

# Opulse

LITERARY MAGAZINE

# pulse

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# COZUMEL

As we were walking out of the tequila shop, I looked at my watch and realized we had about two hours before we had to get to the docks if we wanted to make it there in time for the guided tour on the Sea Goer. Whatever that means, such a weird name. We needed to get lunch now.

"John, why did you decide to go with that one? It's like 200 dollars!" I asked.

"Well, let's be honest here, it was the only one I didn't think I could use in my lawnmower, and it's blue!" said John.

"Ok, fair enough. It definitely was one of the best tasting ones they had. Honestly, the rest tasted like I was drinking something that was a mix between Jose and gasoline." I said.

"I have to agree. It was really cool drinking something that kind of tasted like blue raspberry," said Jake.

"Ok, so where do you guys want to eat?" asked John.

"So, we heard from one of the locals that there was a great restaurant not far from here." I said.

"Ok, you and Jake be careful. Jenny and I are going to go to one of the local bars and get some enchiladas," said John.

We finally waved down a taxi. It's a dark blue 1990 Ford Tiempo sedan with a sign strapped to the top stating TAXI. We noticed that there was a thick layer of dust and realized it hadn't seen a car wash in years. We attempted to explain that we were wanting to go to a local restaurant to the taxi driver, but there was a problem: Jake and I couldn't speak Spanish. We tried to use some terrible Spanglish that resembled restaurant with an added "ah" accent at the end. He responds, with a rolled cigarette in his mouth, a slur a words that could've easily been in the Guinness book of world records for most words spoken in five seconds.

Finally after what seemed like a century of back and forth and exchanging of noises, he made a sound that resembled something to the effect of "AHHH Si, Si."

He motioned for us to get into the car. Jake got in the front seat and I got into the back. As we both were getting in, we took a look around and both the back seat and front seat were covered with some sort of red and white blanket that reminded us of a pancho- the kind you would buy at a tourist shop. We also noticed that the car had a very strong cigarette smell that almost took our breath away. The taxi driver ground the car into first gear and smoked the tires like a fugitive getaway car. Jake and I gave each other a look of Holy shit what did we just get ourselves into.

Before we knew it we were down some alley way going entirely way too fast. He made a left—then a right; each time the tires screamed for mercy. We're back onto a two lane road and there were

motorcycles with three people on them (some even were carrying boxes), and some old Toyota Tacoma's that were covered in rust. Even a few donkeys were on the sidewalks. We gave each other another glance and silently say through our gaze: we are going to die, this is the end, this is it, this is where we get shot in Mexico, in a 1990 Tiempo. Or even better, this taxi driver is part of some cartel that kidnaps tourists and holds them hostage for ransom. We could see it: 20,000 dollars apiece.

Just as I'm mid thought, Jake gave me a nod as if saying, Just say the words. I'll take this taxi driver out, hijack his taxi and we'll head back to the boat. Just as I'm about to decide what we're going to do, the taxi took a sharp left and came to a screeching stop. We looked to our right and saw a rustic metal entry archway that was covered with vines that were draped all around the property.

We looked inside the rustic metal fence, and we saw a beautiful terrace that was full of palm trees, beautiful flowers, hanging plants, and stone statues placed throughout. This place looked to be fit for a king.

The exterior of this palace was made of a red plaster material, no windows just archway after archway, and the doors were trimmed with a beautiful white brick like artwork. On the front of this elegant mansion was a sign that said Restaurant Casa Mission. We look at each other with disbelief, and we slowly turned toward the taxi driver. He gave us the biggest smile. He quietly said, "50 pesos."

Prose by Kodi Sells

# Virility Falls



Numbing wind lashes my face and threatens to turn my fingers into nerveless clots. My breath comes with hitching rapidity and my left heel bounces like the needle on a sewing machine. A throbbing spasm makes the calf muscle feel like a boiled noodle. My right leg is fine except that it refuses to obey my command to leave a snug ledge and join its terrified brother on the Southern face of Dobongsan.

Prose by *Curtis Mayo*

The edifice of this mountain looms like a morbid fang over Northern Seoul. It's a single, barren slab that plunges nearly two thousand feet into the valley underfoot where a canopy of shimmering gold and orange undulates toward the megacity. From here, Seoul seems like an ant colony, and as the inhabitants scurry homeward on freeways, amid the workday exodus, they remind me of why I disdain cities and all of their clutter.

Returning my gaze to the Technicolor veil below, I briefly admire its beauty—until a swath of crimson demands my attention. Suddenly, I see the battlements of trees under this façade as gnarled, blood-thirsty daggers, stretching upward, beckoning me to join them. I imagine myself crashing through their ranks, flesh tearing upon their knobby veneer, until my lifeless body nurtures their soil. A chilling gust obliterates my static terror and rattles my grip on the wall.

While I freeze on the Eastern edge of this cliff, the drums of a small temple, nestled on the mountainside, reach my ears. Longingly, I cast a glance down at Buddha's shrine; it would seem inviting, were it not so incredibly small and surrounded by murderous trees. My strength is callously ripped away as panic surges through my veins, and my faith hemorrhages while I impotently straddle hell and a shameful retreat. It occurs to me that I will never complete the final, grueling, two hundred feet, to where my friend Cristi waits on belay. Hanging my head low, my helmet rests pitifully on the raw granite cathedral to which I cling. I must face my climbing partner as a discreditable student, and make the long, empty descent to return to my girlfriend a debased man. I remain in this pathetic stance for what seems like hours, until a slight tug of the rope causes me to crane my neck toward the summit.

As the wind slows, I hear Cristi's voice faintly from over the edge. His Romanian accent is difficult to understand from here, but I believe he is telling me that there is only one way down. I look around again and reluctantly decide that he is correct. He has climbed us into a trap and the only way down is up! Smoldering frustration packs the panic neatly inside, and before I know it, I have committed all my weight to my tremulous left leg. In a newfound enthusiasm to confront Cristi for his carelessness, I shift myself from the awkward perch and stand poised to begin a final push for the top. Drawing a deep and steady breath produces grim determination and I accept the unknown.

Tiptoeing on a ledge the width of a dime causes the vision below to become surreal, detached from comprehension. I wedge a hand tightly into the small, vertical crack above my head, and although there is pain, it is distant and no longer connected to me. Smearing my feet vertically on the rock, I trust all my weight to this small hold. Suspended above the void, my muscles surge in a lunge for the next grip and I am consumed in nothingness. There is a feeling of infinitesimal existence as the vastness of the world yawns behind, and the mountains present themselves in their horrifying majesty. Infinite powers of creation and destruction run seamlessly into a timeless nexus. In this place, no emotions exist.

There is no memory, no hope for the future, no tangible form of self. For the first time, the constant hum of anxiety washes away and in its place is a deafening silence. The body moves without clear choice or logic and the soul is free. Perception of time and the surrounding world grinds back into consciousness as my eyes are greeted by a pale, ugly, human foot. Cristi has removed his restrictive climbing shoes while on belay, and smiling down at me, he chirps, "Welcome back!"

With an enormous childlike grin, I mantle the final move and top out next to him. We shift from the edge and I accept his help untying the rope from my harness; the abuse of my hands is too fresh to work the knot free. On the faltering legs of a toddler, I follow him to a nook protected from the wind. There we share a thermos of coffee while I smoke, thankful for some good old, earthy tobacco. Afterward, we hike down the ridges and repel the small bluffs. We are both pretty quiet except for occasional small talk. I later identify my silence with the drained satisfaction of the climb's afterglow. I don't recall being upset with Cristi until Seoul blurs from inside the bullet train heading home. Rocketing through the city and marveling at its electric, kaleidoscopic pulse, I am reminded of the dazzling canopy of the trees, and from that moment, I find it impossible to hold a grudge.




# The Silence of Our Friends

Poem by Ariane Kitenge Mikombe

*I heard an explosion  
I heard the screaming of a man begging for his death,  
The cry of a mother as she holds her dead child  
I heard a wife bewails her husband's death  
But I heard it is nothing new  
A past that has been fought to never become a future  
Has become a present that the future can't forget  
Millions and millions were gone  
Women, children, men  
But that wasn't the truth  
The truth was that millions and millions were taken  
Not women, nor children, nor men  
But a mother, a wife, a sister  
A father, a husband, a brother  
A daughter, a son, a child  
All taken as if they were less valuable than animals  
Today "humanity" is nothing other than a word  
A word without meaning, without power  
I recall humanity as the strongest and the most powerful word  
As the future recalls the humans we were  
Humanity once was the strongest and the most powerful word  
Because it meant "we"  
It meant unity in a storm, selflessness in a hurricane  
Hope in the darkest hours  
Life is worth saving  
A soul is sacred  
Today humanity has no meaning, once we were more valuable than a dog  
Today we are nothing that the future can glorify  
We took those who stand*

*Opinion can't be given  
We laugh at the tears of our own  
We are no more human  
We took lives without any remorse  
We built our nation on fear and named it freedom  
Millions and millions were taken  
But I heard it's nothing new  
It only matters when it's us  
I heard the end is coming  
But there is nothing left to fight for  
No one to stand for a change  
I heard an explosion  
Millions and millions were taken  
What was once a color of passion is now a color of inhumanity  
The bloodshed has repainted our world without us noticing  
As I looked at my hands  
The red color that has repainted them has left me paralyzed  
Afraid of my one voice, I shut it down  
I took their lives as I remained silent  
Scared to be heard, scared to be judged, and scared to fight  
The future that we once feared to be has become our reality  
The story that we write today is one of our extinction  
Millions and millions were taken  
But I heard it's nothing new  
The only thing new is: "it's us instead of them."*



