

THE OPAL

Literary Magazine



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*This issue features pieces with prominent themes of mental health, suicide, and assault. If you or a loved one you know is currently struggling, please reach out to these numbers. You are not alone:

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-8255

National chat/text line: Text 742742 to chat with a trained Crisis Counselor

Trevor Project: 1-866-488-7386

Sexual Assault Crisis Line: 1-800-656-4673

SAMHSA's National Helpline: 1-800-662-HELP (4357)

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NONFICTION



Lady and the Tiger (1900) by Frederick Stuart Church

SCRAPS

By Addison Rainbolt

My mother always hosts our family for the holidays: birthdays, graduations, Easters, Thanksgivings, Christmas Eves. The guest list seems to grow every year: my grandparents, my aunts and uncles, my cousins, millions of children, the occasional temporary significant other or best friend. Our house is filled with people—or family as my mother so often corrects me—that I do not even know the names of. All the men are arguing about the most recent sports match or political news. My grandmothers are asking if I have lost weight. My aunts are gossiping. The children are running amok. My girl cousins are chatting in cliques and braiding each other's hair. My mother and I are laboring in the kitchen.

We have been preparing for family Thanksgiving for the past two weeks. We planned the meal, selecting the perfect array of dishes. We made the grocery list and went shopping, making sure every item was checked off. We prepared the food, making sure everyone's favorite dish was made with care. We made sure every dish had the correct serving utensil. We made sure there was enough dinnerware for everyone to have two of each item, just in case. We cleaned the house, childproofing anything that may be a danger. We were both up before 6 a.m., cleaning and cooking and preparing. We woke up my father and brother an hour before the guests arrived so they could get ready. We got ourselves ready moments before the first car pulled in and then quickly returned to work.

We had been asked if the food was ready three times in the span of ten minutes. While my smile twitched with every comment, question, and greedy finger that tried to swipe a taste of my mother's famous baked potato casserole, my mother wore her smile true. She beamed at all the children who waddled in for a spoonful of whipped cream, the cousin who wanted to introduce her new boyfriend, the uncle asking where the drinks were, the grandmother asking if she can help with anything. How she did it, I do not

know. I suppose it was out of love. I suppose it was her service to our family. However, I wonder. I wonder if it was out of obligation. I wonder if it was her service as a woman. I wonder this as I, a woman, perhaps subject to the same fate, stirred the gravy.

I looked up from the gravy at the conglomeration of people—family—around me. I noticed the women were naturally drawn toward the kitchen and the dining room. They sat with their legs crossed at the knee or ankle. They politely sipped lemonade or sweet tea from their glasses. They spoke in calm, quiet voices with the occasional outburst of giggles. The men had corralled in the living room. They were all seated in recliners or on couches, with their legs sprawled in front of them or knees spread wide. They drank sloppily from cans or loudly clunk their ice in their glasses filled with dark soda. They spoke roughly, laughing boisterously at their own jokes. My mother occasionally chimed in the women's conversation or joined their fits of giggles. I continued stirring the gravy.

When dinner was ready, my mother called my grandfather in from the living room. He slowly made his way to the kitchen, teasing a cousin, slapping an uncle on the back, complimenting an aunt's dress. As he walked, he swayed, side to side, a steady saunter, a measured mosey. He carried himself with an air of confidence, almost entitlement, but not quite. Anyone watching his gait could sense that he was in no rush, he would get where he was going when he got there. Anyone watching *closely* noticed that every time his right foot met the ground, his smile faltered to a grimace. While his old age had weakened his bones and withered his skin, his spirit stayed intact. This was a good spirit, a kind one, one that always made sure the grandchildren were cared for. As one of those grandchildren, I am typically grateful. But for some reason, when he encroached into the kitchen and I glanced up at him from the rolls I had just taken out of the oven, I had to force myself to smile at him. His white hair was combed to the side, and he wore a necktie and a white button-up shirt. It was clear that his pants had been freshly pressed earlier that morning, which was most definitely my

grandmother's doing. Like usual, he had a tissue in his hand that he wiped his nose with and then clumsily stuffed in his pocket. I thought to myself that he probably needed to wash his hands but—

