.

“I am still in the warehouse,” I tell him.

The left side of his face pulls tight, and his top teeth lightly meet with his lower lip.

“Alright, tell me about it.”

I work in one of the squared-off stations in the packing plant. The manager reassigned me to belt eleven. It is a low-priority position for a low-priority worker. I turn each box, so the right corner is pointed in a diagonal. This assures the label will be scanned and processed correctly. I do this for twelve hours.

“The manager is a real prick,” I say.

“What would the warehouse look like in fifty years?”

“Boxes and dirt, I don’t know?”

I’d leave if I didn’t have to be here. I start scratching my chin, itching at the stubble. I try to picture belt eleven all overgrown with thickets and thorn-covered vines.

“Maybe there would be some plants and stuff.”

“What else?”

“I don’t know, maybe a potato bug or something,” I say.

“Ok. Would your anger still be there?”

I’m crouched down on my knees, watching the little guy trail about. The gradual movement of his antennae shows me his true nature, gentle and unbothered. I smile as he investigates the cracks in the deteriorating concrete.

The potato bug at my feet is then flattened by an Oxford-style shoe. My eyes climb up the pleated khaki covering the right leg of this man. It’s Mike. His jaw is sliding up and down like a puppet’s trapdoor mouth. Everything is muted, but I know he is saying,

“Off task again. I’m writing you up again!”

I curl my hand into a fist. In my ears, there is a faint ringing as I look at a bit of dried blood on my knuckles. Just a few spots that didn't wash off from earlier. I look back up at the doc.

"Is the anger still there?"

"Yeah," I say.

Doc then tells me to picture my body. At first, I can only see Mike. He's standing on my back, climbing his way to the top while I'm laboring away, box after box.

Doc says it again. He tells me to picture it. What will my body look like in fifty years?

It's disgusting. Deep purple, except for white on my lips and a greyish film clouding over my eyes. It is slumped over, oozing on the boxes of belt eleven, making the cardboard mushy. The smell of rotting flesh is overpowering.

"Is the anger still there?"

This time, Mike is taking a weedwhacker to the blue-eyed grass and ragweed tangled over me. My decaying gut is sinking to the floor, but beneath it, there isn't any visible concrete anymore. There are only clumps of moss and white mushrooms that rise to my swollen ankles.

"Ok, let's try adding another fifty years."

This time I am all bone. My teeth are crumbling away. My femur is splintering apart into small slivers that are peeling down toward the earth. The walls of the facility are gone. A few of the steel support beams are poking up from the field of grasses and wildflowers. Belt eleven is buried, and only my lower jaw and largest bones are exposed. I can't see Mike anymore, but I know he's close. Even when I am nothing, he is circling.

To hell with anger *management*.

My forehead is burning up, and my chest aches from using up all the air in this boxed-in office.

"Is the anger still there?"

"Yes. To the bone."

The Lucky Candidate

LyNae Golder

Listen, honey, I want you to understand how lucky you are to be here. Out of fifty-odd-something candidates, I selected you. I looked at your resume and knew it was you that I wanted. I knew you were perfect for the job. You'll draw people in, and when they see you—your eyes and your lips and your body—they'll want to trust us. You'll trust me, too, once you see what good you do for me, what good I can do for you, and how well we work together. No need to look away. Relax. The job is easy.

Listen, honey, you'll come in each morning, and you'll stand behind your desk looking professional—professionally beautiful, professionally delicious, professionally forbidden—with your freshly-pressed suit jacket and that nice little pencil skirt of yours. Rick will hand you some paperwork to file, but really, you'll watch for people coming in and out—and maybe you'll wink at them some to catch their eye—and say to them, “What can I do for you?” You see, these people think they're coming in here to book a room at our five-star hotel, but really, they're paying for a conversation with you, they're paying for your smile, they're paying to see such a pretty woman sitting at the counter when they walk in, ready to attend to them like their own personal servant. That's what we're looking for, you know? Someone ready to serve our guests, to make them feel at home, to make sure they find comfort here, to make sure they keep coming back. No need to look down at the floor. Relax. You'll make them come back.

Listen, honey, there's a reason I chose you. There was no other competition when you stood next to everyone else, especially considering how you look, how you smile, and how you listen so well. I looked at your resumé, and sure, it was impressive, but nothing held me like that fierce expression on your face—and that goddamn silhouette—the one that told me you knew you were getting the job. It's as if you knew we'd be perfect for each other. It's as if you knew how good you'd be for me. No need to stir in your seat. Relax. As long as you keep yourself looking like you do—with your hair nice, your lips plump, your eyes bright, your neckline low, your skirt tight—you'll be here for a long while. I'm not foolish enough to let you go so soon.

Listen, honey, you're lucky to be here. You're lucky to be mine.



The Hound of the Baskervilles

Danielle Harrell

Cardboard and acrylic paint; 12" x 16" x 1.75"

When the Train Crashes

Ava Russell

You are not a writer; you only pretend you are. You pretend you believe the people who tell you you're one-of-a-kind, but deep down you know that every person on this planet has a mother, brother, teacher, friend, dog—someone who thinks they're one-of-a-kind in their own oh-so-special way, and that even if all that uniqueness did exist, it would just cancel out. You pretend you're a writer, but you struggled through this simple sentence word by word, letter by letter, struggled to combine your abstract, nonsensical thoughts into something that's barely legible. Who are you kidding? You are not a writer. Put the pen down, close the document—it's blank, anyway—and delete all those useless notes defiled with useless ideas that will never take you anywhere. Put the pen down and walk away because you are not a writer. Walk back to the TV and distract yourself by feeling sorry for the family whose house burned down, or pick up the phone and scroll-and-scroll-and-scroll and feel relieved that you aren't the person who's humiliating themselves by—God forbid—having a good time posting silly videos on the internet. Anything to derail the train of thought speeding endlessly through the darkest tunnel, to make you forget that You. Are. Not. A. Writer. You're nothing but a liar who talks a lot of big talk, and now you've dug yourself down deep into a grave with all that big talk. The only way to climb out of that grave is by building a ladder from the words your foggy brain can't produce even though it runs-and-runs-and-runs like a hamster on a wheel, going fast but going nowhere. And now the train has hit the wall at the dead end of that tunnel, and now the engine is on fire, and now the smoke is everywhere, everywhere, smothering any seedling that might have blossomed into a page, a paragraph, or even a single word. Think about all those people you're letting down; think about how humiliated you'll be when you're old and gray and frail and you haven't managed to sell a single copy of a single book, haven't managed to publish a single word; think about your lost legacy—your lost immortality. Think-and-think-and-think until the clouds roll over and the sun shines through and the flowers bloom and the train is chugging along and the words are coming quickly—and you are a writer. You are a writer who understands that there's no such thing as one-of-a-kind, and that maybe that's a good thing. After all, if everyone was one-of-a-kind, if you were one-of-a-kind, no one else in the world would be interested in what you have to say; and you have so many things to say, so many important things about the world, and other people, and even yourself. And now you have a story, and now there are people who find strength and community in your story—in you. And now you are a writer, and so much more.

“And what, you ask, does writing teach us? First and foremost, it reminds us that we are alive and that it is a gift and a privilege, not a right. We must earn life once it has been awarded us. Life asks for rewards back because it has favored us with animation. So while our art cannot, as we wish it could, save us from wars, privation, envy, greed, old age, or death, it can revitalize us amidst it all.”

—Ray Bradbury, *Zen in the Art of Writing*

BRADBURY-INSPIRED ANTHOLOGY

In collaboration with the Ray Bradbury Center



Introduction to the Bradbury-Inspired Anthology

“Everyone must leave something behind when he dies, my grandfather said. A child or a book or a painting or a house or a wall built or a pair of shoes made. Or a garden planted. Something your hand touched some way so your soul has somewhere to go when you die, and when people look at that tree or that flower you planted, you’re there.

It doesn’t matter what you do, he said, so long as you change something from the way it was before you touched it into something that’s like you after you take your hands away. The difference between the [person] who just cuts lawns and a real gardener is in the touching, he said. The lawn-cutter might just as well not have been there at all; the gardener will be there a lifetime.”

— Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*

Ray Bradbury left many things behind when he passed away in June of 2012—his stories, poems, films, plays, work with Disney, and his relentless advocacy for freedom of imagination, space exploration, libraries, and literacy. How fortunate we are that we’re able to interact with vestiges of Bradbury’s creative genius by reading his books, watching his films, or looking at our moon’s Dandelion Crater through a telescope.¹

But, Bradbury did not become an internationally renowned author overnight. He was a child of the Depression who couldn’t afford college. He even had to take remedial English during his senior year of high school because his grammar was poor. He learned to write by studying his favorite authors at his local library, and he sought out advice and mentorship from legendary Pulp Fiction authors such as Leigh Brackett, C. L. Moore, and Henry Kuttner. He cherished the way these authors coached him, and after he achieved broad acclaim, he paid it forward by coaching and encouraging a new generation of writers—from the Margaret Atwoods, Stephen Kings, Neil Gaimans, Clive Barkers, and Charles Johnsons to the writers that grace the pages of this magazine. Ray Bradbury’s creative grandchildren and great-grandchildren are right here, waiting to be read.

Bradbury often cautioned aspiring writers against being too ambitious by writing novels. “The problem with novels is that you can spend a whole year writing one, and it might not turn out well, because you haven’t learned to write yet. Beginning and intermediate writers should write a hell of a lot of short

¹ Scientists and astronauts who came of age reading Bradbury’s works have named a moon crater, an asteroid, and several Martian terrain features in his honor. A digital copy of Bradbury’s *The Martian Chronicles* resides on Mars thanks to the Phoenix Lander.

stories and poems. If you can write a poem or a short story a week, it doesn't matter what the quality is, because you're practicing. And at the end of a year, you'll have 52 short stories and I defy anyone to write 52 bad short stories in a row! [...] After a year, you'll have at least one thing that's absolutely wonderful. I began writing when I was 12, and I was 22 before I wrote my first decent short story."

This special issue of *genesis* reflects Bradbury's desire to see aspiring writers blossom. What's absent from these pages are the failed attempts, false starts, error-riddled drafts, tears, frustration, and all other vestiges of a messy writing process. What you see is the final product, the harvest that comes from tilling the soil of one's imagination—the product of the hard work required to produce “something absolutely wonderful.”

I'm eager to see how the creative careers of these authors evolve in the coming years, but I hope that they'll look back on this issue with pride, that they'll view it as an important milestone—a touchpoint that they've left behind.

Jason Aukerman, PhD

Director, Ray Bradbury Center

Monster Sale

Jordan Orwig

Artemis Nettle stood amongst the wisps and willows of the night, turning a small piece of bone-white cardstock over in his fingers. “ARTEMIS NETTLE’S TRAVELING STORE, OPEN YEAR-ROUND, BY CHANCE OR APPOINTMENT ONLY,” the business card read in painstakingly crafted script. He looked up and examined the approaching couple: they looked young, no older than thirty-five, and they probably had a seven-year-old at home. He glanced over his shoulder and mentally checked his inventory. He fixed his hat and popped a mint into his mouth. The sugary disc lasted less than three seconds before he crushed it between his teeth.

The couple drew closer to him and the enormous canvas tent rising behind him, and Nettle noted a single drop of sweat trace its way down his back. He shifted his weight, and the sound of his dusty boots crunching gravel highlighted just how silent the night had become. The couple exchanged spurts of conversation, while the woman gripped the man in the crook of his elbow. Nettle charted the best course through his merchandise, knowing that some goods would only generate the desired effect when viewed in proper sequence.