# *As You I Aspire to Be*

Poem by Amy Castle

*Dear Mom,  
My grief comes in many forms.*

*My grief is a drenched pillow covered in snot.  
My grief is the uncomfortable stare from a random  
councilor.*

*The fact that you are still gone,  
Never strays far from my mind.*

*My grief suffocates my laughter, choking me.  
My grief controls my mood.*

*I must cling to your memory like  
Wet clothes cling to the body after getting caught  
in a torrential downpour.*

*I have to remember you through words,  
So that I'll never forget what you were like.*

*Your memory is fading like an old polaroid,  
That's almost lost its image.*

*I love you.*

*It's been eight years,  
but I still remember that you are:*

*A Lover of Literature, and  
Have Diligent Demeanor.*

*2AM walks to the bathroom included  
looking down the stairs  
To see you unapologetically absorbed in a book  
that you wouldn't put down until you finish.*

*That's me now.*

*An Involved Inspirer, and  
A Strong-willed Supporter.*

*Your lawn chair was cemented on the sideline of  
every softball game of mine  
Consistently in place like the Statue of Liberty.*

*That's me now.*

*Are Fearlessly Friendly, and  
A Compassionate Councilor.*

*Like how I could never get you to stop talking to  
one of your friends,  
When all I wanted to do was go home.*

*That's me now.*

*I aspire to keep following your example, and  
Not let my grief rule my life anymore.*

*Love,  
Your little girl.*

# “IMPERFECTION”

“Imperfection is okay,” I whisper to myself as I place my eraser between my teeth instead of unleashing it upon my paper. Somewhere along the way, between the countless iterations of my newly adopted mantra, the lines have blurred so much that I can no longer tell whether I utter those three lonely little words so desperately as a crutch for my inevitable mediocrity, or as a warning of the impossibility of achieving flawlessness. Now, rather than obsessing over the strife for perfection, I’m obsessing over my obsession. My fingertips ache with the residue of my mistakes, my eyes burn from staring at the spaces that used to be blank and are now smeared with average. I close my eyes and wish for the blank to return; completely empty is better than half-filled with half-decency. “Imperfection is okay.”w The words burn my tongue and etch themselves into the back of my eyelids. I don’t think I really believe them. If I did, my skin wouldn’t itch like falsehoods were growing from my follicles and I wouldn’t have such a goddamn headache all the time. “Imperfection is okay.” I erase the page and start again.

# The Lesser of Two Evils

Prose by *Marissa Merriman*

This headband, with cat ears attached on the top, feels tight around my scalp and the edges are digging into the back of my ears. My classmate, Adrian, gave it to me from her Halloween costume because she claims that: "My long hair looks prettier with a cute headband." Sure, my straight, chocolate brown hair has grown all the way down to my bellybutton, but if I cut it short, my mom curls the tips to frame my face and she always burns me with the iron. So, I did what I have always done in these situations: choose the lesser of two evils. I'd rather walk out in public with a painful headband instead of burn marks on my cheeks. This has always been an effective strategy for me... but I don't think that it will save me now.

"I didn't do anything, I swear!" I pleaded, practically begging her to believe me. My skin is red with fear, my foot taps on the hardwood floor of our kitchen, and my hands cling to the left and right edges of the chair. I can feel my heart pounding in my chest: thump-thump, thump-thump. I blink my brown eyes quickly to try and prevent tears from forming, but that's also not working out so well. My pink t-shirt has pit stains, my blue jeans feel itchy, and all I want to do is go upstairs and fall asleep. However, I'm stuck in the kitchen with my mom towering over me, folding her arms, and glaring down at me. "You were at Mickey's 13th birthday party yesterday, Piper. I know that you ran into Adrian and Tiffany, because they were there, too," she says with complete certainty in her tone. I gulp in fear of her and break eye contact by looking around the kitchen, searching for a good justification in the darkness. The sun has gone down and the entire house is completely dark, except for the light right above our heads. This interrogation is making the air thick and difficult to breathe, but I force my hands to relax and my shoulders shrug after several seconds of not knowing what to say to her.

"I know, and I did... but I didn't say or do anything!" I reply, looking back up at her. She sucks her teeth and shakes her head, like she doesn't believe me. Her pixie-cut blonde hair swings with her head and her brown eyes close. She places her freckled hands on her hips and remains silent for a moment. My shoulders are still shrugging because I have absolutely no idea what she wants me to say. Of course I was at that party, and I hung around them, but why does she assume that this is my fault? I huff with frustration as she opens her eyes and takes a deep breath, obviously trying to control her anger.

"Those girls' parents called me while you were in school. Both of them stated that you were with them while they harassed that poor girl over text message," my mom explains. My jaw falls open for a moment, angry that they would throw me under the bus so quickly. I also wasn't expecting this to be such a big

deal. Adrian and Tiffany are my acquaintances more so than friends, but they were the only ones who acknowledged me at that party. What was I supposed to do? Sit in the corner while they had fun, like a 13-year-old loser? I'm a goody-two-shoes, but even I know that having fun isn't a crime. I shut my mouth and straighten up in the chair.

"They weren't harassing Amber, it was just a prank." I correct her rudely. She scoffs at me as I fold my arms and fall back into a slouch, realizing that I don't have the liberty of choosing between the lesser of two evils in this case. I'm getting in BIG trouble no matter what I say or do, which is ironic, because I never said or did anything in regards to participating in the prank. Adrian came up with the idea because we were bored and Amber annoyed her at school. Amber wasn't at the party and Tiffany happened to be the only one who owns a cell phone, so she lent it to Adrian, and they began to anonymously text Amber. I admit that it might have gotten out of hand, but I was an innocent bystander! I never touched that phone or told them what to say. I explain this story to my mom at length, and she remains silent while I talk, but her expression has changed. She suddenly looks sad.

"They told Amber that one of her best friends was dead, Piper," she reminds me. "Then they proceeded to text her from a completely different

phone number and claimed that it was the ghost of the friend." I throw my hands up in the air and look at her like she's crazy, because she is. We never meant to actually hurt her. It was a joke! I didn't come up with the idea, but I agreed that it sounded absolutely ridiculous because we genuinely thought that she would have to be the most gullible person on the planet to believe it... or at least I thought that.

"You're making it sound way worse than it actually was. Who would actually believe that?" I ask with a laugh. However, when my mom suddenly slams a hand down on the table, which makes me almost jump out of my skin, I tense up in the chair again and understand her seriousness. She leans into me close enough to almost touch her nose with my nose.

"Piper, if you received an anonymous text message stating that one of your best friends was dead... how would you feel?" She asks me in a scary tone. My palms start to sweat as my heart suddenly drops into my stomach and I begin to feel nauseous. I look down into my lap, slide down in my chair, and my entire body shivers because I finally understand how upset Amber must have been, whether she believed the joke or not. I run a hand through my hair and accidentally knock the headband off of my head. It hits the ground with a loud smack. I take a shaky breath after a moment of



silence and look back up at my mom, still gripping my hair. "How is she?" I ask in a whisper, too scared to keep up the innocent act. She leans away from me and bites her lip, like she's debating whether to tell me or not.

"You all bullied and scared the hell out of her. I'm not going to sugarcoat anything for you. She was so upset and terrified over this that she almost tried to take her own life. Thankfully her mother caught her before she went through with it," her voice breaks as she finishes. The combination of watching my mother choke up and the guilt that I felt brought me to tears. I never meant for that to happen and I've never been called a bully before, especially not by my own mother.

"I didn't mean to - I never said anything to her!" I keep repeating, trying to validate this as much as possible. She raises her eyebrows at me, like she's astonished at my reaction to all of this. She continues to shake her head.

"That doesn't matter. You never stopped them, and clearly, you didn't believe that what they did was wrong. I bet that you were laughing right beside them the entire time. I thought I raised you better than that," she says condescendingly as my crying becomes sobbing. I nod, then bury my head in my hands and lean forward in the chair. I rock myself back and forth for about a minute before mom kneels down next to me and tries to calm me down. I straighten back up and wipe the tears off of my face.

"It didn't even feel real. Bullying her, I mean. I didn't think that we were actually hurting her." I whisper with a congested tone. Mom nods, picks up my headband, places it in my hands, and pushes the rest of my hair out of my face. I place the cat-eared headband back on my head with a flinch.

"I believe that you didn't mean to hurt her." She says, ignoring my flinch. I sniffle and wipe a finger underneath my nose, feeling calmer.

"So, what happens now?" I ask worriedly. Mom takes a deep breath.

"You confess to everyone," she answers. I sigh heavily and fall back against the chair again. I immediately know what my defense statement will be.

"I swear that I witnessed it, but I never said or did anything to Amber! I just let it happen, which, in hindsight, is not nearly as bad as actually participating... right?"