“Something smells good!” My grandfather much too loudly exclaimed. His voice seemed to be intended for the stage, performative and projected. His audience of one, my mother, smiled and thanked him. I cast my gaze back down to the rolls. I thought to myself that *he should be the one thanking my mother. It was Thanksgiving, after all, yet he could not even surrender a “thank you” to his own daughter—*

“The food's ready! Everyone, gather around, I'll bless it and then we can *finally* eat!” I closed my eyes, seemingly in prayer. I thought to myself about his emphasis on “*finally*” and what gave him the authority to “bless” the food God had provided and my mother had prepared with care but—

“Amen! Dig in, everyone!” The people—family—formed a line and filled their plates. My mother and I stood next to the serving table, prepared to refresh any dishes that ran too low or replace any utensils that were accidentally dropped. As the men placed heaping helpings of hickory-smoked turkey and sizeable servings of slow cooker stuffing onto their plates, the women half-filled theirs, whispering self-critiques and –disciplines to each other with every scoop. After everyone had gone through the line, they reclaimed their seats. My mother and I hovered near the serving table, each eating a few bites of her famous baked potato casserole before remanning our posts to assist people—family—coming back for seconds. The women now sat in the dining room, and the men in the living room. The women sat their plates on the tables before them, cutting their food with a fork and a knife, wiping their mouths after every bite. The men rested their plates on their knees or the arms of their chairs. They had not brought a knife to their seat. They did not use their fork if they could get away with it. They hollered at their wives, fiancés, girlfriends, moms, or sisters to bring them napkins if they got too messy. The women complied without a second thought.

Before we knew it, the men had finished eating. They told their women that it was time to go. The women said their goodbyes and thanked my mother before following their men out the door. No man uttered any note of gratitude. No man acknowledged that my mother opened her home and provided a meal and would be left to clean up. They all were more focused on getting home for their post-Thanksgiving meal naps. My father and brother were no different. Before the last person left, they were both fast asleep. They could not even bring themselves to leave the living room, my father in his recliner and my brother on the couch. They were exhausted, it seemed; too much turkey, perhaps.

As I escorted my grandmother, the last to leave, to the door, I glanced into the kitchen. My mother was, again, laboring in her domestic duties. She had already begun washing the dishes and gave me a smile that silently urged me to hurry back. I opened the door for my grandmother, who gave me a tight squeeze and a soft, proud smile. For the first time in my life, I noticed the wrinkles that covered her face. They formed river valleys over her cheeks and across her forehead. She had little creases on the outside edges of her eyes that deepened when she smiled. I forced my eyes, away from this winding landscape, to meet hers. I presented her with a plastic container holding some of my mother's famous baked potato casserole, a dish she had originally perfected before teaching it to my mother. She gently placed one hand, which, like her face, was covered in wrinkles and folds, under the container and one over mine before smiling thankfully and turning to leave. I quickly returned to my mother's side. Without a word, I began packing the food away. As I transferred food into plastic containers and placed aluminum foil over cake pans, I thought to myself about what I was thankful for. I turned to look at my mother over my shoulder. She was humming "Mary, did you know?" to herself. I knew she would have the Thanksgiving decorations down and Christmas decorations up by the end of the night. Then, tomorrow morning, she would go Black Friday shopping. Then, she would come home and wrap all the gifts. Then, she would finish

up her plans for Christmas Even dinner. Then, she would make her grocery list and go shopping. Then, then, then. It never seemed to end for her. She seemed to be subject to a life of preparing and hosting and cooking and cleaning.

She could see me watching her in the reflection of the window above the sink and looked at me over her shoulder. She smiled for a moment and then turned her attention back to the dishes. I knew she was thankful for me. But no matter how thankful she was for me and no matter how much she loved me and no matter how much she wanted the best for me, she would never be able to protect me from her life, our fate, our obligation.