Nettle bounced lightly on his toes and then stopped. He didn’t want them to think him too eager. He held his right wrist in his left hand behind his back and tried to relax his knees.

“Good evening,” Nettle said as they came into the full view of the light emanating through the tent flap. “Welcome to Artemis Nettle’s Traveling Store! I’m the owner, proprietor, and sole clerk, Artemis Nettle.”

“We weren’t sure if anyone would even be here.”

Nettle attempted to make eye contact with the woman, but her attention was elsewhere. She stared behind him, and he soon realized what she was looking at: a wooden sign hammered into the ground with red, spray-painted letters. The wording had dripped some, but the words remained legible.

MONSTER SALE

“Is this for real?” she said.

Nettle smiled and nodded.

Her face was impenetrable, but Nettle could sense what little faith she held in his store beginning to dwindle as the grip on her husband’s arm tightened.

“So, you saw my ad?” Nettle said, hoping to change the subject.

“What? Oh, yes,” the man said. “We thought it was a joke.” He wiped sweat from his forehead. “My name is David Yearling. And this is my wife, Ellen.”

“I assure you, Mr. and Mrs. Yearling, this is no joke.” Nettle felt his tongue and jaw loosen. “Tell me, how old are your children at home?”

His heart leapt at the sight of Ellen’s mouth dropping open. “How did you-” she began.

“Ma’am, I’ve been in this business for a long time.” He touched his index finger and thumb to the edge of his bowler hat. “Please, right this way.”

Nettle led the couple to the front of his tent. It had taken him an entire day to set up. Last week had been easier. He’d had help, but the dreadlocked girl hadn’t lasted long. None of them ever did.

The couple followed Nettle past the sign and up to his wooden podium. He went behind it and began rifling through papers. David moved his hand to his pocket.

“How much is it?” he said.

Nettle looked up at him. His hat had fallen askew. “How much is what?”

“The show?” He motioned toward the tent flap.

Nettle put the papers down and looked at the two of them. “Please understand something, Mr. and Mrs. Yearling.” Despite his annoyance, he kept his expression neutral—neither malicious nor kind. “This is not a side show. This is not the back lot of a carnival where I take you into a shadowy mirrored tent to unveil a dog-faced turtle boy floating in a vat of formaldehyde just so that you gasp and cringe. Don’t let the façade fool you: this is a business, and I am a businessman. Though I will be guiding you through my inventory, I would no more charge you to peruse my wares than a car salesman would charge you to look at last year’s models. So, for my sake and for yours, have no lingering doubts about the nature or the legitimacy of my store and its contents.”

Nettle returned to his paperwork. The sounds of papers shuffling floated oddly in the night air. David just stared at him, his mouth cracked open. Even Ellen had quit pondering the dirt.

Finally, Nettle lifted his head and held out two yellowed sheets of paper along with two ballpoint pens.

“What are these?” David said as he plucked the papers from Nettle’s grasp.

“Damage waivers.”

The Yearlings waited for Nettle’s face to crack, to produce a smile that would let them in on the joke.

It never came.

David looked from the paper, to Nettle, back to the paper. He glanced over at his wife, who barely registered the fact that she had been given anything at all.

“You can’t be serious,” he said.

“I take my job very seriously, Mr. Yearling,” Nettle intercepted. He could feel the hairline fracture of resentment enter his voice, and he did his best to smother it. He had gotten them this far after all. “I am more than happy to allow you to peruse my wares at your discretion, but only after the proper paperwork has been filled out. They are as much for tax purposes as anything. I can understand your skepticism, but I assure you that this is all according to procedure.”

Ellen’s pen hovered over the paper. Nettle did his best to keep his features light, while still maintaining the seriousness of the waivers. His hands, out of sight underneath the booth, unclenched as she lowered her head to read the form.

David and Ellen finished filling out the forms and returned them to Nettle, who placed them in a manila envelope. He stepped over to the flap in the tent and motioned for them to follow.

Gripping one part of the opening, he smiled at them. “Mr. and Mrs. Yearling, again, I welcome you to Artemis Nettle’s Traveling Store!”

Out of the corner of his eye, Nettle caught them clasp hands as they took a step forward. He checked over his shoulder before following them in. The night shrouded the surrounding trees in a murky cloak, and, despite the breeze, the atmosphere was taut and unflinching. Nettle knew there would be no more visitors tonight.

He let the tent flap drape closed as he caught up with the Yearlings. Shadows danced along the interior plywood walls of the tent. Oil lamps hung sporadically from the rib-like beams of the ceiling, flooding some areas with light while neglecting others entirely.

“Well,” Nettle said as he approached the couple. “Shall we begin?”

“It smells in here,” she said.

Nettle pressed on, indicating to his left, “If you’ll just follow me this way.”

“Maybe we could come back tomorrow,” David said. “Will you be here tomorrow?”

Nettle’s back stiffened: he wouldn’t be here tomorrow. He had reserved a spot of land in Ravensport. Unlike the trickling traffic in this town, Ravensport had always been an ideal market whose sales would hopefully turn his year around.

“Mr. Yearling, and Mrs. Yearling, please,” he said. “All I ask of you is twenty or thirty minutes of your time. As I said earlier, you’ve already driven out

here, and I would hate to make you waste a trip. I know that, if given the chance, I can meet all of your needs and expectations!" He adjusted his hat and swept forward, willing them away from the entrance.

Before he reached the first cage, he turned back to them. His mood dipped when he saw that they hadn't moved, though he made sure his smile remained.

"How old are your children? I don't think I caught it earlier."

"Ruby is nine, and Caleb is seven, but he'll be eight this October."

Nettle's smile broadened. "Perfect! Come right up to the first stall."

The couple advanced slowly to where Nettle stood, mindful of the bars nearby, inside of which hung heavy, faded curtains.

Nettle's hand went up to a rope that dangled near the cage. "Again, I promise you both that you are completely safe, but I would advise that you steel yourselves so as not to excite her."

"Her?" Ellen said as Nettle pulled down the rope.

The drapes inside the cage swooped away, and the couple gave a premature jump just from the curtains being drawn. Their faces turned to puzzlement at the sight inside.

A door.

It stretched across the width of the cage, the frame touching either end. A simple brass knob stuck out amidst the flakey white paint. Nettle motioned for them to keep looking at the door, his smile never wavering from his face. David made a soft squeak as the doorknob started to turn.

Two sets of purple fingers tipped with black, pointed nails wrapped around the crack that had appeared as the door swung out slightly. The knuckles resembled warped wood, and a soft hiss escaped from the opening, followed by two glowing eyes peering out from the blackness.

The Yearlings stood frozen.

Nettle cut through their stupor. "This is the standard Boogeyman that I have on offer. Well, Boogeywoman, but the difference is completely negligible. I think that she'd be *perfect* for your children. She's low maintenance, requires no food or care, and the only thing that she needs is a nice closet to live in. Just wait for the right moment, and out she comes. Nothing too scary, just enough to set them on edge!"

Another hiss slipped from behind the door. The Boogeywoman drummed her fingernails along the wood but never showed more than those twisted fingers and gleaming eyes.

Without taking her eyes from the door, Ellen said, as if speaking to herself, “Our children don’t have closets in their rooms.”

The corners of Nettle’s smile sagged slightly. “Oh, well then.” He dropped the rope, and the curtains fell back into place. The Yearlings came out of their spell, blinking rapidly.

“Come along then, I’ve much more stock that might interest you.” He started to turn away, but then stopped. “Do they have attics in their rooms? Because she works just as well in attics. Not only that, but she comes with a thirty-day warranty that I could throw in at no charge.”

They shook their heads. “No, they just use dressers for their clothes.”

Nettle’s eyes lit up. “Oh, excellent! Please, follow me.”

He led them past several more cages—one smelled like rotten eggs while another emitted a green haze—before stopping at a compact cage with bars no bigger than drinking straws. Once they finally caught up with him, he leaned back and stepped aside, allowing them to peer into the cage.

“This next sample is a crowd favorite.”

Inside the cage sat a miniature dresser the size of a large dictionary. In most places, the wood was worn and dusty, but around the center of the drawers, there were long streaks of darkened wood. A withered length of string was attached to one of the knobs, and Nettle promptly reached over and gave it a pull.

A low sigh escaped from inside as the drawer slipped open.

“Mr. and Mrs. Yearling, I would like to introduce you to Kilroy.”

Nettle watched as the two parents edged closer to the cage and peered into the space. They jumped backward as a brief, wet sneeze chirped from the drawer. They continued staring as a shock of black and white hair popped up from inside, followed by two jawbreaker-sized eyes. Nettle’s smile grew even more as Kilroy rolled his pupils around to stare back at the two figures gazing in at him. Finally, with another soggy sneeze, the creature rose far enough so that its nose rested on the lip of the drawer. Nettle suppressed a cheer as he heard Ellen allow the smallest of laughs escape her lips as Kilroy emitted another sneeze. Kilroy’s eyes rolled and stared while its cucumber nose flexed and wiggled. Her laugh became a soft groan as a stream of snot melted out of Kilroy’s nose like candle wax, following the trail of darkened wood perfectly.

“Yes, well, as I said before, Kilroy is a favorite,” Nettle said as he hurried to draw the Yearlings’ attention away from the creature’s nasal discharge. “I’ve heard back from several satisfied customers saying that he’s just the thing their kids needed to keep them in bed. Some folks with younger children have let me know that their kids would rather try to adopt little Kilroy than show any signs of fear. But those are rare occurrences, and your children are well within the effective age range.”

He caught the eyes of both parents. Ellen's mood had lifted somewhat at the sight of the pocket-sized figure in the drawer.

"Though he doesn't come with a warranty, I will provide you with a reasonable price." Nettle fought to keep his arms from crossing across his chest.

"Well, he is cute," Ellen said contemplatively.

David suddenly found familiar footing in this strange place and began speaking with the tone of a man who was used to haggling over price. "Mr. Nettle," he began.

"Please, call me Artemis."

"Alright. Artemis. As you said, this little fellow might be just a little *too* cute to do much good, and without a warranty..."

"I agree with you; it is unfortunate that I cannot offer the thirty-day warranty on little Kilroy here." Nettle was no stranger to negotiating himself and knew that this line of conversation meant that the couple had made the gradual shift, as most eventually did, to accepting his store as a legitimate business.

At the sound of his name, the snuffling figure let loose another sneeze, adding more mucus to the front of the dresser. A noise that sounded like a strangled cat's purr came from within his flaring nostrils.

"David, are you sure?" Ellen said from behind her husband, her eyes still transfixed on the bulbous-nosed creature.

"Nobody knows your children better than you do," Nettle said to them. "If you don't think that Kilroy is up to snuff, then he's not." The purring continued, interrupted briefly with an indignant snort.

Nettle's mind raced. *Something less cute than Kilroy, not as off-putting as the Boogeywoman, but wait, their children have no closets.*

"Please, Mr. Nettle. Artemis. Is there anything else?" David said. "We're just looking for a little peace in the evenings."

At that, the salesman tugged on the string again, and the drawer snapped shut. Kilroy hadn't quite got his nose clear, and he let out a sharp squeak as his nose caught in the dresser.

Once the drawer was shut, Nettle raised his arms to indicate the tent. "Mr. and Mrs. Yearling, my entire stock is for you to peruse. I will make it my mission to ensure you leave here with precisely what you need."

Nettle led the couple through row after row of cages. He demonstrated his standard Monster Under the Bed, as well as providing instruction on how to banish it for the night with a few simple phrases and a pattern of flickering light. He gave them the hard sell on his deeply discounted Shadow in the Corner.

Nettle told the Yearlings that this last one simply had to go, and he was willing to sell it to them at, or possibly even below, cost.