# Our Time

*Our time is vapor.  
A simple piece of paper.  
Inked from the thoughts in our head,  
Down to everything we said.*

*In the blink of an eye,  
Our lives could pass by.  
We should be God's fount,  
And make our lives count.*

*Life may seem short.  
Life may seem long.  
No matter the course,  
We should finish strong.*

# DON'T EMBALM ME, I'M NOT DEAD

*You wonder why I wear a mask,  
Yet scream when you see what's beneath.  
I've learned to conceal my true face,  
So I can have some kind of relief*

*From the bone-crushing stares  
And the razor-blade words.  
I just want to be MYSELF!  
Why is that so absurd?*

*I always say, "I don't care."  
It doesn't matter what you think.  
But inside I am bailing out  
Water as I try not to sink.*

*I'm choking on expectations  
Of who I'm supposed to become.  
Why isn't it enough  
just to be someone?*

*I should be used to it by now  
Because every time it's the same,  
You carve your impression of me  
Into the essence of my name.*

*Each syllable that used to be  
So scrumptious and sweet,  
Now drips with assumptions  
I don't dare to eat.*

*To escape I don heels making  
Monuments of my soles,  
Hoping the extra height will help me  
Take back what you stole.*

*You've captured my whole person,  
It's now immured in your palm.  
"Don't worry," you say,  
"I know how to embalm!"*

*Then you take my true self  
And you sweeten it up,  
So sickeningly sweet,  
I think I might throw up.*

*Until I am not me—  
I'm no longer myself—  
Just a wig-wearing mannequin,  
Gathering dust on a shelf.*

Poem by Rylie Wahl

# But Still

*They took my voice  
As they turn away  
They left me a tissue for my tears  
But they took everything  
All I have left is a tissue  
And my hands  
A tissue for my tears  
And my hands to wipe the tears out  
To you it was nothing else than water  
You didn't see the words behind the tears  
You didn't hear the scream in my silence  
You are wrong, your tissue but my words  
You took my voice but I still got my hands  
Today I'll use my hands as my voice to speak  
Tissue, tissue, tissue that's all you saw  
I saw the carrier, carrier of my words  
I made it the platform of my words  
I took my tears as the ink of my writing  
Each of them means speak, shout, and let it out  
They might not read it or see between the lines  
But say it, say it as hard as you can  
As loud as you can  
Make them remember your voice  
You might have taken it all  
Broke me into a thousand pieces  
But you gave me a tissue with the ink  
So thank you for leaving me.*

Poem by Ariane Kitenge Mikombe

# *My Escape*

Prose by *Marissa Merriman*

I curled my fingers around the cold doorknob, twisted it to the right, and struggled to pull the large black door open. I felt a blast of warm air rush over me as I stepped into the school hallway and let the door slam shut behind me. I stood still for a moment. I watched students dressed in tan khakis with white sweaters, or brown and white plaid skirts with dark brown sweaters, fly past me as though I was the only one moving in slow motion. I constantly felt like everyone was moving forward a lot faster than me. However, I would always remain right where I was. No matter how hard I tried to move my feet as fast as everyone else, they were never going to feel like anything other than cinder blocks. I felt my heavy eyelids shut, and I asked the same question I have been asking myself all year: Why did I even bother showing up to school today? I turned around to walk back out the door when I felt a strong hand grasp my arm.

"Hey, where are you going, Rachel?" a deep voice asked. My tired eyes snapped open and I instinctively ripped my arm away from my varsity softball coach. He appeared to be taken off guard by my defensive reaction, but I didn't care. I pulled my sweater sleeves over my hands and crossed my arms over my chest as I looked up at him. "What?" I challenged him. My mood swings were completely out of control. I was never disrespectful to people, especially to a man old enough to be my grandfather who could still snap me like a twig. However, I couldn't seem to help it. This unusual behavior has been building throughout my entire junior year and I had finally hit my breaking point mid-year.

"I want to speak with you in my office. Now," he said and walked away as if he expected me to follow. I sluggishly walked towards his office

my cinder block feet making it difficult to walk. The last thing I needed was to be kicked off of the high school softball team, but that's what I thought I wanted. I didn't have the energy or the willpower to play anymore. I also skipped too many practices, so this was bound to happen sooner or later.

I finally reached his office at the end of the hall and I dragged myself inside. It was the tiniest room in the entire building, littered with empty boxes and books, even though he had moved in months ago. There were newspaper clippings of all our team's accomplishments taped to every inch of the surrounding walls. The large mahogany desk was covered with paperwork and Coach was sitting behind it, staring at me in silence as I walked in. I shut the door behind me and shrugged my backpack off of my shoulders. I tucked my uniform skirt underneath me as I sat down in a chair.

"Am I being kicked off the team?" I asked, wanting to get directly to the point. Coach raised his eyebrows at me. He looked baffled and then sighed heavily, staring down at his desk, as though he couldn't figure out how to respond to me.

"No. It's just that -" he started, but couldn't find the words to finish. I sat up straighter when I realized what he was trying to say. I tensed up because I saw that awful look on his face. That damned look of pity. My mouth felt dry and I gripped the edge of my seat until my knuckles turned white.

"You know," I stated in a quiet voice. His brown eyes finally found my blue ones and nodded once.

My entire body trembled with fear or anger. Or both. "How do you know?" I frantically asked him. All I wanted to do was crawl into a hole and die there. Tears sprang into my eyes. Coach shook his head at me, leaned forward on his desk, and seemed extremely uncomfortable.

"No, no, please don't do that," he practically begged, "You know that your teachers talk to me, Rachel. Mrs. Green had to tell me what happened because we're in-season and you're one of nine players on varsity." He explained while tears slid down my cheeks. I tightly gripped my blonde hair that was tied in a messy bun at the top of my head, as it was every day.

"I'm so embarrassed!" I cried out in horror. I couldn't believe my French teacher would discuss the breakdown that I had in her office with my coach. This was my first day back to school since I officially hit my breaking point two days ago. Only two damn days ago. My shame turned into hatred in a heartbeat.

"Quitting softball won't help you," Coach explained as I wiped the tears off of my face and pushed myself out of my slumped position.

"I'm not looking for help," I growled. Instead of the anger that I anticipated, Coach only seemed to look concerned.

"Well, your friend Linda -" he started, but I waved my hands back and forth to signal for him to stop. I didn't even want to hear her name.

"Don't even. This was all her fault," I snapped. Coach was still surprisingly very calm. I still didn't understand why he wasn't throwing back at me.

"I don't think it was a bad idea that she made you speak up," he admitted and then glanced down at my arms. I self-consciously pulled my brown sweater sleeves back over my hands. I then felt my anger fade away as exhaustion took over.

"After I was sent home, my parents took me to the emergency room, where I sat for nine hours. All I needed was a note saying that I wasn't suicidal so I would be allowed back in school. I may be a little depressed, but I'm not suicidal. So how could you possibly think that the undoubtedly worst experience of my life was necessary?" I asked him angrily. My hands were shaking and my head hurt. Coach hung his head low for a moment.

"Your little depression could've turned into something a lot worse. This needed to happen in order for you to finally seek professional help!" I scoffed and leaned back in my chair. I crossed my arms and my eyes darted around the room, searching for an answer to make him understand that there wasn't anything that would help.

"The only thing that I was seeking was freedom from this hell hole. Look, just let me quit. Please," I pleaded tiredly, hoping that he would just let me go. He stared at me intensely. I could tell that there was something that he wanted to say, but I hoped that he'd decide against it. Unfortunately, my prayers went unanswered as he folded his arms over his chest.

"No, I won't let you quit, and here's why. Your grades are slipping and you look like you haven't slept in ages. You're walking around this school like you're carrying a thousand pounds on your back every day. I've noticed that you're isolating yourself from your teammates at the practices you actually decide to attend. Quitting softball means that you're officially giving up and I won't let you make that mistake!"

I remained frozen in my seat, staring at him with unblinking eyes. Was I being that obvious? I've barely spoken a word to anyone for months, was this really something that he could figure out based solely on my appearance?

"Trust me, you need to keep yourself busy," he added, clearly not budging on the issue. I pressed my lips together and looked down at my lap. I honestly didn't know if I could do it. I hadn't had an appetite for months, so I had no physical strength.

"Keeping busy is what got me into trouble in the first place. Besides, I'm just an outfielder. I'm sure there's an easy replacement for me." I replied.

"I know softball's been a source of stress lately, but channel this new uncaring feeling of yours and transform it into something that's fun for you, like an outlet, or an escape from the rest of the world. I refuse to let one of my best players give up." I was left speechless for a moment and I finally felt that huge weight finally lift off of my shoulders.

"Really?" I asked, still afraid of failure, even if I fought against the black abyss in my mind. Coach laughed and leaned back in his chair.

"Are you kidding me? Why else would I have brought you up to varsity as a freshman?" he asked as though it were obvious. I finally cracked a real smile for the first time in months and laughed with him, because it was a pretty idiotic notion when I heard it being said out loud. I should have realized all of this a long time ago. I finally had a reason to try moving forward again. I found an escape at the end of my cold, dark tunnel... so I made a run for it.

# ON THE HUNT FOR A MAN

Prose by Megan Bache

Sheila was on the hunt for a man. She sat at the dimly lit bar nursing a beer and watched for the right man to come in. She fixed her lipstick, a deep blood red that always caught eyes. As she drank, she reminisced about her old life in Atlanta. Marietta was much safer and quieter; Atlanta PD had been uncovering too many murders so she moved before it became too dangerous. These thoughts made her hand reflexively move to the knife that she kept in her purse. She still felt out of place no matter where in the small town she went. The difference between Georgia and Ohio was obvious everywhere.

While sitting and enjoying her drink, she spied a young man, well-groomed and handsome, likely in his mid-20s. His bright blue eyes caught hers and she smiled at him, her lips parting to flash her white teeth. He smirked and took the seat next to her.