My gaze drifted up into the window. Even my mother's reflection was busy scrubbing. The reflection of my face hovered above my mother's. Her face displayed evident marks of fulfillment, the crow's feet in the corner of her eyes and smile lines parenthesizing her mouth. These had taken time to wear in, a lifetime. A lifetime of making silly faces at babies and surprising my father on his birthday, of squinting at recipes scribbled on faded notecards and shrinking away from the heat of the oven, of singing along to hymns in church and reading aloud children's books in the nursery, of work and joy and love. I remembered that these marks existed more deeply on grandmother's face.

As my gaze drifted back up to the reflection of my own face, I realized that these marks existed there, too. I tried to trace the path of these marks that were eroding away my once-youthful complexion with my gaze, but I had to look away. Instead, I turned to look at my mother's hands, covered in soapsuds. I glanced down at my own hands, holding a roll of aluminum foil.

While we share a fate and a face, something else connects us in the space between. Something that includes my grandmother, too. And her mother and her mother's mother. Something that exists in the landscape of wrinkles, the feet of crows, the lines of smiles, the time spent earning them. It is a fulfillment of fate, an acceptance of duty, earned in service, perhaps out of obligation. It is an unspoken gratitude, an appreciation we cannot put into

words, a sorrow for the future, yes, but a gratefulness for the past. Despite the fate we share, despite the role we fill, despite the anger we feel, we work side by side, we giggle together, we make each other's favorite dishes and we help clean up. We share a fate and a face, and we are thankful for this.

I turn away from my mother and her reflection and mine. I tear off a rectangle of aluminum foil. And I cover what scraps are left of her famous baked potato casserole.

SECOND GRADE

By Jenna Brown

One of the last real good times I had with my dad was a cool summer day in second grade. He had just completed Alcoholics Anonymous, which would be the first of many recovery programs. I hadn't seen him for a while as he underwent his treatment as my mom wanted to make sure he was better. And he was better, or at least he was for a little while. So just for that day, I was allowed to stay at his place on fifth avenue.

A warm breeze flickered through the open windows of the house, fluttering the long, white curtains, and the air smelled of freshly mown grass. Church bells chimed the hours and the sun reflected off of clean tabletops and danced shadows on vacuumed carpets.

He had cleaned my room and made my bed, folded my red duvet underneath my pillows, and arranged my stuffed animals. My pink unicorn pillow pet, my brown bear, and my baby butterfly doll snuggled up with various hand-me-down penguins and quilts.

"I'm better mom, really," he protested from the tiled bathroom, phone to his ear.

I watched from the doorway, eyes wide.

"Jenna go to your room, I'll be there in a minute." He shut the peeling white door and turned the lock. "Just let me have the day with her, okay? I'm not drinking, I promise."

We spent the afternoon on my bedroom carpet, tinkering with my bracelet maker, which was meant to string beads onto cord. It proved difficult, however, so I ended up just making them by hand. I made a bracelet small enough for my wrist and another big enough for my father's. He wore it for weeks after that until it broke.

Afterwards, we put together my unopened *Harry Potter* Lego set I had received for my birthday. The set contained plastic towers, a bridge that opened, six different figures, and a dementor. We spent the next few hours

tacking piece onto piece and stickers onto sides. By pulling a certain lever, the bridge would collapse and send the unlucky lego figure flying. We catapulted Draco Malfoy again and again until the joke wore off.

“Hm... I wonder what this bridge is doing here,” my dad would narrate, placing Draco in the middle. “Oh noooooooooo!”

In the lowering sun, we pedaled our bikes to Rising Park, wheels a circuitous blur, bumping across uneven pathways and weeds. I rode my pink mountain bike, with five different gears. It was stolen just the year after, when I left it in front of the house during the night, rather than put it in the garage as I was told to.