As they rounded a final corner of the tent, the mood lightened but determined, they passed a large cage covered with heavy black satin curtains with a large letter B stitched in gold thread on each drape.

“Mr. Nettle,” Ellen said, “what’s this?”

Nettle drew up short. His spine was an ice pick. Without needing to look, he realized his error. He turned and caught her eye. “Oh, nothing, merely a piece of inventory that I doubt you or your children would be much interested in,” he said, waving his hand dismissively.

“Why?” David said. “What does the B stand for?”

“It’s actually two Bs, Mr. Yearling,” Nettle said, his fingers rubbing the edges of his hat.

The Yearlings waited for him to continue.

Nettle took a deep breath, wishing he had taken a different route through his store rather than excitedly leading them through like a hurricane.

He said the words in an exhaled breath. “Bed Bug.”

His customers exchanged looks, and then turned back to him in unison.

“Show us.”

He tried to buy his way out. “I’m sorry, but I’m afraid that this specimen here is already spoken for.”

“But you could get others?” David asked. “Surely you could get another if this is what we want. There can’t be just one, right?”

He took a deep breath and met their eyes. He weighed what would be worse: the truth or a lie. He drew himself up slightly, bracing, but he would never deny a customer’s request.

Nettle returned to the cage with the black curtains and placed his hand on the fraying rope. The Yearlings waited in anticipation.

“You were quite fond of Kilroy, yes?” Nettle said, his hand motionless. “I did mention that he was thirty percent off, didn’t I? Quite a steal...”

“Yes, yes, he was cute. Now, if you don’t mind.” David gestured lifting with his upturned palms. “I have a feeling that this might be just right for our children.”

Ellen never took her eyes from the cage. She leaned in to examine the bars, and Nettle’s blood turned to battery acid as he saw her eyeing the serrated marks that ran up and down the length of the metal.

Why didn't you get those fixed? he screamed to himself.

In one frantic motion, he readjusted his grip and jerked the rope downward. The drapes drew back with a whoosh, and light tumbled outward from within the cage. It was the size of a child's room. Stains lay splattered across the moldy carpet, and a simple bed sat in the center of the cage.

A few moments went by. Ellen looked first to her husband and then to Nettle.

“Did you mean *actual* bedbugs?” she began. “Those tiny brown-”

Without drawing his eyes away from the interior of the cage, Nettle raised one finger, silencing her. He then used the same finger to point inside. Ellen returned her gaze to the small bed.

A low whirring noise escaped from beneath the bed. At first, it was a mix between the buzzing of a cicada and the chirping of a cricket, but then it was neither. Maybe a baritone version of a mosquito with the flapping of immense dragonfly wings.

From beneath the bed came three pairs of grotesque, segmented legs. The light reflected dully off the chitinous exoskeleton, and each monstrous appendage flexed and heaved, churning ever upward in a wild dance. Ellen's face blanched as the buzzing intensified. The barbed ends began to pluck and scour the bed, and Nettle could almost see for himself what must be going through the Yearlings' minds as they imagined their children on the receiving ends of those razored prongs. Finally, Nettle saw his deal slam shut as thick, coagulating ooze seeped from the tips of the legs. It dripped with an agonizing slowness, coating the bed and carpet in a clear, sticky gunk.

With a sunken head, Nettle pulled the rope again to let the curtains fall back into place. As they shut, the chatter from within ceased, and he could practically feel the silence rush to fill the space.

He cursed himself and his carelessness. He should have paid more attention to what he displayed when he was setting up. He should have done everything in his power to move them along and assure them that the Bed Bug was completely wrong for their children.

But he hadn't.

The Yearlings stood before him, slack-jawed and ashen-faced. Nettle almost preferred the clamoring of the Bed Bug over their shocked silence.

Almost.

“You show this to parents?” David sputtered. “You show this to parents in hopes that they'll pay you money so that they can take it home and use it on their children?”

“Mr. and Mrs. Yearling, not all my wares are intended for children. Some, like Kilroy, are merely there to give them a little fright.”

“Is that or is that not a child’s bed you have in that cage?”

“Well, when traveling from town to town, space does become an issue...”

“Let’s go, Ellen.” David grabbed his wife’s arm. She hardly seemed to register his pull. Her face was chalk white.

As he watched them hurry away, Artemis Nettle’s hands found his pockets. His fingers brushed against a thin edge of cardstock.

“Wait! Mr. and Mrs. Yearling! My business card!”



The Scythe

Curtis Williamson

Digital; 9" x 11"

The Master in Pieces

Kyrsten Carlson

The breeze drowned in the drizzling sky leaving people uncomfortably warm in their coats. Take it off, get wet, leave it on, suffocate. So everyone choked. Lights winked in the windows like glitter thrown across the skyline. The soft moon hid behind whispers of clouds, providing a stream of light here and there, like looking through a funeral veil. The night was young, but the day, tired and tried.

Inside, Mr. Oliver Hamilton stood to the side. His brown tweed jacket and orange sweater vest beneath nearly yelled out his age, a robin among cardinals and bluejays. Removing his matching flat cap, he wiped his brow with a yellowed handkerchief. Returning his small, chubby hands into his beige pleated pants, he shifted about in his slightly-too-large brown shoes he'd forgotten to shine.

Around him, people molted, their falling coats revealing bare shoulders, smooth against the deep blues, shining reds, vibrant greens of their gowns, turning each into a colorful gem strung up on a necklace. The men unwrapped themselves like cigars of various neutrals and unbuttoned suit jackets with sighs of relief. It was a sight, the colorful birds of paradise against the concrete interior of the museum, but not one cawed with delight, shook hands without calculating judgments, no, not one meant a thing.

Though the night spoke otherwise, this was a happy occasion. A celebration of art reborn, reincarnated into something still to be discovered. On this night, the modern art museum of San Francisco was having its soft reopening to those in high society that could afford donations and couldn't afford suffering reputations.

Somewhere in front of an ever-murmuring crowd, the museum director gave her thanks for all the support from the art community and motioned to the now-open bar. The group flocked to it, their voices rising to cheer the night along. The champagne fizzed out into bubbly laughter from bright red lips while the men gave hardy whiskey shoulder slaps to a chorus of ole sports and champs.

Mr. Oliver Hamilton, not one for drinking and less for socializing, wandered ahead into the reconstructed gallery that was, at that moment, for his eyes only. They'd chosen to open with color field - large canvases of color blocks on top of color blocks on top of color blocks daring to mingle at the edge. It didn't thrill him. But, nonetheless, it had something to it, right? He turned a corner and came upon a few pieces of contemporary art. Smears of color abstractedly thrown onto a blank canvas. The next round of framed pieces was abstract expressionism, a canvas that cried in color and screamed in chaos.

He continued on, puffing up at this piece, strutting away from another, until he came to it. A painting. A scene. A woman's eyes, wide, broken, staring out in an empty room. From her eye traveled a drop of brown paint, down the canvas, and onto a chair that protruded from the wall.

"Strange, isn't it?" chirped a smooth voice. It startled poor Oliver who, looking wildly about him, realized he wasn't alone. "Strange, right?" she repeated.

"What's so strange about it?" Mr. Oliver Hamilton asked, his feathers all ruffled.

"Well," the woman traded her drink from hand to hand, "why does the tear become a solid object? It's clearly supposed to represent emotion, but as it solidifies, does it mean she is stuck that way? Left to forever feel sad?"

Intrigued, Oliver turned to the woman who continued watching the painted lady's gaze. "Perhaps, or perhaps it shows that feelings can be rooted in the concrete, in the real and the touchable."

She straightened up and crossed her arms, "Hm. I suppose, but really, why a chair then? It seems rather arbitrary to me, depressing even."

"But if anything, art should make us feel and to feel saddened by it is to be touched by it, is it not?" Yet when he looked for his audience, he saw her sauntering away to another piece. "Well, I certainly think so."

"You think what?" a tall, slender man asked. "To me," he finished his wine, "to me this piece says, well, frankly nothing!" He clapped Mr. Oliver Hamilton on the back with a chuckle.

"Nothing at all?" Oliver said.

The man straightened his bow tie before clapping Oliver on the back again. "Ha, ha, old chap, this is that new stuff that no one gets. Maybe in a few decades we'll come to see something of it. Ah, Carrie, Carrie, dear, it's been too long!" He gave Oliver's shoulder a goodbye squeeze and followed a silver bird as she disappeared into the crowd.

Mr. Oliver Hamilton looked around, his eyes landing on a thin vase of a woman all dressed in ivory sequins, staring at a large stone statue of a child kneeling and clutching its arms around the neck of a dog. The child's arms and hands seemed to melt into the hard fur of its companion.

"Ah, and what does this piece say to you?" Oliver asked while removing his cap to dab at his forehead.

"It's not really fair," the woman said.

"And why is that?"

“It’s always about being younger and younger. I’m quite tired of it,” she said.

“Perhaps the child merely represents innocence instead of a particular age?” he offered.

“Listen, if he wants to go, then he can go,” she snapped.

“Which? The dog? The child? Perhaps one clings to the other for stability of the mind or of time which passes too quickly.”

“Alright, Roger, you tell him I’ll sign the damn papers. He can travel the world with that college dropout if he wants to. They can be two idiot dodo love birds together.” She angrily returned a phone to her bag and turned, nearly running into Oliver, huffing as she made her way past him.

It was a waste. All of it. The night, the people, the minds, the art - oh, god, of course, the art. Wasted. He searched for any consolation, any sign that he was wrong, that it had meaning. The answer, perhaps, lies with a child tugging on his suit sleeves, a futile attempt to stretch them so they might hide his wrists. Mr. Oliver Hamilton approached with caution.

Sitting in a large metal frame that jutted out well past the canvas was a cityscape on fire. Only the silhouette of the buildings gave light to what they were, all the windows one would expect to see were closed, no movement within. Most peculiar water seeped down the painting from some hidden mechanism. Each drop would catch onto the yellows, oranges, and reds of the painted flames and bring them to a muddled conclusion along the bottom lip of the frame.

“Well, what do you think?” Oliver asked.

Giving up on his jacket, the boy shoved his hands deep into the recesses of his pockets. “Who’re you talkin’ to?”

“You, boy, I want to know what you think of this painting!”

“Uh,” he glanced at the elderly man with his large caterpillar eyebrows asking the questions. “It’s kinda cool how only the fire melts. Or whatever.”

“What does it make you think about?” Oliver asked.

“I dunno, I guess, like, the water is putting out the fire,” the boy kicked at the ground.

“Anything else you notice?” It wasn’t the most splendid conversation on art he’d had in his long life, but it was more worthy than those he’d held, or thought he’d held, throughout the night.

“Um, there’s no people?” It was clear the boy was searching for the right answer rather than giving his own opinions.

“That’s not untrue, but what does that tell you?” Oliver encouraged.

“Hm,” he stared into the painting. A smartly dressed man in a suit that matched the boys made them a trio.

“Who’s your friend, Jojo?” the man said.

The boy looked at Oliver and then the new man, unsure who to answer. “I hate it when you call me that,” he said.

“It’s what your mother calls you,” the man returned.

“That’s because she regrets naming me after my dad. I like Joseph.” He shifted his weight from one foot to the other. “I think that it’s interesting there’re no people, but the city’s on fire. Like, you know people have to live there because why else build a city? But no one cares. Did they leave? Before the fire or after? Where’d they go?” he said to Oliver.

The man laughed with a smugness that only comes with a fat wallet and a good-looking face. “Oh god, wait until I tell your mother you think you know about art.”

“The boy’s got an interesting perspective, art isn’t the same to everyone. The important thing is he’s asking questions.” Mr. Oliver Hamilton said.