The man flipped his shaggy blonde hair away from his eyes and said, "Hello there, beautiful. My name is Neil. Next round is on me if I may join you." Before they could even get to the next round, however, the bar began to be overrun with college students. "It's getting a little crowded in here. Do you want to go take a walk around the river? It's beautiful this time of night."

They headed off into the night and walked to the river. "It is so beautiful here. I like to take walks late at night and think about my life. I have a great job, a ton of money, and a beautiful house but nobody to share it with," Neil said, looking at Sheila. "All I need is a woman in my life to make it complete."

Confused and shocked by his forwardness, Sheila did not respond. She smiled and kept walking silently beside Neil, taking in the gurgling of the river and the chatter of Neil talking nonstop.

When they got to a dark and secluded part of the riverbank, Neil stopped. "This is my favorite spot. Not many people come back here because it's so dark, but it's beautiful. You can come back here and never be disturbed since the tunnel is blocking us from view."

He moved closer to Sheila and leaned in. At the same time Sheila's hand went into her bag and drew her hunting knife. In one swift and practiced arc, she slashed at him. One smooth motion and it was done; Neil was on the ground bleeding. She laughed as she watched him clutch at his chest, fighting to stop the blood pouring out of his wound. Quickly the life left his eyes and Neil was dead.

Sheila heard a rustling in the leaves and tensed. Preparing to run, she turned on her heels and took a few steps when a dog burst through the brush along the river. He sniffed the corpse, lifted his leg, and urinated on it. *Great, now I'm going to get dog*

*piss all over me*, Sheila thought. The dog bounded off and Sheila got back to work.

She cut a small lock of his hair and hid it in the secret pocket of her purse, just as her mother had taught her. She would add it to her collection later. Luckily, she was along the river and the corpse was much easier to clean and dispose of. She rolled him over a few branches, through a bush, and into the current, saving time by letting the water clean him for her.

Sheila sat down and cleaned her knife until it shimmered, watching the blood mix with the same water that was carrying her victim. As she worked she laughed to herself; she found it quite amusing how simple it was to get away with murder. Her knife, originally her grandmother's, had hundreds of bodies to its name and was untraceable due to its age and abundance in the country. It had never been tested by the police; none of the women had ever been questioned. A good scrub always kept it glimmering and a pretty pout always kept her from the eyes of the police. These were two pieces of advice she learned very early from the women who raised her.

Sheila slipped her knife back in her purse and continued on her way, reapplying her blood red lipstick as she walked. Sheila was on the hunt for a man.

# POOR MAN'S SATIRE

Essay by Emily Stainbrook

*John Gay's The Beggar's Opera* is primarily a Juvenalian satire. Gay tackles the very important topic of corruption within the judicial system and the corruption controlling this system in Britain. He takes this significant topic and places it within a mock opera, a method of dissemination not favored for policy conversations. By approaching his topic and form in this manner, Gay created a low burlesque piece. *The Beggar's Opera* works as a Juvenalian satire because Gay bluntly discusses the flaws of the judicial system. The characters allegorically represent specific roles within the corrupt judicial system and perform according to what best delineates the outrageousness of the real situation that the opera parodies. Gay's theme is still present and dangerously volatile in today's society.

The entirety of *The Beggar's Opera* satirizes the state of the judicial system by pointing out its flaws in a rather ridiculous manner. Mrs. Peachum spends time on-stage where she instructs Filch on how to avoid punishment by hanging if he is ever arrested for theft by learning the catechism in Latin (I.vi). By proving he can read Latin, Filch can have any potential case moved to the ecclesiastical system where there is no death penalty. The punishment for theft at that time was death by hanging. Mrs. Peachum and Filch are working the system. Mr. Peachum and Lockit are also playing the system. Peachum is an informer and Lockit is a prison guard. Together, the two of them inform on the individuals with the highest reward and Lockit makes sure that they stay in prison to be sentenced, as this is when Lockit and Peachum will receive their bounty. This system makes Peachum very wealthy and allows him to run a criminal organization as a fence. Lockit also makes some money separately from Peachum by letting free prisoners that are able to bribe him (II.vii). The judicial system portrayed in the opera is built on corruption, because it seems that it is impossible or incredibly unlikely that the police actually catch a

criminal without the help of an informer. The play takes its most bitter turn at the end, where the beggar says to the audience and the player: *Had the play remained as I at first intended, it would have carried a most excellent moral. 'Twould have shown that the lower sort of people have their vices in a degree as well as the rich, and that they are punished for them. (III.xvi)*

The beggar is caustically pointing out that if an individual had enough money they could buy him or herself out of the punishment for their vices. This is still true today in the United States. If individuals have the capital to pay for a lawyer and to support their families throughout the legal process, they have a chance to fight the charges laid against them.

However, if wealth is something that an individual is lacking, they may take a plea bargain in order to protect their family's

investments and ability to care for itself. It is cheaper to agree to a plea bargain and admit to a crime you did not commit, and 90-95% of all cases that go through state and federal legal systems do not even go to trial because the defendant agrees to a plea bargain ("Last Week Tonight with John Oliver: Public Defenders (HBO)"). Public defenders, who are the lawyers provided by the court when a defendant cannot afford one, are woefully underpaid, understaffed, and underprepared ("Public Defenders"). Due to this, some public defenders are restricted to seven minutes to prepare a defense for a new case ("Public Defenders"). Additionally, in 2013 approximately 40% of New Jersey's jail population was being held prior to their trials because they could not afford to pay their bail ("Last Week Tonight with John Oliver: Bail (HBO)"). John Oliver points out that if money is no object to an individual, bail is not a guarantee that he or she will return for his or her trial ("Bail"). Robert Durst, who was charged with murder, paid his \$250,000 bail and fled ("Bail").

The problem with the bail system has been acknowledged since 1964 ("Bail"). In the United States, there is actually a viable alternative to the bail system being used in Washington, D.C. ("Bail"). Yet most of the country continues to use a system that does not work and actually persecutes the individuals without enough income to hire a lawyer that it was meant to protect. The bail system was intended to keep the people who had not been convicted of a crime out of jail. It is failing to do that, and it actually makes it much more likely for individuals with low income to take a plea bargain so they can get out of jail. The horrible situation with the public defenders persecutes the same group of people: those without monetary resources to buy fairness or their way out of prison. John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* addresses the same situation. Gay depicts how those with money are the individuals with the power to adjust the judicial system to suit their needs. Those without money have to struggle through as best they can: "plead the belly" or attempt to get the case moved to the ecclesiastical system (I.vi).

John Oliver's show *Last Week Tonight* follows the tradition of John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*, and tackles real issues with comedy. Oliver uses Juvenalian satire to make the same points Gay did 287 years earlier. Oliver makes very serious arguments and follows these with ridiculous humor. This humor, upon reflection, is actually in terrible taste in these segments; so while funny at the time, it leaves a horrible aftertaste. Oliver calls for his viewers to consider where

they stand as moral individuals, just as Gay did. Peachum's and Lockit's success is actually very frightening: two completely self-serving men almost got away with using the British judicial system in 1728 as a murder weapon. Every day, American citizens are successfully abused by the judicial system based on the quality of their finances.

Gay's and Oliver's methods of dissemination are very similar. Both are using lowbrow techniques to communicate a very important topic. Gay used mock opera; Oliver uses mock TV news program. Oliver's method actually walks the fine line of irony: it is a fake TV news program that sometimes conquers hard topics better than real TV news programs. At the same time, Oliver clings to his identity as a comedic program: he often takes his segments to a ridiculous. However, this is a very effective method of communicating with his audience because not only does he reach the people who are watching his show, laughing at his jokes, and participating in his practical jokes, he reaches the people who read articles about his TV show that express surprise at the topics he is covering and how well he does so. John Oliver's Last Week Tonight was quoted in a judge's decision on a class action case involving taxation in Guam (Rhodan). Other articles, explaining Oliver's argument of an issue, also increase his popularity and allow him to reach an audience that would otherwise be unavailable to him. Oliver's Juvenalian satire generates more discussion about his chosen topics than he would otherwise.

John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* used Juvenalian satire to inspire conversation about serious issues of corruption within the judicial system. John Oliver's Last Week Tonight uses Juvenalian satire to the same end, but expands to different topics because it is a weekly broadcast that was unavailable to Gay. The Juvenalian satire inspires deeper consideration upon the topic; however, it can also allow people to walk away with the belief that what they watched was comedy and nothing more. Neither Gay nor Oliver provide solutions for the problems they drag over the coals. They both state that there is a problem and leave it to their audience to devise a plan for correcting it. Without giving their audience a solid way to correct the issue, Oliver and Gay lose some of the power that comes with convincing their audience that something needs to be changed. While their Juvenalian satire is creative and allows for discussion of the issue, the Johns do not lend themselves and their ideas to immediate cessation of the issue under the microscope.

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A bouquet of daisies, tied together by a pink satin ribbon. Identical ribbon would have been tied in the blonde pigtails of a little girl's hair to match blue eyes that twinkled with a smile.

The teenager stared at the daisies as they lay on the sidewalk, right beside the peanut butter stained teddy bear.

The crowd was getting bigger and the air was getting thinner. He couldn't take it much longer. He looked at his dad, standing stoically beside him in a crisp police uniform, and his mom, with tears in her eyes, looking like she was barely holding it together.

Neither of them noticed when he turned and left the crowd, left the memorial. He broke free of the crowd and crossed the street, his hands in his pockets and his head down.

He sat on a bench and stared at the museum, rebuilt after a year with hundreds of people now surrounding it.