At night, my father tucked me into my sheets and kissed me on the forehead. “I remember when you held my thumb with the palm of your hand,” he said, “And now you’re so big, and so tall! But you’ll always be my little Jenna.”

Maybe we didn’t do all those things that day. Maybe I’m remembering several separate days and mushing them together, or even remembering things incorrectly, But if you asked me about my favorite day, I would tell you about that one. I think it was the last day, or one of the only days that he solely focused on me.

Or maybe it’s my favorite because it happened after one of the worst days.

Just a few months before, I had invited my next-door neighbor Sylvia to my house for a sleepover. We spent the majority of the evening playing with my American Girl dolls and waiting for dinner to be made. Sylvia had brought her doll in a carrying case, with a handful of various shoes and skirts. For hours we switched their outfits and hairstyles.

“When are we having dinner? I’m hungry,” she complained, sitting her Kit doll in her lap. The sky out my window was pitch black and the house was silent. “Can we go ask again?”

“I’m sure it will be ready soon.” I handed her a doll brush. “Here, let’s braid her hair.” I was stalling. I knew dinner had probably never been made,

or that my father was passed out on the couch. I hoped for the latter.

“But can we ask?”

I nervously followed her down the carpeted stairs to the dark kitchen. Sylvia flipped on the light switch, illuminating my father, who sat at the small kitchen table, spooning microwaved broccoli from a tupperware container into his mouth. His eyes were glossy, glazed over like baby-doll eyes.

“Hey dad, can we eat?” I choked, fingers fumbling the hem of my shirt.

A piece of broccoli fell out of his mouth onto his lap. He didn’t seem to notice. “I thought you ate. I told you it was ready.”

Sylvia walked over to the nearly cleaned out pot of macaroni, with a cheesy fork at the bottom. “You ate it all.”

This had happened before, when she wasn’t there. He would burn the hamburger meat for spaghetti, and forget to make the noodles, or assume I’d eaten when I hadn’t. On these nights, I made cereal or sandwiches and ate in my room.

I nudged her shoulder. “We can just make peanut butter and jelly sandwiches or something. I can get you chips out of the cupboard. We have barbecue.”

My dad jerked out of his chair and stumbled to the closet. He put on his winter coat, even though it was sixty-five degrees outside.

“What is he doing? What’s wrong with him?” She whispered.

“Dad,” I asked, “What are you doing?”

My father grinned. “I’m getting orange juice from the field.” He opened the side door, stiffly standing at the precipice.

A tear rolled down my friend’s cheek. “I want to go home.” She ran upstairs, stuffing doll clothes back into her bag. I helped her pack everything up, mumbling I’m sorry’s in embarrassment. I was embarrassed that she had witnessed his drunken state, that my dad drank so much, but above all, I was embarrassed that my father was my father.

Sylvia’s father came to the door later. He was angry. “What’s up with my

kid coming back home crying saying she hasn't eaten when it's ten at night?"

They bickered back and forth, until my father phoned the police.

We waited on the porch until they came. Sylvia's father stood on his porch, two doors down. He and my father screamed at each other while I sat on the front steps, picking at the skin on my knees. They continued until blue and red lights flashed.

Two officers stepped out of the car. "Sir, what seems to be the problem?"

"He's drunk, is what he is!" Sylvia's dad leered, "Made my kid cry!"

My father swayed, holding the porch banister to keep himself upright. "I'm fine! I'm fine! You're making my kid upset!"

"Gentlemen! It seems you both had a little bit too much to drink and need to go back inside and call it a night." The officer glanced over at me. "Sir, can you tell your kid to go back inside?"

"Jenna, go back inside." My dad snapped.

I shut the door.

When it opened next, my father was being held by an officer on either side, like a criminal. He still wore his winter coat.

"Jenna, they're taking me away, they want me to never see you again! Please, you have to help me!" he cried, hands outstretched.

I never took them.