Putting his emptied tumbler in his left hand and putting his right on the child’s shoulder, he glanced from boy to Oliver. “Should you really be talking to young boys? Come on, Jojo, your mother has absolutely got to hear this.” Though he tossed his head back to laugh, his hair remained perfectly sculpted to his head.

Before he could respond, the two were too far away approaching a cardinal wearing a necklace of pearls. The adults exchanged words and the mother, he presumed, threw back her head, curls bouncing with each laugh. Having had enough, the boy jerked his body out from under his stepfather’s repressive hand and found a bench against an empty wall where he could consider his hate.

Mr. Oliver Hamilton sighed. His heart sighed. His mind sighed. His whole body shivered with one big releasing sigh—of anger. And he left.

And he returned.

“Hello, mister, I’m sorry, but the museum’s closed. Been closed for about three hours now.” The security guard waved him back toward the door he should have locked.

The intruder produced an ID. “I am Oliver Hamilton. I explained to Ms. Cathay Bates that I needed to fix my exhibit before the second night.”

“I don’t know anything about that sir, I’m afraid you’ll have to leave until Ms. Bates...”

“I’m here, Henry, it’s alright,” Cathay Bates said as she entered the front door, struggling to get a thin strap of her shoe around her heel. “Mr. Hamilton, I’ve really got somewhere I need to be so I’ll give you the key to your exhibit and then you leave it here with Henry when you’re all done.” She handed him the key and moved on to tame her hair. “Please do whatever you want to, stay all night, I don’t care. My car is here, I must go.”

Whatever he wanted.

“Well there you go, mister, I’ll be down here waiting.” Henry resumed his usual pacing.

Whatever he wanted. What did he want? The short man hurried to his exhibit space. It was haunting so late at night. The ghosts of gentlemen and ladies with their light laughter and empty words shivered in the dark. The security lights only shone in the far corners where a corridor led to a bathroom or an elevator or stairs. It was like walking through a neighborhood at night, the lights blinking out as he passed them.

He found the bench where the young boy Joseph had sat. Oliver’s feet dangled as the child’s had. It only deepened his sense of foolishness. He didn’t mind if someone didn’t understand a piece so long as they thought about it! So long as they questioned it, questioned it with wonder, not irritation.

That’s what he loved about art—about creating it and viewing it. All these moments of life, his birth, his mother’s warm smiles, and warmer hugs, his father’s cigarette ashes burning late into the night as he read the newspaper, his teasing classmates who said things about his height, his knowledge of artists, the first kiss from his first girlfriend, the first time he tasted a real New York slice of pizza, losing his childhood dog, his grandmother still and quiet in her casket. All of this made up him, Oliver Hamilton. All the little day-to-day moments were his and his only, his perspective, his life. And all sorts of little moments made up another person. Both had equally complex lives with heartbreak, with laughter, sorrow and joy, fear and courage, family and friends—each the main character in their own novel. All this made for different minds, different thoughts, different reactions.

So he created a piece with one vision, but someone else saw it through their own vision. New interpretations, new questions with new answers. It wasn’t so much the art that was special as it was the interactions between people, the conversations, the discoveries, the connection from person A to person B living parallel, now perpendicular because of a piece of art.

But these people didn’t care! He stood. They saw themselves as pieces of art. He stomped. Decorated with lavish pieces of gold and silver, gowns like liquid poured over their thin bodies. He circled. One woman’s red dress with a high slit to make her irresistible to another woman’s husband. He paced. One man’s gift of three-tiered pearls to his wife, not out of adoration, but so his ex-wife might

see how well he was doing after their divorce. He cried. Oh maybe they glanced at the art, but they studied the human anatomy, let their jaws hang loose and their morals looser as they jabbered and slobbered at her backless dress or her plunging neckline. He sobbed. A bunch of wild peacocks spreading their feathers of wealth to dance at their own reflections. He lost it.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I see many familiar faces among the crowd, I’m so glad many of you have returned. This is a first in the art world, a living, reacting, breathing museum. As I know many of you are new, we’ve established a mini gallery, if you will, of photos of how the Hamilton exhibit began. Be sure to really take a moment to absorb those into your mind before entering the actual exhibit and have your mind wonderfully expanded. Remember, we again have the open bar and encourage all to have a memorable night. Thank you!” Ms. Cathay Bates opened the door leading to the exhibits.

The champagne and wine again flowed, the flirting and glances shook egos and stirred emotions, the night was intoxicating. When they reached the Hamilton exhibit, their eyes widened, their chatter crescendoed.

The chair was in pieces. The canvas of the woman, the city, all ripped and hanging. The child and dog, now separated, lying wounded on the ground. Frames hung askew, some resting on the floor. Everything ripped, broken, shattered, destroyed.

And they laughed. Someone commented on how fragile life was. Another on how short it was. Another still on how unpredictable. One woman bumped another causing her to drop her glass of wine, staining the shreds of canvas, splintering glass on glass. They all clapped at the additional chaos. A perfect addition! A symbol of togetherness! No, a sign of outside force! No! An indication of how sorrow begets sorrow!

And there sat Mr. Oliver Hamilton, a man more broken than the broken mess he’d made. Now they found meaning, now they discussed, they argued, they thought. Bird-brained idiots picking at trash to find a crumb.

He lunged. Short as he was, he grabbed a fistful of necklace and tore it from a slender neck, the stones flying. He took a man’s whiskey and catapulted it against a shredded painting. None dared to stop him. His eyes lit with fire. He shoved a woman, her drink cascading down the rhinestones of her dress. He punched a man who doubled over onto the floor bringing with him a woman he’d tried to grasp for stability. He shouted. He screamed. He jumped through the window.

For Ray

Lance Hawvermale

The seller of lightning rods
dropped his bag at my feet.
He said go west young man
go west until the sun tires
of running and by the way
there is a market for solar flares
if you can bring one back,
a penny a word at least.
He mopped his face and kicked
the bag.

I saw the damn thing move.
Cherry bombs and dandelions,
a Mason jar of Venusian rain—
Eat metaphors he told me.
Let the dentist pick their crust
from your shimmering
teeth and between us the bag
lay like a bundled-up shadow
shed as skin in the Illinois sun.

I lifted the awful weight
thinking he ain't heavy he's my—
African lions strained the seams,
foghorns and entire lakes,
books with the ISBNs filed off
and printed with asbestos ink.
You better use two hands he said.

The Halloween Tree

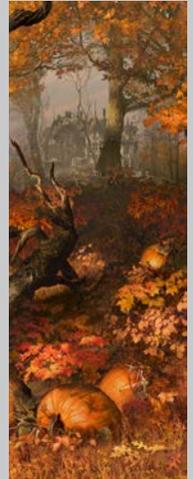
Tim W. Kuzniar

Digital tryptich

Left - 17" x 36"

Center - 9" x 24"

Right - 36" x 17"





Stuff Your Eyes with Wonder

Corrine Phillips

When I was a child, I read a book
about a pumpkin-covered tree,
and I hoped for a magic October night
where they might really shine down on me—
where I'd search for my pumpkin among all those smiles
of flickering souls in the autumn leaves,
and I'd live on forever if I could just take it
and carry it close to me.
But as I've grown, I realize a harsh reality:
that there is no such thing as this winsome gift of immortality—
unless we paint and write our souls
on canvas and the page,
or capture it with a camera lens and in films that never age.
We must compose, forge, and sculpt our grins—
strike every match 'til the wick ignites,
and we'll surely become eternal spirits
who glow every Halloween night.
So create all you can, my extraordinary friends,
even when doubt clouds your mind,
because you only fail when you choose to leave
that gift of wonder behind.

The Clodhoppers of Winter

Ron Keedy

“Free at last!” shouted five left toes. “Free at last!” shouted five right toes. “Free at last,” wiggled all ten toes as they stuck out from under the old quilt, tasting the warm June air, knowing they would no longer be prisoners of the “clodhoppers of winter.” Brogans, boots, clodhoppers, call them what you want, but this morning they get tossed to the deepest, backest, remotest corner of the closet, never, again, to surround these toes with the stiff leather trappings of winter snows and heavy rains.

There’s a special season, known only to boys. It comes at the end of spring and the beginning of summer. It’s the season of barefoot. It’s the season of Huckleberry suspended pants, torn t-shirts and the magic of Milligan Park grass still cool and wet between your bare toes. It starts with a quick drink from the water fountain next to the old picket fence bandstand where you can stand under the roof and watch the whole park get washed clean by a warm summer shower and you never get wet. Tearing down the hill to the playground you can make a high jump off the swings, tumble through the monkey bars and fly down the big slide at burn-your-butt speed, finally grabbing at the sky in higher and higher circles on the Maypole and falling breathless, burying your toes in the warm sand while spilling squeals and giggles everywhere.

Next comes a quick cooling, minnow-nibbling wade in Dry Branch around past the miniature train and golf course and you come face-to-face with every Milligan Park kid’s rite of passage, THE TUNNEL. A heart pounding crawl through total darkness while stranger-friends taunt you with spooky growls and groans and you pop out the other end squinting in the sun, heading for the trails. Climbing to the top you get to dirt-pants slide down to Dry Branch and then do it all again while making Tarzan calls to friends in pursuit.

The huge covered grandstand bleachers of the old ball diamond are lonely and empty now. On hot summer days past, it sheltered sweaty, cheering baseball fans from the sun. Like a giant Noah’s Ark, they sat two-by-two, feasting on hot dogs and warm Cokes while hoping for a cool breeze to find them. If you listen, you can hear a million “sa-wing batta” taunts that have soaked into the nooks and crannies of the weathered boards. As the sun begins to wander into the west, a solitary home-run trip around the bases with the wonderful feeling of hot ball diamond dust all over your feet, and it’s time to head home.

Slamming screen doors brought together the neighborhood gang for a game of statues or hide-n-seek in the waning evening light. Mothers calling everyone to wonderful small town suppers and finally the adults settling into the porch howdahs with the glow of pipes and cigars lighting up the night like so many red fireflies, ends a perfect June day.

Feeling the good tired, I climb the stairs to our bedroom and spy a shoe box on my bed. Mom has surprised me with a box of new adventures. Nestled among the crisp tissue is a brand new pair of tennis shoes from Miller's Shoes, downtown. Tennis shoes that are full of summer magic. Tennis shoes that can scorch sidewalks, jump over Dry Branch, flower beds and sleeping dogs. Tennis shoes that won't let you stand still; that have miles and miles of running stored up that steer you to the Strand theatre, the skating rink and back and forth from The Big Dipper for ice cream. Tennis shoes that let you pull the pig tails of street skating girls and disappear into a puff of summer dust. I knew, in my heart, that these brand new, super charged, wings for my feet would die next September and there would be a new pair of "the clodhoppers of winter," but right now, the summer adventures begin.

Silver Flash Minnows and Pickle Green Frogs

Ron Keedy

Silver flash minnows and pickle green frogs,
Brown-eared bunnies inside hollow logs.

Off in the distance goes the velvet moss trail,
From under the mud peeks an old rusty pail.

Crawdads swim backwards in water so clear,
Dragonflies buzzing without any fear.

Squirrels loudly cussing perched high in the trees,
Wildflowers nodding in the afternoon breeze.

A fast moving ripple gives bare feet a tickle,
A snake crosses path causing neck hair to prickle.

Wade through the shallows to the big bar of sand,
A tiny warm island detached from the land.

Sand buried toes toasted by the sun,
Wind at your back ain't no better fun.

Kingfishers diving, catching fish in their beak,
Fond memories always of my Sugar Creek.