Someone sat beside him, but he didn't look to see who it was.

"You're here for the memorial service, right?" a girl asked.

He looked over to see a girl his own age in a knee-length yellow dress with bronze flowers on the hem. Her blonde hair fell in golden ringlets to her shoulders and she had the greenest eyes that he had ever seen.

# A Girl & A Daisy

Prose by E. L. Chan

"Yes," he said, swallowing what he wanted to say. That he hadn't wanted to come, that his parents had made him. It wasn't enough of a reminder that he had to walk by that repaired museum every day to school, but now this.

"Your name is Zacarias, right?" she asked and he looked at her again. He didn't recognize her, but he went to a big school and an equally large church.

"Just Zac." he settled on.

"Right," she said and cocked her head slightly. "Well, just Zac, what are you doing over here when everyone's over there?"

Zac just shrugged and looked back at the crowd. They'd be starting soon but he didn't want to go back over there.

"Did you lose someone, too?" she asked. Zac looked back at her, frowning. Why wouldn't she stop talking?

"I guess that's a personal matter," she said and turned to look across the street, but she didn't seem to be seeing the crowd of people gathered there. "I only ask because sometimes people think keeping it inside is the best thing to do, especially when they have other people to look out for."

Zac looked away, wrestling with his reaction. She was hitting the nail on the head without even knowing or seeming to try. He didn't want to give his parents any cause to worry about him when they had so much on their plates already.

"Why would you want to know?" The question came out without his permission. There was something about the girl that was inviting, an aura of kindness even.

"Because some things aren't meant to be kept inside," she said, still not looking at him. "It isn't healthy for the soul, if you think about it."

"What?" he asked. What did his soul have to do with anything?

"You don't have to really talk to people . . . but not opening up to anyone?" she said and shook her head slightly. "Everyone should be able to tell someone everything."

"Her name was Cara," Zac said, staring at her, "and she was my sister." He didn't know why he would tell this girl anything about himself, let

alone his sister, but she was right about one thing. He hadn't told anybody about it before.

The girl smiled softly, "Cara."

"She was only six years old," Zac said, seeing her in his mind. "She had blonde hair the color of wheat. She loved daisies and her favorite color was pink."

"She sounds like a lovely little girl," the girl said.

"She was," Zac said. He sucked in a shaky breath, "She was on a field trip with her classmates. Dad wouldn't tell me, but I know how to use the internet. I know it was a bomb and that some kind of extremist group claimed they did it. I don't remember the name but it doesn't really matter anyway. What do they gain by killing kids?"

Zac finally asked it, the one thing he wanted to know, the one thing that had been burning inside him for the past year. The girl turned towards him and her face was sad.

"Nothing," she told him, "There is nothing to be gained from it."

Zac felt the tears forming in his eyes and looked away. No one could seem to provide an answer, so why would she be able to? This random girl that had sat next to him on a park bench?

He felt a hand under his chin, turning his face back to her. Her other hand brushed away a tear that had slid down his cheek and he stared at her.

"There will never be an answer for why bad things happen," she said. "But that doesn't mean that we stop looking for one. Along the way, we might find something else."

Zac moved her hand and wiped at his eyes. "Like what?"

"A ray of hope, maybe a little faith," she said.

"Why should I have either of those when things like this happen all the time?" Zac asked.

"Because it's what the people before you have had and they've made it this far." she said. "Why can't they work out for you?"

Zac didn't know what to say to that.

"Sorry, I'm late." a boy's voice said.

Zac looked and saw that a boy had appeared on the other side of him. He was dressed up all in black with a suit jacket and tie, and glossy black hair swept to the side over his eyebrows.

"You're just on time." the girl said, smiling. The boy walked over to her and handed her something that Zac couldn't see.

"Still," the boy said and smiled a small smile.

The girl looked at Zac. "I think they're wrapping things up over there. Your parents are probably looking for you."

Zac looked over and saw that she was right. The people were streaming away in crowds. He stood, then stopped at a hand on his arm.

"Here," she said and held a single daisy out to him. White petals with the yellow center on a thin little stem.

Zac stared at it then at her.

"Never forget, Zacarias, but don't dwell in the darkness either." she said and Zac accepted the daisy. "Dwelling in the darkness and forgetting that there is light in this world means forgetting that things like this exist."

Zac turned away, her words sinking into him somehow, as he walked back to his parents. He heard the girl say to the boy, "You are never late, always right on time."



He glanced over his shoulder to see that the boy had joined the girl on the bench, draping his arm across her shoulders, and she was looking back at the boy with a familiarity that couldn't have been casual.

Zac twirled the delicate flower between his thumb and index finger as he rejoined his parents. When his dad asked where he had been, he just stared at the flower as he spun it.

"Talking with a girl across the street," he murmured.

"What girl?" His dad asked.

"Right across . . ." Zac started but then his voice died out as he looked up to see that the girl and boy were both gone, the bench and sidewalk across the road completely deserted.



# IT'S ALL ABOUT THE CAESURA

## RECITING SONNET 18

Essay by *Emily Stainbrook*

William Shakespeare's Sonnet 18 follows the convention of English sonnets, also known as Shakespearean sonnets. A Shakespearean sonnet consists of three quatrains followed by a rhymed couplet. There is also a volta, a "turn" in the poem where the sonnet shifts focus. The three quatrains describe three observations, and the rhymed couplet is a "zinger," an insightful twist on the aforementioned observations.

Shakespeare's Sonnet 18 begins with the question, "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" (l. 1). Shakespeare's persona is presumably speaking to a woman because of the poem's romantic nature. After that first line, Shakespeare flips the script. The first question sets up the expectation that Shakespeare's speaker will tell whomever he is speaking to that she (or he) is as beautiful as a summer day. However, the second line, "Thou art more lovely and more temperate," subordinates

the summer day to the beauty of whomever the speaking persona is complimenting. Shakespeare gives two examples of how summer can be un-lovely and un-temperate in the first quatrain. First, that there can be bad weather in the summer, and second, that summer lasts only a short time before turning into autumn. This first quatrain sets up the situation of the poem. The second quatrain continues the speaker's description of the imperfection of summer days. Sometimes, Shakespeare elucidates, summer days are too hot and sometimes they are cloudy instead of bright and sunny (l. 5-6). Then Shakespeare's persona says generally that "every fair from fair sometime declines," speaking about how anything that is beautiful and perfect will eventually fall to ruin, "By chance or nature's changing course untrimmed" (l. 7-8). Everything in the world is impermanent, including (and maybe especially) beauty.

The punctuation in the first two quatrains contribute to the meaning of the poem. These eight lines are only two sentences. The first line is a question; the other seven lines are the second sentence. The second line, where Shakespeare's persona claims that the person he is speaking to is more beautiful than a summer's day, ends in a colon, signaling to the reader that he is about to list all the reasons the poem's subject is more beautiful. The next six lines are paired together with similar ideas. Lines three and four are about the deficiency of summer weather; lines five and six are about how the sun can be too hot or hidden behind clouds; and lines seven and eight are about the inevitability of the change wrought by time, that robs everything of its beauty. Each of the couplets end with a semicolon, designating the end of an idea but not of all its related thoughts.

The final quatrain begins with the volta, or turn. This is indicated by the word "but" at the beginning of the ninth line of the poem. Shakespeare's persona has gone back to the idea of the second line of the poem, where he states that the person he is speaking to is better and more beautiful than a summer's day. He directly addresses the person he is speaking to, and again sets him/her apart from summer and everything else in nature by claiming that their beauty "shall not fade" (l. 9). And not only will this person remain beautiful forever, he/she will never die: "Nor shall death brag thou wander'st in his shade" (l. 11). In the final line of the third quatrain, there is a period that indicates the end of an idea: that the eternal beauty of the individual Shakespeare's persona is talking to is preserved "in eternal lines" (l. 12).

The final rhymed couplet, which resolves the message of the poem with a witty statement, clarifies what the "eternal lines" are. Shakespeare states that the object of the poem's longevity comes from the poem itself. The poem will continue to exist as long as it is being read, which will be "So long as men can breathe or eyes can see" (l. 13). The person that Shakespeare's persona is speaking to will be more beautiful than a summer's day for as long as the poem exists and as long as English teachers make students memorize sonnets because "this [the poem] gives life to thee"

(l. 14). This final rhymed couplet delivers to the reader the purpose of the poem: to immortalize the beauty of Shakespeare's subject. The punctuation of the final line of the sonnet emphasizes Shakespeare's purpose in writing the poem. The fourteenth line of the sonnet is the only line in the entire poem that has punctuation in the middle of the line, a caesura. The rest of the poem uses end-stops. This caesura creates a pause before the final clause of the poem, and because this is the only time it happens, produces a feeling of importance for the line that comes after the pause. William Shakespeare used form and punctuation to enhance the message of Sonnet 18 and to make his message more understandable to his audience. Some of Shakespeare's decisions about the format and punctuation of his poem become clear only when the poetry is read aloud. The caesura, for instance, is most noticeable when the poem is being read because at all other points in the poem, the reader would stop at the ends of lines for breath. The caesura grants implicit permission for a pause, which would heighten the attention of an auditor for that final clause because it would be a break in the established pattern. Only through thorough examination of form (the three quatrains and the couplet) and punctuation (end-stops and caesuras) is Shakespeare's true message discovered.