FICTION



Bailey's Beach (1901) by Childe Hassam

THE UNSEEN MALADY

By Karson Dickinson

No one was supposed to know that I have an invisible disease. I keep it to myself, ensuring that my friends and family, as well as my foes, do not see the cracks in my armor. Armor that I have been wearing to guard myself from the world since I was young, since I was a child with dreams that had never heard of such a thing called reality.

I have always taken pride in the way I hide my downfalls. I laugh as the girl with the shiny hair tells a joke, smile as the boy recounts a story that we both know isn't true. I blend in with all the other faces, I portray myself as "normal." Even here in this club surrounded by swarms of people, no one can see that something about me is . . . off. That's the wonderful thing about having an illness that cripples you from the inside: if you choose, no one has to see you suffer.

No one has to watch as your mind whispers that everyone you love will die because of you, and the only thing you can do to save them is *tap*

tap

tap

your fingers. *That* will save them from greeting the land from which no mortal returns. No one has to see you crumble from within while the voice that sounds oh-so similar to your own intrudes when you are happy and smiling, only to tell you that you don't deserve that smile. Inside, the moment is ruined, but outside, no one else can see that your smile has gone from genuine to fake. The loveliest of facades.

No one has to know you are a shell of a person, barely holding onto your sanity, always at the mercy of the monster that has made a home inside the collapsing walls of your mind. I have lived this way for as long as I can

remember. There may have been a time before I coexisted in my own being, but that time was too short lived to have had any kind of impact. That's okay, though. It makes the situation that I am in now far easier to bear.

It's roughly eleven o'clock, and the flashing strobe lights are a beam that illuminates the darkness, momentarily allowing me to see the people around me, seemingly hundreds of them inhaling and exhaling in waves. The light radiates off my dress, a black and sparkly thing that might look nice on my form. My hair curls around my shoulders, each strand a flawless spiral. I spent hours perfecting this small piece of me. I even went as far as choosing makeup to accentuate the color of my eyes, what might be perceived as natural beauty. Realistically, I know all of this holds no weight. Deciphering what I truly look like these days is difficult; my disease can tell me whatever it wants, and I will believe it.

But now I'm too distracted to care about how others may perceive me. I saw him across the floor of churning people and now I'm floating in the sea of bodies that dance and sing to the music that fills the club, the bite of alcohol burning my nose as it sachets towards me from all directions. For me, there's no more dancing or singing or smiling. My thoughts are racing because they've been triggered by the boy who is now a man, a man that was once a boy that found joy in deconstructing me. The floor is sticky, and I worry that I'll get stuck in my place here forever, the man that chewed me up and spit me out an entity that hovers closer by the minute. Just ten feet away now. I'm still here, but he won't stop coming. *Please*, I beg my monster, *don't let me collapse now. Let me fight, let me win.* But then my mind whispers that it will all be okay, just close your eyes and *jump*

jump *jump.*

Those three small actions, the compulsion that I must pay heed to, will keep me pulled together. I try to push down the panic, refusing to cave to the impulse when so many eyes are on me. But it comes in waves, quick as anything I have ever known.

No, I scream inside the walls of thought that I am trapped in. I stumble on my feet and my friends sway around me, but I'm not dancing, I'm dying, I'm trying, but it's futile. In my heart, I know it's already far too late. I disobeyed my brain, refusing to respect that demented pattern of three. I can't, for the world would *see*, and my disease would take another piece of me. The piece called privacy, my little secret, the right to my hidden demise.

When I look back on this moment in the future, I will wonder why my armor chose this night to shatter into a million pieces. I will contemplate the catalyst of my unbecoming, forever questioning if I could have pushed back harder, keeping the beast at bay for just a *second* longer. I will try not to blame it on the man who was once a boy, the one that treated me as if I were a toy, but both me and my monster know that there will never be a concrete answer. Sick people can never see the moment that will kill them until it's already upon them.