From Ray, with Love

Roger Terry

To be rocketed from this world to a place so fantastic, yet so familiar that it steals your breath away, that is what it feels like to read Ray Bradbury. His words wrap around the reader, like a warm embrace from the world's greatest lover. The flow of his prose engulfs one in a wave of pure poetic pleasure. It would be dishonest, though, to hide my fears in regard to his decline in readership. In a time where illiteracy and semi-literacy runs rampant, the world needs its Papa Ray now more than ever. Words, stories can change lives, can change the world. With that in mind, let me tell you all a story about how Ray changed the life of a disabled young man, and why he should be remembered into the future as one of the most important authors in history.

From Waukegan to Walt Disney World and beyond, Ray left an indelible, crater-sized mark during his lifetime. The first time the Martian Maestro's name met my ears was in 2010, during the fall semester of freshman English. My teacher, Ms. Schneider, assigned everyone to read *Fahrenheit 451*. Before that, I chatted during lunch with the shop teacher, Mr. Elliott, who encouraged me to read Stephen King during the spring semester of my eighth-grade year.

Before picking up King's *Dreamcatcher*, it had been three years since my last book; had been a voracious booklover most of my young life, figured the gap from ages ten to thirteen would not make much difference in my reading speed, but discovered soon after that the act was more of a chore than it used to be. The brain is like any muscle, if not used... well, you get it. Took me six months to read through six-hundred pages, put the book down twice. The third time, picked it back up from the Shoals High School Library and said to myself, "You are going to finish this *goddamn* book before summer break, and that's that!" Finished with two weeks to spare. As slow as my reading was, the seed of excitement within had sprouted, and my love for the written word began to blossom again. It was during this time, at the age of fourteen, that my creative tools would begin the process of sharpening themselves for the future.

By the time Ms. Schneider's class came around, my thumbs had turned well over one-hundred pages into my second King novel, *Under the Dome*. At the time, there was no interest to read anyone but King, so I didn't. In class, all the students (those who didn't try to get away with sleeping, that is) watched Francois Truffaut's film adaptation, but even that did not secure my attention at that time. The "bonus features" interview with Ray about the creation of *Fahrenheit* did, though. A curiosity for the act of story-making had rooted itself after my bout against the shitweasels, and immediately found myself hooked on Bradbury's every word. By the end of our time with *Fahrenheit*, though, the majority of the students came to dislike it. Back then I was curious as to why, but shrugged it off and went back to *Under the Dome*.

Soon after, the high school librarian, Mrs. Lanham, presented her students with a challenge: if enough were to read through the book of her choice, that she would go about bringing in the author of said book, to answer questions. This excited me, the chance to meet my first ever author, live and in the flesh, was an opportunity too good to pass up. So, I picked up the young adult novel she chose, and read it with intense vigor, until around page eighty or so. The book was dreadful. In the end I walked back into the library, tossed the book onto the counter, and said, "As much as I would love to meet the author, I can't finish this book. It's awful." My eyes spied the tagline atop the cover of the book (#1 *New York Times* Bestseller) and thought to myself, "That story was that bad, yet it was a *bestseller*? Heck, I can do better than that." It was at that moment, at the age of fifteen, standing in front of the Shoals High School Library counter, that I chose to dedicate the rest of my life to the craft of writing, and have done so since.

Ray left my mind for a while after; his next appearance in my life came at a most somber time for the world. His passing on June 5, 2012, sucker punched me, my eyes locked on a computer screen in Mr. Dahlen's media class. A tinge of sadness hit me at the realization that, after all this time, my eyes still had not grazed over his written word. At that moment, I promised myself not only to read his writing one day, but to acquire his works for my own private library. That same class period, my eyes and ears came across a video clip on YouTube of Ray in Santa Barbera, California, giving a speech to a bunch of would-be writers on the date of June 24, 2006: a speech that would change my life forever:

"You are supposed to be having fun. You are supposed to be *living your life!* You are here on this world to enjoy yourselves, to be in love. And not to think about it, and not to worry, and not to be unhappy. If you are unhappy, get the *hell* out of writing then! Go do something else. I have no time for you if you are going to be self-conscious. If you are going to ruin your life with *thinking*. I want you to make your life with feeling... with feeling, with loving. That's what you're here for. You've been put in the world to love the act of being alive."

Those words have lived in my head since, and I've tried to live my life by them. I had been a bit unhappy for a time, though. Outside of my health issues (which we will get to soon), my first two years of college were tough—the two consecutive rounds of summer school didn't help, either. My biggest gripe was that it felt like I no longer had the time or energy to read what my mind desired. By the end of the courses, during my second summer in 2015, it left me with two weeks until the start of fall semester. *What should I read from my library before the deadline?* My question answered itself at the sight of a stack of paperbacks, two of which I'd purchased online before coming home from campus: *Zen in the Art of Writing* and *The October Country*.

The collections mentioned previous have remained among the most influential throughout my life. The essays contained in *Zen* came and went like a fever dream. It was what my inner muse had been salivating for since the beginning of my writing journey. My great ambition back then was to win the Bram

Stoker Award for Best First Novel, and thus I became heavily interested in first projects and publications. So, the first short story picked out to read from *The October Country* (many of which were published previously in a 1944 collection titled *Dark Carnival*) was “The Lake,” Ray’s first published tale that debuted in the May 1944 issue of *Weird Tales*. By the end, it felt as if my mind had been pulled fresh from the sea itself, my imagination gasped for air, and what rushed in was loaded thick with metaphor. The remaining stories were consumed two at a time, in a pleasure-fogged daze.

After that summer, a main priority of mine became to seek out as many lectures and interviews with Ray possible. Upon listening to his loves, his passions, I discovered that we are kindred spirits in many ways. Whenever he would project his love for libraries and movies, ancient Egypt and outer space, dinosaurs and daydreaming, his words would rattle through me with the power to reduce the song of Notre Dame’s bells to a shameful jingle. The want (no, the *need*) to acquire his stories rose to an insatiable level. Yet, with limited mobility and no internet at home, books that were not readily available at the campus “bookstore” or the usual summer yard sale became hard to obtain.

Being born with the rare disability Adams-Oliver Syndrome, it has left me with a copious amount of health complications, mobility being one of them—though I can walk a little. Which, to think back now, was probably the start of my turn toward literature. The loneliness, the lack of social stimulation. Books and films rooted a love of storytelling within me years before the thought ever occurred of pursuing writing as a lifetime endeavor. It was near the end of my third and final year at Vincennes University—spring semester, 2017—when a philosophy professor friend of mine, Bruce Buchanan, took me on a trip that would solidify my love for Ray.

It was on February 3rd that I pulled myself out of bed, strapped on my leg braces, slid into my wheelchair, and rode over the old brick walkways to the Humanities building. A cool, sharp breeze at my back. My six-wheeled steed galloped through the double-doors, past my advisor Dr. Alderfer’s office, and screeched to a halt outside Bruce’s office door that was tacked with numerous sayings from philosophers past. We made the plan to go from his office to Bloomington, Indiana, to spend the day. It was near the end of my time at VU, so he wanted to take me on an adventure, to a place of unknown pastures for my eyes to watch and wander. So, I parked my wheels inside his office, and off we went. Bloomington, being *the* liberal hotspot in the cultural wasteland known as Hoosierstan, was a breath of fresh air for a growing literate.

We parked outside an old brick-and-mortar on 122 N. Walnut Street. In part due to my walking troubles, we kept the trek within a short distance. “Take it slow,” Bruce said, “we have all day.” After our seventy-four-mile drive, he recommended we stretch our legs a bit. Our first stop would become my favorite bookstore. Caveat Emptor (Latin for “let the buyer beware”) is one of the oldest bookstores in Indiana and has called the Hoosier State home since 1971.

Upon entering, eons of history raced between my eyes and ears. My ears twitched, the words and wisdoms of people long dead shouted out from their spots on the light-caramel-colored shelves. The first thing we spotted, other than the few other patrons shuffling about, was an old wooden ladder leaning against the first bookcase to our left. Not just any ladder, though, but one with its top and bottom connected to a track. A bookworm's dream locomotive.

We began our joyride at the start of the tracks, looped our way around the many bookcases, and touched the spines of every hardback and paperback possible. My fingers touched bindings coated with magic dust, some pages within as yellow and ancient as the blocks of The Great Pyramid of Giza. Everything bombarded my senses at once. I found my way to a section of smaller books, all carefully placed in zip lock bags like fine finger-sandwiches. William Shakespeare serenaded me, called out to be read, so the first to be pulled from its purgatory was an 1893 copy of The Bard's *The Comedy of Errors*. Next, my childhood called out to me, and I grabbed a pop-up book called *Return of the Jedi: Han Solo's Rescue*.

After rounding the first corner we came to a door on the other side of the room—it stood ajar. “Where does this go?” my young self inquired and was told from an aged voice behind me that that was where most of the genre books were kept. With saucer-wide eyes, I leapt into the room, Bruce following behind. The walls of the small cubby were crowded thick with horror, science fiction, fantasy. Atop the middle shelf, resting in its own little stand, was a coffee-table book titled *Bradbury: An Illustrated Life (A Journey to Far Metaphor)* by Jerry Weist. Not a book of his stories, but a great start, and thus it was plucked free like a fresh fruit from its limb.

After exiting the small space we moseyed to the middle of the room, almost bumped myself into a small, dark wooden case with glass sliding doors. “What’s in this?” The same aged voice as before replied, this time from the lips of an old man with a silver beard who sat behind the counter; his image resembled to me a Tolkien-esque gatekeeper of the printed word. His name was John. He said that it contained books not only old, but valuable beyond what my mind (and disability check) could fathom. I shriveled away, defeated, wanting so badly to own something from such a treasure chest. Instead, Bruce and I walked up to the front counter.

“Is this everything?” John asked.

I stared back at the ladder from the beginning. I noticed, then, that the whole shelf behind the ladder consisted of leather-bound books. “One second,” I said, then went to the ladder. A few rungs up out of reach, my eyes spotted a green monstrosity that seized my soul. Being as careful as possible, my feet climbed up one rung, two, three. I reached up, pulled the book from its place, the lights from above reflected off the emerald tomb's golden gilded edges, like something precious unveiled from the Ark of the Covenant or equal to. It was a 1980 Franklin Library First Edition of *The Poetry of Robert Frost*.

All of our finds were placed on the counter, paid for, then we put our books in the trunk of Bruce's car. After our sifting through Caveat Emptor, we decided to walk up the road to 211 N. Walnut and rest our legs at an Americana restaurant called the B'Town Diner. We feasted on Hometown Burgers, fries, but soon found that we could not finish. The kind, somewhat portly lady who served us let us store our leftovers in their fridge until we returned from our next destination. We thanked her, left, and walked to a small shop at the corner of 100 N. Walnut.

The small shop was called Book Corner, a bookstore opened in 1964 by James (Jimmy) and Barbera (Bobbie) Spanuth. With little money left, there was one goal firm in my mind: *Our last bookstore. Need to find some Bradbury.* It was then my eyes steadied upon a massive one-hundred-story Everyman's Library collection titled *The Stories of Ray Bradbury*. Jackpot. I purchased this copy for \$34.24, elated, more than ready to dive in and read Ray's work. After chatting with Bruce recently, and upon finding the original Book Corner receipt, all of these memories came rushing back—the receipt ink, like all things with time, has withered away to almost nothing. My hope is that this essay will help keep these memories alive long after the ink, and my memory, has faded away.