# A MOST COURAGEOUS KNIGHT

Prose by *Tristan Bailey*

I drive as fast as I can make my Prius go because nothing stands in the way of my love anymore. Now I can tell her how much she really means to me. I can tell her how long I've waited for her to leave Brad. How long I've admired her elegance from afar. There is no one in the world that loves this woman as I do. Not even the blinding rain pounding on my windshield will hold me back now, for Death himself cannot touch me, as I am coated in my blazing conviction. I cannot be late. She is always in the coffee shop at 8:00 A.M., preparing her stunning body for a long day of arduous labor not fit for a goddess. I pull into the Starbucks parking lot without a worry in the world, knowing that I would soon hold her in my arms. After grabbing the gift, I obtained for my precious future wife, I head into the local watering hole.

There she is, waiting in line behind her own mere peasants. Oh, what a wonderful queen she would make. I burst through the glass doors, ready to announce my love to her. She turns to see me, and a light takes to her face as I yell, "Victoria, my love! Brad is gone, so I shall be your new knight in shining armor." To my surprise, I wasn't met with cheers from the bystanders, but rather shrieks and vomit.

These servants must not be akin to the trophies of men, as they turned yellow at the sight of the prize I hold now in my hand. The very prize that shall prove my devotion and compassion for my sweet Victoria. It made for a beautiful scene. The vibrant red pool of love collecting at my feet, and the harsh smell of victory that filled the air. There couldn't be a better way to confess my love.

"What have you done to Brad?" Victoria screamed.

She began running straight to me, with tears of joy filling her eyes. This is it. Victoria has finally realized my heroic nature and is going to jump into my arms. I close my eyes, expecting my goddess to embrace me in a warm and tender hug. However, there was no hug, as I open my eyes no one stands before me, so I turn to see if something has happened to my darling only to find a horror so dastardly I can only bellow in agony. My beloved ran past me into the streets and was struck by an evil steed bearing the mark of House Dodge. With my manhood on the line, I wiped the tears from my face, readying myself for battle to win vengeance for my princess. Do not worry, my dear, for even though our love was short-lived, you will live on in my memories.



# NOW YOU KNOW

Prose by *Marissa Merriman*

# SPLASH!

I squeezed my eyes shut and shivered in response to the cold water my cousin slowly poured onto the back of my head. I was on my knees, leaning over the edge of the bathtub. The ice water transformed into a dark purple color as it soaked through my hair that hung upside down and dripped into the tub. I tried to keep my red t-shirt dry, even though it was already stained with permanent, black hair dye. However, I looked down into the dirtiest tub I've ever seen and felt satisfied with my decision on washing my hair this way, without taking a shower. "Jesus, Sam. You couldn't wait for the water to warm up?" I incredulously asked her. She pressed up against my back, reached around my right side, and placed a plastic cup underneath the shower faucet.

"We're in a bit of a rush," she reminded me, right before pouring another cup of freezing water onto my head. I gasped and shrieked while banging my hands against the edge of the tub.

"Fuck, that's cold!" I exclaimed loudly, and then Sam elbowed me in the ribs.

"Keep it down, Liz. It's two o'clock in the morning," she said as she squirted shampoo onto her hands. She rubbed it into my hair and I cringed as her long, fake nails pulled at my black strands and scratched my scalp.

"I still don't know why we're doing this – OW!" I said as she yanked on my hair, rather hard. I could sense her brown eyes glaring at me. She released my head, refilled the cup, and dumped all of it onto my head at once. The water was still running, so this time, it was boiling hot. Sam was really shitty at being contrite.

"Why? You stole five hundred dollars from your mother's purse and then ran to my house to avoid getting killed," she reminded me harshly. I wish she was exaggerating, but she really wasn't. My mother's boyfriend threatened to shoot me right in

my driveway with witnesses and damned if I didn't believe him.

"Yeah, but why do I need my hair dyed? I mean...I feel like I'm in *The Outsiders*," I said as she started to lather my hair with conditioner. This time, she applied it a little more tenderly and chuckled. This had softened her.

"Well, sorry there, Ponyboy, but your hair can't stay gold. Don't worry though, Johnnycakes is going to take real good care of you," Sam sarcastically said with a southern accent. We both laughed at the reference to one of my favorite novels, and then she started rinsing the conditioner out of my hair. Afterwards, she stood up and threw a towel at me. I wrapped the towel around my head and finally stood up straight.

I looked at my cousin, who was washing her hands in the sink. She was slightly taller than me, with dark red hair falling over her shoulders and very tan skin. She was a tough, big-boned woman, but practically my big sister. She faced me, leaned back against the counter, and dried her hands.

"If you want to disappear, this is the first step. We'll take you to a salon and tan your pale skin, then maybe get you some colored contact lenses. You can borrow the clothes that my little sister left here because you'll swim in mine. Then you'll stay here until we think of a better plan," she explained to me with a surprising calmness. I shook my head and folded my skinny arms over my small chest.

"You don't have to do this," I told her softly. Sam stared at me tiredly.

"I'm fully aware of what I'm doing," she whispered. I stuffed my hands into the front pockets of my jeans, feeling five hundred dollars on my fingertips.

"Then why are you doing it?" I asked, because I could get Sam arrested for this. She was twenty years old and I was sixteen. Helping me hide would label her as a kidnapper. I knew my mother

well enough to know that she was already in contact with the police, trying to track me down. She needed that money.

"Look, you're basically my little sister and I love you, but you're making things harder for yourself," she said with concern, taking a step towards me. I let out a laugh.

"I have five hundred dollars in my pocket, Sam. I think my situation just got better, but thanks for your concern." I said sarcastically. She ran her hands through her wavy hair with anger, consciously trying to control herself.

In a harsh whisper, she asked, "Why did you steal it?" Before I could answer, we were startled by a loud knock on the door downstairs.

"OPEN UP, IT'S THE POLICE." We heard someone yell from the outside. They were trying to open the door, but Sam had locked it. The towel fell off of my head and my black, damp hair clung to my face. I gasped as Sam covered my mouth with her hand and turned off the bathroom light with her other hand. I trembled as she let go of my face and grabbed my wrist, quickly leading me out of the bathroom.

We kept all of the lights off on purpose, so I had no idea where we were going. All of a sudden, we stopped, and Sam flicked a light on. I realized that we were in a closet in her mother's room. Sam grabbed a rope that was attached to the ceiling. A door fell open to reveal a dark attic. I immediately knew what to do. She reached behind a bunch of

coats and pulled out a ladder. I helped set it up and began to climb. Once I was in the attic, I pulled the door closed. I heard Sam flick off the light, close the closet door, and walk away.

The attic was pitch black and silent. There were no windows and it smelled musty. It was fairly empty from what I could tell, so I had enough space to sit down and wait. The darkness and silence strangely made me feel safe. However, after about an hour of sitting there alone, I heard loud footsteps entering the room right beneath me. I started to sweat and my breathing got shallow.

"Where is she!? I know you're hiding the little bitch!" I heard someone scream. I quickly crawled away from the attic door. My mother's boyfriend was on a rampage. I heard him throw the closet open and flick on the lights. I hugged my knees to my chest and stopped breathing.

"She's not in there. Look, I told you guys. I was getting ready for bed in the bathroom when you knocked on my door." I heard Sam say. I bit my lip and really hoped that they would believe the story and leave. Then I heard someone sigh.

"Look, Dave, either she's telling the truth or Elizabeth is hiding from you, not being held captive. I wouldn't be shocked, considering that your wife was just arrested for possession of heroin," the police officer explained with obvious judgment. My reaction to this was weird, though. I felt a strong sense of relief.

"If that little brat hadn't stolen our money, brought home the drugs that you framed my girlfriend with, then ran away and gotten kidnapped, then we never would have had to call the police." Dave yelled and then yanked on the rope attached to the attic door out of anger. The door fell open a few feet from me and I buried my head in my knees, shaking like a terrified puppy.

"Wait a minute, you're seriously trying to frame a sixteen year old for bringing home heroin!?" I heard Sam scream.

"Okay, I've had enough. The girl wasn't kidnapped, but because she stole money, we'll continue searching for her in the morning. We searched the entire house, and clearly, she's not here. Ma'am, I'm sorry we disturbed you." I heard the police officer apologize and then walk away. Sam was still silent, but Dave decided to speak again.

"I know you have her. Mark my words. You will go down for this." Then I heard everyone leave. After a few painfully long minutes, I heard footsteps running towards the closet.

"It is safe, come down!" Sam called. I felt tears roll down my cheeks as I slowly headed towards the opening and carefully climbed down the steps she set back up. As soon as I reached the floor, Sam engulfed me in a tight hug.

"Jesus Christ, that was scary," she whispered. I nodded and then she let me go, "You set them up. You knew they'd stupidly call the cops and get busted," she added.

"No... I wanted to make it as impossible for her to buy drugs as I could," I answered weakly.

"Now I know." She replied, but she didn't sound completely satisfied.

"Yeah... now you know."

# THE CADET'S *three* GOOD REASONS

Prose by *E. L. Chan*

"You should not have punched her."

CoCo Thorn rolled her head back against the bench to look up at Warren Davvy, her bright orange ponytail resting over her shoulder.

"Twice." Warren said, holding up two webbed fingers in case his point hadn't gotten across.

"You shouldn't have gotten caught punching her." Kola Claw's lilting accent broke in. Kola smirked, making the black Jkedin stripes on her face stretch against her bronze skin.

Jasper Garnet snorted from the ground beside CoCo but didn't open his eyes.

Warren rolled his blue eyes at Kola next to him on the bench. "You are not helping."

Kola just shrugged and looked back down at her tablet.

The four teenagers looked like all the other cadets as they lounged near the edge of the training yard. Warren sat on the bench with his tablet on his lap, his black hair reflected blue in the rare winter sunlight and his bright blue eyes were focused on CoCo. Sitting next to him, Kola was distractedly tapping her stylus against her tablet screen, her black lips pursed.

CoCo leaned her head against Warren's knee from where she was sitting on the ground between

them, her orange hair and green freckles made even brighter by the sun high overhead. Jasper laid on the grass next to CoCo, his white hair and white skin in stark contrast to his black cadet uniform. It was Saturday, which meant training in the morning with the rest of the day free. They all still wore their uniforms even though training was over for the day. They had much more pressing things in mind.

"What did the Commander say?" Warren asked. He bumped CoCo's shoulder with his knee, shifting her attention back to him.

At this, Kola and Jasper looked towards her. Jasper sat up, leaning back on his elbows, and shook his white hair out of his face.

"You didn't say that Swan was the one in the Punishment Room." he said, his white eyes narrowed at her.

The Punishment Room was so called by the cadets because cadets were only sent there to receive their punishments for infractions. Major infractions. Commander Swan was the officer in charge of Sky Way Patrol on Earth, making her the highest ranking officer on the planet.

She usually had better things to do than discipline a cadet.

"What's the damage?" Kola asked. Her eyes narrowed, making the vertical pupils look even more ferocious. CoCo shrugged. "Twenty extra miles in training on Monday."

"You punched another cadet in full view of an officer and the Commander only gave you twenty extra miles?" Warren asked, his eyebrows shooting up.

"Cadets have been expelled for less." Kola said. Her curved teeth flashed as she put the emphasis on the less part.

CoCo didn't say anything but shrugged again.

CoCo had grown up on Nroht as a princess with every luxury she could ever want: the best education before she had been accepted to the Sky Way Patrol Academy, and a doting family. The cadet she had punched, Chaela Tish, hadn't been wrong in saying that CoCo was a privileged girl.

But calling CoCo's friends privileged had crossed a line.

Kola wore fingerless gloves all the time to hide the scars that reminded her of a family she refused to talk about. Jasper woke up at three in the morning like clockwork from nightmares, but wouldn't say what he was so afraid of. Warren was like the big brother every cadet needed, but he wouldn't stand up for himself no matter what verbal abuse was thrown at him.

Tish could call CoCo anything she liked, but her friends were not privileged and, now, no one else will make the same mistake. CoCo had told Commander Swan as much in the Punishment Room. Swan had been silent for a long time, just looked at her with those unreadable black

eyes, and CoCo had started to fear that she would be expelled from the academy. But then Swan just gave her twenty extra miles and dismissed her. "What exactly did you say to her?" Kola asked, shaking her short curly black hair back.

"The usual," CoCo said.

She stared up at the sky and her friends let it be. Because of her looks from being half Jkedin, the other cadets expected Kola to be the most aggressive of them.

They were only half right.

Kola was the most aggressive in her fighting techniques, which gave her sparring partners bruises every session, but the other cadets had yet to realize that among the four of them, CoCo was the one with a temper.

Her friends can take care of themselves, but Kola was right. CoCo shouldn't have gotten caught punching Tish.

Warren was the first to check the time and point out that if they didn't get to the dining hall now, there wouldn't be any food left. The four friends shoved their tablets into their bags and started circling the training yard towards the dining hall.

The doors to the dining hall slid open automatically, letting the noise of a large roomful of teenagers flood out. The noise level dropped considerably when the cadets realized who had walked in.

CoCo ignored it and focused on the seven screens mounted across from the doors, each screen devoted to the seven major planets in the Sky Way Patrol Alliance.

"You'd think they'd have more important things to think about." Jasper muttered, uncomfortable with the sudden attention even though it wasn't directed at him in particular.

"Such as the halfway mark exams on Monday." Warren offered.

CoCo grinned and shot a look at Kola who smirked back. Warren was always more concerned about their grade marks than anyone else they knew.

CoCo looked up in time to see Tish and her little group of followers leaving a table. The right side of Tish's face was bruised purple from her earlier encounter with CoCo's fist.

Tish headed towards the doors and purposefully rammed her shoulder into CoCo's.

CoCo lunged towards her but Jasper grabbed her and hauled her back.

"I'd be careful if I were you, Thorn." Tish drawled, smirking.

"Remember who won the last time, Tish." CoCo snapped.

"One more step out of line and I wouldn't be surprised if they sent you back to the planet you came from," Tish shot back over her shoulder as she sauntered away, "Not that the Nrohtians will want you back."

Jasper pulled on CoCo and the group moved away with CoCo and Tish glaring daggers at each other, Tish with a razor sharp smile and CoCo with her teeth bared in a manner that was more reminiscent of Jkedin.

"You need to stop letting her get inside your head." Warren told her as they picked up their trays to go through the lunch line.

CoCo was probably the only person he had ever met that could go from rainbows and sunshine to fire and fistfights in under a nanosecond. But he had never seen her get mad over nothing, which was what made her need to control her temper even more important.

"Prediction," Kola said, setting her tray on the table, "Tish will wash out before final exams."

Warren choked and started coughing.

"Evidence?" Jasper asked, raising an eyebrow. Kola smirked.

"She didn't even get CoCo's homeplanet's name right," she said, "She called it Nrohtian when it's Nroh'ia. If you're gonna insult someone, get your facts right."

"You actually pronounced it right." CoCo said. She took a sip of her water.

She knew Warren was right; she needed to stop letting Tish inside her head. She guessed the clashing culture backgrounds were a part of the problem.

Nroh'ias, like CoCo, generally run hot-blooded, spawning a

stereotype that they were quick to take offense and even quicker to draw blood. Her first training instructor had informed her of the saying, but then had winked at her and added, 'not without a good reason.'

Warren and Jasper started debating grammar, prompting a smile out of CoCo when Kola bumped her elbow and smirked. It was true that CoCo was hastier in starting a fight than most cadets, but she only had to look around the table to see her good reason. The four of them were all from different planets with drastically different backgrounds and cultures, each of them with their own secret. But she'll be damned before she let anyone try to convince them that they didn't belong here and, for her, that was reason enough.



# THE AMBUSH AT THE TRAIN STATION

Prose by *E.L. Chan*

The train station started coming into view and Tsavo Cross sat up, being deliberately calm even as he felt his pulse thrum faster and faster. He was purposeful in his movements as he placed his cap firmly on his head, watching O'Neill ready himself from under the brim.

The train came to a slow screeching halt and Tsavo stood with the other passengers. He connected eyes with the rest of his team, O'Neill, Russaw, and Vermanh. They all nodded to him and he gave them a tight smile before turning to heft his bag. This was it.

Tsavo made a beeline for the direction that Copeland and Huxley had gone. He held his bag in his left hand, leaving his right hand free if he needed to reach his gun in a hurry. He caught Vermanh's eye, even though the man's blue eyes were hidden by the glare on his glasses, and casually slung his arm across O'Neill's shoulders.

Tsavo's hand tightened on O'Neill's shoulder for a second then he instantly relaxed. He had spotted Ritc. The man was in his early forties, but he had a head of salt and pepper hair with multiple lines running along his face. Tsavo's target glanced furtively over

his shoulder with gray eyes, but all he saw was the gooey-in-love couple standing behind them with their bags, who also happened to be Copeland and Huxley. Tsavo allowed himself a true small smile, not missing a beat in his pretend chatter about his girlfriend as Ritc turned to face forward again, placing a gray tattered hat on his head. But the hat wouldn't help to hide him, Tsavo's team had already picked him. Tsavo steered O'Neill towards Ritc, only getting a slight resistance from the younger man. Not pausing in his fake conversation, Tsavo lightly bumped shoulders with Ritc.

"Sorry." he tossed over his shoulder. There was a mumbled reply as Tsavo placed himself and O'Neill in front of their target, effectively blocking Ritc from the civilians in the front.

Tsavo moved his arm from around O'Neill's shoulders to stuff his hand in his pants pocket, being careful not to pull his black coat far enough back to reveal his gun. He gave O'Neill a meaningful look at the lag in the conversation and the Staff Sergeant immediately launched into a story about his fiancé, a woman named Amelia who had a surprisingly lot in common with their old desk clerk back in the West.

The rush and crush of bodies felt like a two-way battle as they started getting closer to the doors of the train. The crowd fought to move them, but Tsavo remained firm. He had to stay in front of Ritc,

just as his team needed to keep him boxed in as well. On top of that, they needed to act normal. If Ritc found out that the people surrounding him were military, bent on his arrest, he could do two things: open fire on both Tsavo, his team, and the civilians, or he could bolt. Neither of which would be particularly good.

The blood roared in Tsavo's ears over the station crowd as he stepped off the train and onto the platform. Even though he had been told that there would be plainclothes at the station to initiate the arrest, he couldn't mark any of them.

Measuring his steps to make sure that he was still in sync with his team, Tsavo walked forward. He continued to nod as O'Neill chattered away but his eyes never stopped moving. It was too much of a dead giveaway to look completely behind him but he made note of the possible escape routes that Ritc could take if he bolted. The man had evaded capture for over five years, which meant that he could squeeze through even the tiniest crack if allowed.

As he kept walking, Tsavo silently urged the plainclothes to make their move soon. His team was already pushing it, but if they continued to surround Ritc when the crowd started to thin out then he would most definitely notice them.