We decided not to go back for our burgers (sorry, kind lady). Instead, we walked back to Caveat Emptor, drove down to 322 E. Kirkwood Avenue, and hung out at a local joint called Soma's Coffeeshouse & Juice Bar. A hobbit-hole of a place where one can sit and enjoy the smells of various roasted beans and listen to the chatter of a few campus locals. To the left, upon entering, is a rack full of goodies and a chalkboard with a plethora of drinking options. Never having been to a coffeeshouse before, I tried to find something close to inexpensive—thus, ordering a double espresso for the first time, I expected to receive a full-sized coffee cup.

When a small shot-glass paper cup was placed before me, I felt duped. "What's this?" Bruce smiled and said to drink it, so I did. We drank down our brews, thanked the staff, left, and headed back toward our own campus. Upon exiting back out into the cool night air, the brew kicked in, and my body began to sweat out whatever it could.

It was dark by the time Bruce dropped me off at my dorm in Vigo Hall, not yet tired, the bitter brew still racing through my veins. Ecstatic about the newest additions to my library, I cracked open the Bradbury collection and read "The Fog Horn." The story follows Johnny, a three-month newbie, and the lighthouse keeper, McDunn, who talks about the mysteries that lie beneath the great ocean depths and says that before Johnny leaves tomorrow for solid land, that he has something to show him. "About this time of year... something comes to visit the lighthouse," and if Johnny thought him nuts after, he could leave. The further along in "The Fog Horn" I read, something from deep within my past began to knock at the back of my mind.

McDunn keeps secret what is supposed to show up at the lighthouse, so they wait. But, not long after, something mimics the cry from the foghorn. Then, a monster from some Jurassic past rises up from the ocean depths. The monster calls out to the lighthouse, mocks the foghorn. Upon finding out, in fact, that the noise is not coming from one of its own, the monster goes mad and begins to destroy the lighthouse. Upon reading this, something in my brain clicked.

After finishing the story, I pulled up Netflix on my television. *Pokémon*, my favorite childhood show, had just been added to their streaming library. My favorite episode as a youngster was, and still is, “Mystery at the Lighthouse.” The story is about a giant Dragonite that rises up from the ocean depths at the sound of a recording of its own voice being played back to it. The Dragonite, thinking the lighthouse was a Pokémon like itself, greets it and finds out otherwise. It gets mad, destroys the lighthouse, and walks back into the watery depths while roaring out a heartbreaking, lonesome cry.

This moment cemented Ray Bradbury to me as one of the greatest authors to ever live. He had influenced my life before I even knew who he was. Ray loved animation, and inadvertently ended up becoming inspiration for one of the greatest episodes in animated television history. Not only that, but the episode was also the thirteenth of the season, his favorite number. It goes to show that no matter in what form, great writing transcends all.

From January 28th -30th of 2022, I devoured *Fahrenheit 451* in a single weekend. I loved every page of it. After all these years, why would one go back to a book that so many of my peers disliked all those years ago? Because I came to understand that they forgot how it feels to love literature, if they ever felt that love at all. That is why everyone should read Ray Bradbury. He teaches you how to fall in love with the written word, that really great stories can do so much more than take up space on a page. Stories can change lives, alter futures. If not for Ray, this essay may not have been, but now it is.

My only regret after all these years is that I never got to write Ray a love letter; never once got to tell him just how much he meant to my life, whether I knew it at the time or not. Even though, each piece of his work is a love letter of their own. With each turn of the page, one can feel Ray smiling down from the cosmos. At the end of every story, poem, play, signed off by a well-known hand, our Papa sends all his children his best regards and well-wishes with a few simple words, scrawled on a paper-dove’s wings from another world: “From Ray, with Love!”



The Banshee

Curtis Williamson

Digital; 9" x 11"

Romance with Ray

Christopher James Bollinger

She stands there glowing under the Southern California sun. A quick breeze lifts her sunhat to reveal her face in half-shadow. The red brick of Royce Hall looms behind her. I take a photograph that will bring me joy and sorrow in equal measure.

“Live forever!” Ray cried. We were enraptured, watching my hero sit in his wheelchair raising up his gnarled hand in the air, providing both blessing and benediction to the crowd. The energy in the room was intoxicating, we all hung on his every word, this frail looking old man with his hidden, tenacious power. He pulled us by hidden marionette strings—one way to laughter, one way to tears. I looked at her with tears in my eyes, tears of love for the man, tears of love for the life I was so fortunate to live.

The night before we came to see him speak, I read to her “The Last Night of the World.” The husband and wife finishing one last, quiet night before the literal ending of the world. We both cried. I remember lying next to her in our big California King-size bed, her warmth and her scent so powerful in that space lingering after sadness. We spoke a bit of our fears about the end, about death. I didn’t have any sense of it. I felt too young, too assured of a long life that death was only a concept, one that sometimes kept me awake if I thought about it before falling into sleep. But she had opinions.

“Death is not the end,” she said, “but the beginning of the soul’s journey.” She seemed very sure. I know her fiancé had passed only a few months before I had met her. She alluded to messages from beyond. I was a callous atheist with very little tolerance for nonsense then. “Well, I’m not too sure of a soul. I think that when we go, we go. What we leave behind us is what’s important. Things that people will remember.” She looked at me with bemusement—maybe pity. “You know Christopher, I know exactly how I am going to die.” My eyes opened wide. “Tell me,” I implored her. But she shook her head no. She looked into the distance and I could see in her eyes that she believed she knew how, if not when.

“Let’s play Scrabble.” The distraction tactic. I gave in and pulled out the board, a nice game (I would *let* her win), we would make love, and go to sleep. Drive out that morning to UCLA and see Ray Bradbury speak. It would turn out to be a lovely day. Walking through the campus talking. Telling her about how Ray wrote *Fahrenheit 451* in the basement of the library, stuffing dimes into rent-a-typewriters. Of course, he would tell the story himself on stage later. But she loved to see me passionate. She leaned in and gave me a big kiss that made me blush, like every kiss she gave made me blush.

I was a shutterbug. I took pictures of everything, of fascinating faces, or architectural details. Of Ray on stage. It was serendipity that I was able to

capture her in that fantastic light. I showed her the photo on the computer later that night, and she told me she looked fat. Of course she looked radiant. I kept it as the wallpaper on my cellphone for years. When we moved from Southern California to the Pacific Northwest to endure seemingly endless rain, just seeing her smiling face would make *me* smile no matter the weather. But eventually new photos took its place. New memories crowded out that one specific moment.

Then she wasn't feeling so good. She put off going to the doctor. I told her it could be appendicitis. When we finally went to see her PCP, the urgent CT scan showed she had cancer. I remember sitting in the little room as he showed us the images, I remember how my heart sank into the center of the earth. How I knew from working in healthcare for years that there was no way out of this. I could see her face through my tears, taking it in. She was optimistic to the end, and I pretended so well that she thought I was too.

She wanted to be cremated so I could keep her close to me. Her sister had been buried in Colorado and no one took care of her grave. "Promise me you'll keep me close." She passed on a couple of days after my birthday. She left me as I told her it was ok to go, that I would be ok. Her favorite song played at that moment and I *knew*, knew without doubt, that her soul would go on. She sent me messages only I would know.

I had bought a carved, rosewood urn with a spot for a photograph on its face. I was so distracted with all of the aftermath that I forgot about it. When the funeral home called me to let me know she was ready...I wasn't. I looked for a photograph that would capture her, capture her love, her beauty, her heart, the other half of my soul. And then I saw it there, stored as computer data, that moment in time after we had seen Ray Bradbury: that smile shining in the light I missed so much. Her holding on to her hat so that it wouldn't blow away. A moment of romance with Ray.

To Ray

Corrine Phillips

You once wrote of a brother— mostly dead,
whose ghostly visitors haunted your head,
and I have known him just as well,
but inside my mind you mostly dwell.
We once walked the earth at the very same time
when I was so young, and you past your prime,
but each word you wrote enchanted me so,
taught me of magic and helped me to grow.
I've known you in high attics where meadows did green,
where spiders weave pearly webs,
and Dust Witches glean—
cataloging her souls like books on a shelf,
imbibing their spirits to poison herself.
And what sweetness it is to swallow such things,
to taste the bitter wisp of dandelion,
or arid Valley of the Kings,
to dream yourself smiling on a cold October night
when the air smells of cinnamon as you fly on your kite.
Then one day in June you flew off into the breeze,
while a circle of moths danced 'round pumpkin-covered trees,
and there will never be another,
what more can I say? —
about my favorite brother I never met,
my best friend called Ray.



Idyllic Pasts Nostalgic Futures

Edward Whatley

Pen and ink with digital coloring in Clip Studio Paint;

13" x 10"

*“The magic is only in what books say, how they stitched
the patches of the universe together into one garment for us.”*

—Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*

Interview with Jason Aukerman

Director of the Ray Bradbury Center

“The mission of the Bradbury Center is to fully document, preserve, and provide public access to its large and diverse collection of Space-Age visionary author Ray Bradbury’s literary works, art, artifacts, personal office, personal library, correspondence, typescripts, manuscripts, photographs, mementoes, audiovisual materials and juvenilia; to enable visiting scholars and students to conduct research; to continue its outreach programming in the Indianapolis community, throughout Indiana, nationally, and internationally, with an emphasis on reaching high school teachers, students, and librarians; and to continue publishing our annual scholarly journal The New Ray Bradbury Review.”

—Ray Bradbury Center Website (<https://liberalarts.iupui.edu/centers/bradbury-center/>)

The Ray Bradbury Center, located in IUPUI’s Cavanaugh Hall, memorializes the work of the influential Midwestern-born author. To learn more about the Ray Bradbury Center and Ray Bradbury’s writing influence, the Managing Editors of *genesis* (Shannon Kucaj and Monica Simmons) interviewed Jason Aukerman.



Recreation of Bradbury’s office, featuring artifacts from his life, constructed in the Bradbury Center.

When did you first hear about Bradbury? What was the first work of his that you read?

I don't remember when I first heard about Ray Bradbury, but I was "aware of his work" by the time I graduated from college. *Fahrenheit 451* was one of the first works I read after graduating with an English degree. Bradbury became prominent in my life a few years later when I taught my first college English course. Most English professors get their start teaching Freshmen Composition, and I was no different. I taught in a computer lab, and my students spent a lot of time writing and workshoping. After a few weeks, I sensed a growing fog of skepticism emanating from my students. (I was dealing with an awful case of impostor syndrome.) So, I tried to find some affirmation for my approach, and I came across a video clip of Ray Bradbury. He was reflecting on his career and the importance of writing persistently. He talked about how he started writing daily at age 12, but it wasn't until he wrote a short story called "The Lake" at age 22 that he felt he'd found his voice as a writer. The next day, I played that video clip for my students, and I read "The Lake" in class. Bradbury has been a vital part of my teaching curriculum ever since.

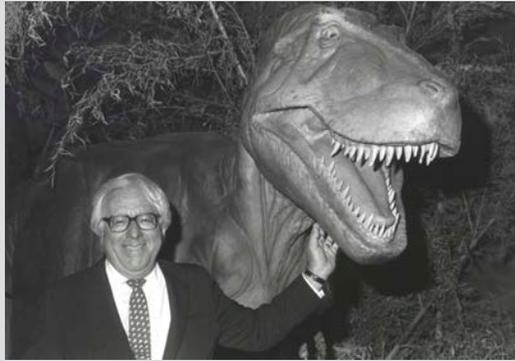
What's your favorite Bradbury fact—something we don't know about him?

Bradbury insisted, throughout his life, that he could vividly remember his own birth. Most people dismissed this for obvious reasons. As an adult, he learned that he was a "ten-month baby"—meaning that he was born almost an entire month after his due date. From that point on, he cited that as evidence for this memory—he claimed that because he was born later than anticipated, his brain was more fully developed than a typical newborn's.



How would you describe Bradbury's writing style?

Bradbury's writing style is highly imaginative, a bit eccentric, and thoroughly charming. He infuses his narratives with prose poems and rich metaphors.



What are the major themes that Bradbury wrote about? What was he concerned about? Does this show in his work?

Bradbury, like many science fiction authors, imagines possible futures in his stories. Sometimes the things in these stories come to fruition. (Take space travel, wireless phones, and smart watches as obvious examples.) Ray Bradbury imagined wall-size television screens and 24-hour bank services, and later in life people often asked him “How’d you do it? How were you able to predict the future?” Bradbury’s response was simple—“my goal was never to predict the future. My hope was to prevent certain unsavory futures from happening.”

Bradbury was a lifelong champion of public libraries and literacy, and his love for books is apparent in *Fahrenheit 451*, his classic admonitory novel of authoritarian government overreach and cultural devaluing of literacy, culminating in censorship and book burning.

He was also concerned about the environment and colonization. Author Ken Crossen described Bradbury as “the voice of the poet raised against the mechanization of mankind...to him there is only a difference of degree between the atom bomb and [people] tossing beer cans into Martian canals. One destroys the whole [person]; the other indicates that [the person] is already destroyed.”¹

Ray Bradbury’s thematic content is wide-ranging, but for me, his most poignant and important works deal with themes of othering and isolation—“Homecoming,” “The Foghorn,” “The Dwarf,” “The Scythe,” “The Exiles,”

1 Kendell Foster Crossen, “Review: The Golden Apples of the Sun,” *Future Science Fiction*, November 1953.

“Usher II” and many others. I think his motivation for writing about these things can be summed up when he was interviewed for a documentary on Lon Chaney—Ray Bradbury’s silent film idol: “[*Lon Chaney*] was someone who acted out our psyches. He somehow got into the shadows inside our bodies; he was able to nail down some of our secret fears and put them on-screen. The history of Lon Chaney is the history of unrequited loves. He brings that part of you out into the open, because you fear that you are not loved, you fear that you never will be loved, you fear there is some part of you that’s grotesque, that the world will turn away from.” Lon Chaney did this on the silver screen. Bradbury accomplished it through the power of the written word.

How did Bradbury impact the world of writing/art and beyond?

How much space do I have?

Ray Bradbury’s career spanned seven decades and intersected an impressively broad spectrum of American cultural history. He was deeply connected with Hollywood, where his stories and books were adapted for feature films, radio, television, and stage theater production. He defended public libraries and First Amendment rights and became one of the most prominent public advocates for space exploration. While he is most well-known for his fiction, having published more than four hundred stories and twenty-seven book-length works, he also engaged real-world issues in his writing, including racial and political intolerance, freedom of the imagination, the threat of nuclear war, the need to fund the American Space program, and the vital importance of literacy.

Nearly all of his books remain popular today; *Fahrenheit 451* remains a best seller after nearly seven decades in print. In 2006, *Fahrenheit 451* became a core reading selection of the National Endowment for the Arts’ Big Read program. Other Bradbury works, particularly his short stories, have been published in over one thousand literary anthologies featured in the curriculum of schools throughout the United States.

Bradbury used his literary craft to probe the human condition, often bypassing the technological terrain of more traditional “hard science fiction” narratives. His unconventional approach to genre fiction, shirking the formulas used by his contemporaries when writing for pulp fiction magazines, propelled Ray Bradbury to new heights as he became a catalyst for bringing the often-marginalized science fiction genre into the literary mainstream. Bradbury also reached international acclaim for his ability to reimagine the American Gothic tradition and the dark fantastic. Horror writers from Stephen King and Peter Straub to Clive Barker, Neil Gaiman, and Dan Chaon were particularly influenced by Bradbury’s ability to refashion gothic tale settings in American small towns and suburbs. Other notable authors such as Margaret Atwood, Steven Barnes, Charles Johnson, Michael Chabon, and the recent two-time Pulitzer Prize winner Colson

Whitehead were all inspired by Bradbury's imagination, style, and ability to cleverly depict human encounters with the unknown.

Bradbury's influence, however, is not limited to the North American continent. He is one of the most widely translated authors in the world, ranging from various editions in French, German, Italian, and Spanish to many non-western languages including Arabic, Russian, Japanese, Chinese, and Thai. Bradbury's French readers were particularly drawn to his surreal short fiction, and he was eventually awarded the French Ordre des Arts et des Lettres (Commandeur) Medal in 2007. Perhaps the most surprising and most indicative emblems of Bradbury's international influence are the many Russian awards that he received throughout the twentieth century, particularly his 2007 Olympus Award from the Russian Academy of Sciences. Ray Bradbury, writing at the height of McCarthyism, when Cold War tensions haunted nearly every aspect of civilian life in the U. S., was read by Russians and Americans alike. His vision for space exploration transcended national boundaries, imagining a widespread, collaborative human endeavor to the point that it was appreciated by archrivals. Perhaps this point is most profoundly illustrated in the details of Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev's June 1990 visit to the United States. Gorbachev invited his family's two favorite authors, Isaac Asimov and Ray Bradbury, to a state luncheon given at the Russian Embassy in Washington, D. C.²

Bradbury's contributions as a space-age visionary expanded his influence into the next frontier. During the 1960s, Bradbury emerged on an international level as one of the most popular and dynamic advocates for space exploration. His award-winning articles for *Life* magazine excited millions of readers about humanity's potential to reach the stars, and he became a frequent speaker at Caltech and the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena.³ As the space program began to focus on unmanned exploration after the Apollo missions, Bradbury continued his devoted support of the space program through continued interactions with Jet Propulsion Laboratory teams as well as the Caltech faculty who played vital roles in the Mariner 9 orbital photographic surveys of Mars; the Viking Mars landings; the Voyager missions to Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, and Neptune; the Mars Odyssey's thermal imaging program; and the first Mars rovers—Spirit and Opportunity. While dozens of artifacts and mementos commemorating Bradbury's prolonged engagement with these space exploration programs are housed in the Ray Bradbury Center, his broad influence is also effected in numerous global interplanetary achievements. For example, the Phoenix Mars Lander brought a digitized copy of Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles* to the red planet where it remains at the time of this writing. On August

2 Bob Remington, "Ray Bradbury," *Edmonton Journal*; Eller, *Bradbury Beyond Apollo*, pp. 184–185.

3 CoconutScienceLab, *Ray Bradbury - An Inspiration, Visits JPL | NASA Mars Rover Program Science Fiction HD*, accessed November 19, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H-h7eiGA85ws>.

22, 2012, just ten weeks after Bradbury's passing, the rover Curiosity's touchdown point on Mars was re-named "Bradbury Landing."⁴ Additionally, scientists and astronauts who came of age reading Bradbury's works have named a moon crater, an asteroid, and several Martian terrain features in his honor.

Bradbury's science fiction stories approached space travel with a sense of childlike wonder, and that sense of wonder was imparted to many of his readers. His dreams of space became their dreams, and this inspiring influence eventually led to friendships with astronauts Michael Collins and Buzz Aldrin (Apollo 11), Alan Bean (Apollo 12), David Scott (Apollo 9 and 15), and Harrison Schmidt (Apollo 17), as well as such Space Age luminaries as writer Arthur C. Clarke, astronomer Carl Sagan, and Jet Propulsion Laboratory director Bruce Murray.

It is certainly possible (though difficult) to overstate Bradbury's importance as a twentieth century American writer, but it is impossible to deny his wide-ranging cultural significance. Scholars of twentieth century American film, history, space exploration, television, and literature cannot *broadly* examine what was going on in the United States during the latter half of the twentieth century without acknowledging, on some level, Bradbury's pervasive influence.



What got you started in the Ray Bradbury Center (RBC)?

That is a long story. Let's just say that it was a series of extremely fortunate events. I still can't believe that I get to do what I do for a living.

4 Alison Flood, "Ray Bradbury's Influence on Our Culture Was Transformative, Says Barack Obama," *The Guardian*, June 7, 2012, sec. Books, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/jun/07/ray-bradbury-influence-barack-obama>; Dwayne Brown and Steve Cole, "NASA Mars Rover Begins Driving at Bradbury Landing," Press Releases, NASA, August 22, 2012, https://www.nasa.gov/home/hqnews/2012/aug/HQ_12-292_Mars_Bradbury_Landing.html.

What does the RBC do? How does RBC keep Bradbury's memory alive today?

Dr. Jon Eller, the world's foremost scholar on Ray Bradbury, articulated four thematic principles and causes inextricably linked to Bradbury's legacy:

1) intellectual and creative freedom: this includes matters pertaining to free speech, freedom of the imagination, and the freedom of human beings to pursue the things they love.

2) looking to the stars for the future of humanity: Bradbury was one of the primary visionaries of the Space Age. His stories about human beings reaching other planets and exploring new worlds are rooted in a childlike wonder at the combined beauties and terrors of the universe. His stories of space travel touched many astronauts, planetary scientists, astrophysicists, and astronomers as they determined their careers, and throughout the 1960s and beyond, his dreams of space and the excitement for the space program that he communicated in award winning articles caught the collective imagination of the American public. His dreams became our dreams.

3) advocacy for public libraries: knowledge should be free and accessible to everyone regardless of race, creed, social status, class, or gender.

4) celebration of the precious gift of literacy: the ability to read, to encounter magnificent stories, and to interact with the thoughts and ideas of some of the most interesting figures in history is a gift. It should be celebrated and put to good use. Literacy is the primary harbinger of the past, present, and future of all culture in developed countries.

While all four of these ideas remain relevant in the twenty-first century, Bradbury's passion for literacy and his firm belief that people should be able to engage in literacy regardless of class and social standing is especially pertinent, but the primary audience for these items exists outside of a university context. For humanities centers such as the Bradbury Center, it is imperative that we extend beyond the ivory tower of academia and provide rich programming for everyone, not just scholars. The Ray Bradbury Center can use its resources to advance Bradbury's legacy in the Indianapolis area and beyond. Limited resources, however—both in terms of finances and time constraints on employees—currently prevent the Center from excelling in any one of these four initiatives. For this reason, we have narrowed the focus to one of these four themes: literacy development in people of all ages and skill levels and public access to libraries so that everyone can explore and develop his/her personal literacy.

What do you think is the coolest item in the RBC?

Ray Bradbury's original writer's desk—the desk he used for the early part of his career. The stories from *The October Country*, *The Illustrated Man*, *The Martian Chronicles* and many others were typed right there at this desk.



Bradbury working at his desk



Bradbury's original desk (now featured in the Ray Bradbury Center)

Our thanks to the Bradbury Center for the photographs featured throughout this interview.

Artists' Statements

IUPUI Students

Truitt Anweiler is a senior studying English—Creative Writing at IUPUI. From growing up in small-town Indiana to living in Indianapolis, writing and storytelling has long been one of the biggest impacts on his life; he wishes to stir up readers to remind them of experiences that matter to them.

Jasmine Bailey supports others who struggle with mental illness and uses art to portray the thoughts and emotions that may underlie the various conditions that she and others may have experienced.

On “Major Depressive Disorder,” Jasmine says: This piece in particular is one that gives deeper meaning to what it is like having depression. The feeling of emptiness, uncontrollable outbursts, self-harm, insomniac episodes, and total isolation. It’s like the body is peeling apart and every piece falls like a landslide or sometimes it’s like drowning into a pit of dread. This disorder can give you a nagging sense of doubt that your life is important and that there is nobody to help or save you from the pain. The sad truth is that there is no cure for depression. But there is always hope.