Tsavo felt his body grow tauter and tauter as they approached the pillars where there was the least amount of people. The pillars were rectangular in shape and spaced no more than five feet apart. They were a good ways away from where the train stopped and created a shaded space for passengers to wait and greet each other. If the plainclothes didn't make a move very soon then his team will have to.

"Hey, there," a friendly voice called in Tsavo's direction. Tsavo followed the voice and met gazes with his friend, Lieutenant Colonel Nigeil Wharker. Dressed as a civilian in black pants and a tan jacket, Nigeil's black fedora covered his bald head.

Nigeil smiled and waved, but his brown eyes were deadly serious.

"Hey, man." Tsavo said, not taking more than a second to respond. "How's the family?"

Going on gut-instinct by now, Tsavo left his formation to walk towards Nigeil. They greeted each other with handshakes as if they were acquaintances. The real welcome home would have to wait.

"Good, they're good." Nigeil said, completely enthusiastic and this time it wasn't an act. He pulled his fedora off and placed it over his heart and that's when it got loud.

"Burnard Ritc!"

There were several voices shouting variants of the first voice as the multiple plainclothes on the platform responded to Nigeil's signal. Then the distinctive sound of bone breaking followed by a cry of pain and the sound of glass cracking.

Tsavo pivoted on his heel and dropped his bag, his hand going for his gun. His hand came around the butt and he brought it up with his eyes. A man in a brown shirt was curled in a ball on the ground and Vermanh was on the ground, but in the process of getting back to his feet.

Just as Tsavo's finger touched the trigger he found himself eye-to-eye with Ritc then stumbling backwards, his vision going blurry as tears filled his eyes. Then he felt a hand on his chest that pushed him back, slamming him into one of the pillars.

Not completely seeing yet, Tsavo grabbed the wrist of the hand that shoved him with his left hand and kicked out where the legs were supposed to be. He heard a curse as his eyes cleared in time to be hit in the side of the head with a fist, shocking him into letting go of the wrist he had grabbed. His hat went flying, but he ignored it. Tsavo's gun moved back up as he trained it

on Ritc, but then he froze as a figure stepped out from behind a pillar, her gun less than an inch from Ritc's head.

"Give me a reason," she said, quietly.

Ritc froze and Tsavo slowly lowered his pistol, but he kept his finger on the trigger. He strode forward with Nigeil beside him. The woman was the only person on the platform in the blue uniform of the military with the ribbon on her left breast marking her as a major. Her brown hair was held back in a ponytail and her face fierce as she stared at Ritc. She seemed vaguely familiar, but he couldn't put his finger on it.

Her hand never wavered, but her shoulders were rigid and she held her right hand behind her back as if she were grasping something. Ritc straightened deliberately, completely ignoring the gun leveled at his face. His eyes never left the woman's face as he returned her stare for stare.

"It's been a while." Ritc said. His voice was a bit gravelly, the quality more likely coming from age than anything else.

"Three years, almost to the day," she said, her voice almost bored, but Tsavo thought it was tightly controlled. "Get on your knees and put your hands on your head."

"Or what?" Ritc asked, his mouth twisted into a nasty smile. "You'll shoot me like I shot that man who tried to play hero?"

The Major stiffened, her finger tightening on the trigger and Tsavo heard Nigeil suck in a sharp breath.

"Do not tempt me," she said and Tsavo swore ice crystals formed in the air.

"On your knees. *Now.*"

This time Ritc slowly got to his knees and lifted his hands to his head, the Major's gun lowering with him.

"So very bossy," Ritc continued, not quite silenced even on his knees. "Is that how you got that young man here, by ordering him around?"

The Major started to pull her right hand from behind her back but Tsavo saw the conscious effort as she stopped herself.

"Take him." she ordered, her voice rough.

She stood unmoving as Nigeil and about eight others rushed to follow her order and Tsavo holstered his gun. Ritc was officially in custody.



# THE PICADILLY

## CRISIS

Prose by *Tristan Bailey*

"Hello?! This had better be Detective Van Baron, or I will be suing this rubbish Scotland Yard!" Arthur yelled into the phone.

"Yes. It's me, Mr. Piccadilly. Now, would you please calm yourself?" replied the detective.

"It's Sir Arthur Piccadilly to you."

"Tell me what you need. I don't have to deal with your posh attitude."

"Fine. Fine. It's Martha! She... she's gone! I was in my chambers rolling some baccy, and when I came back out, Martha was gone! Then I found a note on the counter saying that I must leave a million pounds in the bathroom of Red's Pub, or I'll never see my Martha again."

"Good Lord! I'll be there in a jiffy, Sir Piccadilly. Don't trouble yourself."

It took Detective Van Baron only 15 minutes to reach the Piccadilly Manor. Of course, that wasn't good enough for Sir Arthur Piccadilly. Nothing is ever good enough for him. However, there wasn't much anyone could do to counter the old bag, since he was one of the richest men in all of London. If Scotland Yard had turned down the old bloke, their reputation would've been sullied, so they just put the rookie on the case.

Detective Van Baron was flabbergasted by the manor, he walked through the pearly halls with his mouth hanging wide open. He had never laid his eyes on such a beauty before. Van Baron fancied himself an architectural enthusiast, so it was no surprise he was taken by such a sight. The small-time detective pulled himself together as he walked into the main room, knowing that this was his chance to stand out. The humongous dining room seemed to fit the large, impudent Piccadilly quite well. He was leaning over his mahogany table sobbing when Van Baron crawled in.

"What took you so long? The thought of my Martha being taken leaves me gutted, yet you took your sweet time to get here, you lazy arse," bickered Piccadilly at the detective.

"My deepest apologies, Sir Piccadilly. Now, if we are going to get Martha back, we will first need to find out who pinched her out from under your nose," said the detective in quite an enthusiastic manner.

"I don't have a bloody clue who took her! That's why I called you!"

"Alright, sir, calm down. Let's just have a peek at the note he left behind."

The note was on a previously crumpled up wad of paper, with a few crusty dragons left behind. The words were put on the paper with cut out letters from magazines, quite the cliché way for a kidnapper to leave a message. After reading the note, Detective Van Baron had learned zilch about who the perpetrator could possibly be.

"Is this all you have?" asked the detective.

"Don't you think if I had more I would've told you?!"

"Damn it all!"

Detective Van Baron took a look around the estate, pulling in his surroundings to the best of his abilities. When he returned to the dining room, Piccadilly was still pacing back and forth, frantically yelling curse words on occasion. In a last ditch effort, Van Baron glanced over the note one last time; however, this time he noticed something quite unusual. Around each of the glued-on letters was a grimy red substance that resembled the mulch that Piccadilly had put into his garden.

"Sir, does this red substance remind you of anything?" asked Van Baron.

"Well, now that you mention it, yes. It looks a lot like the mulch in my garden."

"Why would a red stain be on this paper, Sir?"

"Oh my! Could it be that one of my gardeners kidnapped Martha?"

"Well, Sir, are there any of them that would have motive to commit such a heinous crime towards you?"

"Well, there is an awfully dodgy fellow that is always complaining to me about his wage. I threatened to fire him a fortnight ago."

"His name?"

"Hmmm... Richard Beaugard I believe."

"Ace!"

With a smile on his face, and a hop in his step, Detective Van Baron hurried back to the Yard to

look up Mr. Beaugard, sure that he had just solved the most important case he'd ever received. Van Baron found Richard's address and headed there immediately. When he parked in front of the flat, he found the plump Piccadilly twirling his thumbs.

"Sir, what in the bloody hell are you doing here?" yelled the detective.

"Waiting for you to arrest the bloke that took my Martha from me."

"But... Alright fine, just stay here then."

Detective Van Baron went up to Richard's flat and knocked on the door.

"Sir, open up. I need to speak with you." Surprisingly, Beaugard answered. However, as soon as he saw who it was, he began panicking.

"No no no no no no no no! Please don't take me in. I only did it on a whim, I didn't hurt nobody," said Richard, practically confessing.

"Sir, kidnapping someone is a major crime."

"Wait, what?"

"Now turn around and put your hands behind your back!"

"Fine fine fine," Richard squealed frantically.

The great detective arrested the man, and then placed him in his vehicle. He rushed into the house, ready to free the distraught Martha. However, when he opened the door to Richard's room, he found Sir Arthur Piccadilly petting a fluffy white pussycat.

"Thank you so much for finding my dear sweet Martha. Someday I'll pay you back, mate," sobbed Piccadilly.

"You don't mean..." The modern day Sherlock Holmes, Detective Van Baron, fell to his knees with tears in his eyes, and yelled into the crisp London night, "DAMN YOU, PICCADILY!!!!"

*She saunters by the beach without a care.  
The sun glistening upon her skin;  
And a gentle breeze blowing through her hair.  
But suddenly she feels a disturbance within.*

*She glances across the water to see  
A storm rolling in so speedily.  
Before she even has time to flee,  
The weather rages ceaselessly.*

*The girl who was once happy and fair,  
Stands encompassed with a load of care.*

# UNEXPECTED OUTCOMES

Poem by *Melissa Farley*

# Be Free

Poem by *Melissa Farley*

*Let go of the tears  
You've always kept in.  
Let go of the hurt,  
And forget all your sin.*

*Don't keep the affliction  
Tight in your chest,  
Or pretend the pain  
Can be put to rest.*

*Never save your sadness  
For the rainy days.  
Never hide what you feel  
Or rue your own ways.*

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