Kyle Battin practices visual communication design within Herron School of Art + Design (BFA 2023). His formal VCD study began in 2009, followed by military service. Afterward, he studied illustration at the School of Visual Arts in NYC. Kyle is aspiring toward a career within user experience design.

On “Liminal,” Kyle says: No amount of preparedness or endurance can sharpen a person to the complexities of the literal machine in which we coexist. “Liminal,” by definition, is occupying a threshold. However, there is no arrival point in a system meant to plug you in and use you for its own ends.

Jane Bowman has been a student at IUPUI since 1985. She has studied Spanish (BA 1995), French, Russian and Italian. She has studied abroad for each language, twice with IU Overseas Studies. She took a break from 2001-2022 and has now decided to study German with plans to study in Germany in the summer of 2024. She has used her language studies to enjoy many trips to South America, Europe, and Asia. She is a previous contributor to *genesis* and writes short stories and poetry. At 80 years old, her stories and poetry tend to deal with the subject of aging.

On “Slipping Away, Frank and Mattie,” Jane says: This story was the first of several about Dementia or Alzheimer’s Disease. These stories include a couple in their late 70s, early onset of Alzheimer’s for a woman aged 44, her caregiver husband, and the two left behind. Now an 80-year-old woman becomes a comforter and mentor to her neighbor now aged 56.

Veronica Breach is a Drawing and Illustration major in her senior year. Fairy tales and folklore serve as frequent inspiration for her work, and she counts many of her favorite artists from the Golden Age of Illustration. She enjoys horror movies and vintage fashion, and has a large collection of ceramic cats. You can find more of her work @bitterbriar on Instagram.

On “The Sun,” Veronica says: [This piece is] a design for “The Sun” tarot card, from my thesis work “The Briar Witch Tarot.”

Christopher Cassetty is a 19-year-old student at IUPUI pursuing a BA in English. In his free time, he often writes poetry and prose about his mental health and past. He enjoys making music, writing, reading, and spending time with his friends and family.

On “Poppies,” Christopher says: [This poem] is a story about love and lament. The poem takes place from the perspective of something sitting at the speaker’s bedside, watching a dying poppy flower nearby. The speaker laments the death of the flower. The poem exudes tones of disillusionment, codependency, and addiction. The message of the piece is to conclude that not all love is made in good heart.

Nya A. Gaines is a junior majoring in creative writing with a minor in Japanese. She enjoys learning about other cultures so that she can incorporate what she learns into her writings. She aspires to be a movie director to create and share her stories in a visual form.

LyNae Golder is a senior at IUPUI. She is majoring in English with a concentration in Professional and Public Writing and minoring in Spanish. They reside in Indianapolis with their partner and three cats, Lilly, Jerry, and Max. When they’re not nose-deep into schoolwork, they’re writing, reading, or watching one of their comfort shows.

Ben Grimes is a Junior at IUPUI majoring in Biology and in Religious Studies. He’s happy to be here.

On “Taste a Little Waste with You,” Ben says: He is not good at writing scenes with romantic tension. The adjectives he uses to set the scene end up far too unsexy; words like “slimy”, “lithe”, and others which evoke a humid and uncomfortable atmosphere. This was an attempt to write a romantic scene that played to his strengths.

Danielle Harrell is a junior majoring in Drawing & Illustration.

Kira Humes is currently a junior at Herron School of Art and Design studying Printmaking and Drawing/Illustration. They work in a variety of mediums including digital, resin, etching, screen printing, and traditional drawing mediums. Outside of school, they hang out with their cats, listen to music, and advocate for disability accommodations on campus.

Kim Kile is an Indiana native whose poetic inspiration usually comes while driving or washing her hair. She's a doctoral student at IUPUI in the American Studies program whose focus is using bibliotherapy to help children and young adults overcome traumatic events in their lives by writing poetry or reading books.

On "The Problem with Funeral Plants," Kim says: The inspiration for [this piece] was a dying peace lily, an actual funeral plant, in the author's dining room that became a living metaphor for the emotions she had after losing her mother-in-law to long-haul COVID in 2021.

On "What I Used to Love," Kim says: When her grandson died at 34 weeks, Kim had an overwhelming grief that expressed itself in the form of poetry. Phrases tumbled out, waiting for her to piece them together into "What I Used to Love." Speaking to Theo directly was her way of keeping him alive and forever remembered.

Kayla McVeigh is a student majoring in linguistics at IUPUI. She was born and raised on the Kenai Peninsula in the coastal town of Homer, Alaska. She hopes to join language conservation efforts that work with Indigenous communities to support protecting endangered languages.

Alexandra Napers is an Indianapolis born and raised artist currently pursuing a Bachelors of Fine Arts at Herron School of Art and Design. Napers works with various media in her personal practice, but focuses on painting and drawing mediums. Her work investigates themes of spirituality in nature and the human experience. In addition to her own personal artistic explorations, Napers has a deep interest in art therapy, hoping to share the benefits of art in relation to mental health with others in her future career.

On "Autumn Adventures 2021," Alexandra says: Archiving memories doesn't have to look a certain way. Scrapbooking was never for her, so she thought of another way to artistically document her life experiences. She went on multiple hiking trips in the fall of 2021 and wanted to keep record of the findings and happenings in a collage style painting with an experimental twist. The colors on this canvas were created using raw natural pigments sourced anywhere from the trails she hiked to her kitchen at home. This process taught her about paint making practices that had been previously foreign, as well as bringing her closer to the nature she's always been so fond of. It was an important reminder to her that exploration, whether it be academic or adventurous, should never stop.

Carmen Nobbe is a student at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis who attends the Herron School of Art and Design. Carmen is majoring in Integrative Studio Practice with concentrations in Drawing & Illustration and Painting. She plans to minor in Pre-Art Therapy and pursue IUPUI's Art Therapy Master's program after her undergraduate studies.

On "Sweet Dreams," Carmen says: This nostalgic piece reminds her of her stuffed bunny waiting for her to crawl into bed after a long day of playing

and imagination as a young child. She enjoys creating nostalgic pieces to connect herself with her childhood memories.

Lio Patrick writes primarily fiction. He is earning a degree in English literature with a minor in German. This is his last semester of college. After graduation, he hopes to get a day job and begin working on a novel. He hopes you're taking care.

Cassandra Rodriguez is a freshman studying creative writing. In her free time, she loves to write, watch fun movies, and play/listen to music.

Ava Russell is a junior studying creative writing with the hopes of becoming a published author, as well as working in editing or publishing. She loves to write about all things spooky, creepy, and weird but also enjoys using writing as a means of self-exploration.

Natalie Starks is a senior Painting major at IUPUI's Herron School of Art and Design. Her paintings explore the hopeful optimism that is necessary in a dark and scary world, using man-made light sources as her main subject matter. After graduation she plans to build her own business, making and selling her artworks full-time.

On "Bloody Mary," Natalie says: Is Bloody Mary real? Or is she simply a figment of our imaginations? Similarly, are the problems we create in our head real, or are they figments of our imaginations? This work asks questions about low self-esteem and how the ways we think people perceive us usually are not real.

On "Warm Inside," Natalie says: When we're surrounded by darkness, where do we look for the light? How do we hold out until the light of the morning comes? Finding comfort and peace within yourself can be hard in the midst of the chaos and uncertainty of the world. In this work, she investigates the ways we can find that internal warmth.

Savanna Williams is a freshman at IUPUI. She is currently pursuing her major in Psychology and minor in English. Savanna goes through her day to day life finding poetry in the little things, as she enjoys the creative break. She works hard and loves even harder.

On "Defending Death by Overdose," Savanna says: She wrote this poem in hopes to spread awareness of the very real reality of the opioid crisis in America. Please love yourselves, others, and your bodies.

Ashley Wilson is a current sophomore double majoring in Creative Writing and Journalism. She is a writer and photographer. When she is not writing or taking photos, she advocates for LGBTQ+/human rights and makes a lot of baked goods.

Sarah Wulf is a junior Creative Writing and History Major at IUPUI. She lives with her parents, sister, and an old dog. When she's not writing, she likes trying new restaurants with her family.

Bradbury-Inspired Contributors

Christopher James Bollinger is a writer and illustrator whose inspirations include Ray Bradbury, Sherwood Anderson, and Edward Gorey. He writes pieces that aren't chained to a specific genre, often blurring the lines between art and literature. He has authored multiple collections of poetry and short fiction.

Kyrsten Carlson, as a stay-at-home mom, learned the importance of taking time for her passion—writing. With a son whose middle name is Bradbury, her influence is clear. From cats to bags of dinosaurs, she paints, collects, and loves.

On “The Master in Pieces,” Kyrsten says: She visited the Museum of Modern Art in San Francisco and had a thought. *What if someone was murdered in a museum and people thought it was art?* Instead, [this piece] came screaming from her fingertips needing to be told.

Lance Hawvermale, long ago, fell in love with the prose of *Something Wicked This Way Comes* while riding in the back of a bus on the way to a high school football game. These days he serves as an English instructor and, as Bradbury once advised, stays drunk on writing.

Ron Keedy, before retiring, was a career motion picture projectionist for over 50 years. His love of the short story and poetry stems from childhood exposure to authors Isaac Asimov, Robert Heinlein and especially from the magnificent word pictures of Ray Bradbury.

On “The Clodhoppers of Winter,” Ron says: Countless barefoot summers roaming Milligan Park in Crawfordsville, Indiana was, in part, the inspiration for [this piece].

On “Silver Flash Minnows and Pickle Green Frogs,” Ron says: The youthful innocence of being raised on the banks of Sugar Creek in Crawfordsville, IN, was the inspiration for [this piece].

Tim W. Kuzniar, gifted with natural talent for drawing, has been an illustrator all his life. Early interest in astronomy led to an embrace of the specialized field of space art. Currently, Tim is exploring the realms of science fiction and fantasy, participating in many art shows at SF&F conventions nationwide.

On “The Halloween Tree,” Tim says: One of his favorite authors was Ray Bradbury. This is a tribute to his shared love of autumn and one of his favorites of Bradbury's stories.

Jordan Orwig is a public librarian and received his Master of Library and Information Science degree from IUPUI. Writing off and on for years, he enjoys reading, running, and Dungeons & Dragons. His literary favorites include China Miéville, Joe Hill, and Ray Bradbury. He lives in Indiana with his family.

On “Monster Sale,” Jordan says: The inspiration for the work came about after [he] drove by a car dealership and saw a sign that matched the story's

title. The story was influenced by [his] time spent as a sales rep, his love of monsters, and the October Country.

Corrine Phillips is an artist, autumn person, and the author of two poetry collections: *And The Garden Grew* and *The Billion Ghosts Awandering*. When she's not creating, you'll find her reading way through too many books at once, exploring old graveyards, and dreaming of Halloween.

Roger Terry, a lover of books and libraries, has dedicated his life to the craft of writing.

On "From Ray, With Love," Roger says: [This piece] was written for the purpose of immortalizing not only a piece of life, but in hopes to aid in Ray Bradbury's lifelong endeavor, that he may truly "Live Forever!"

Edward Whatley is an Associate Professor of Library Science at Georgia College & State University. Like many readers, he discovered the works of Ray Bradbury at a fairly young age and became a lifelong fan.

On "Idyllic Past Nostalgic Futures," Edward says: Nostalgia runs through not only Bradbury's tales of the past, such as *Dandelion Wine*, but also through his tales of the future, such as *The Martian Chronicles*. Bradbury essentially took his idyllic version of small-town America and transported it to the Red Planet.

Curtis Williamson is a Midwest-based, self-taught artist whose work focuses on the human form. He currently lives in Indiana with his wife, daughter, and two mutts.

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