Bugs are crawling under my skin, and I know if I don't hide or escape or *something*, everyone in this raging pit of dancing ghosts will see me be condemned by the demons I share a brain with. That can't happen

that can't happen

that can't happen

because the man who almost seems like a mirror has seen the writhing insides of my monster once before and he's getting closer, just over my shoulder, and he *must* know that I'm wounded, that I'm bleeding, because he's a shark that circles me and I know he knows I'm going down, faster and faster by the minute. The memory engulfs me, my body shakes, but my mind goes motionless. When it makes me look and see, it must be silent, it must be still. This predator knows how to prepare their prey.

Don't you remember how you trusted him? That day you showed him your darkness. You unlocked the gates of our prison and showed him what it truly looks like here. For the first time, you allowed him to see the dark side of our duality. A tear slid from the

corner of your eye as you thought 'finally, someone truly sees me.'

Yes, he did see you. He looked into your eyes, love and hope and wonder there, a living phantom. You brought your hand up to his jaw, strong and firm, just like all the rest of him. You brushed his skin with the pad of your thumb, still soft from years of calm adolescence. Soft like his hair, like his body underneath you, like his heart. Or at least how you perceived it.

"I loved you, Nichole. I really did. But you are sick. How do you expect me to stay with someone that can't even look in the mirror? How am I meant to love someone who isn't in control of their own thoughts?" You see that his eyes are bleak, and his heart has turned fiery, the crazed red and orange volatile in their pursuit to burn you. We let you get close to the flames, knowing this is best for you, knowing we will use this to convince you to commit our compulsions far down the line.

He pushes your hand away and you start to turn in on yourself, waiting, watching, wondering why your love, your life, has gone as distant as all the far-off places you don't dare travel.

"You are not the person I thought you were. I don't think I even know you at all."

His words cut you, didn't they? Yet you still responded. "I am no different than I was all those years ago! I was born this way, can't you see that? I have no control! I didn't ask for this monster to make a home in my mind; I never wanted to fight for a voice in my own inner monologue. Baby, it hurts, and I hate it, but every day I fight against it. I will get better. I promise! Don't you love me enough to see me through this? After everything, don't you owe me at least the effort of trying?"

You should have known you would never win in a fight against us. He did. He knew. You remember as well as us his face of stone as he turned his back on you, shoulders taugth in anger, in loss. He opened the door, saying, whispering, yelling, "I cannot love those that are ill and unfixable. I refuse to call a broken girl mine."

Then I'm dropped back into the real world, my body still shaking, the people around me quickly closing in, but my mind is no longer still. No, now it races tenfold the speed it did before, and I must run, I must escape, for the world will see me collapse from within if I don't.

In a sentence that is an accordion of words that smoosh themselves together, I tell the group of girls I came with that I need to go to the bathroom. As I turn on my heel, keeping each compulsion inside, I tell the girls, no, don't come with me. Don't come watch me fall into a pit of spiraling madness; the spitting hell that I have learned to call home. I whisper internally, *bush, breathe, don't let them see*, attempting to soothe the panic that has already taken hold. My breath comes faster and my feet become a wobbling mess as I rush towards the door. People look at me in anger and annoyance as I step on their feet, my pace barely below the gait of a run.

Another step, and the corners of my vision go dark, my peripheral now a double set of blinders. It makes me fear, for I cannot see the boy who is now a man, the shark that hunts what he perceives as lesser than. I swear, I hear screaming, and the intruder that lives inside me yells, "go faster!", so I do, I do, I do! I'm wheezing now and everyone is chasing me, pursuing me like hunting dogs hot on my trail. I snap my neck

left

right

left,

because they tell me to. Now I'm too scared to disobey them, I refuse to put up a fight. There's a buzzing in my ears, and I think I'm getting closer to the door, because that's air in my face, and I hope it's not his breath, and I hope those aren't his feet that I'm stepping on, but maybe that's an illusion, a lie made up by my monster to give me hope

when there is none,

when there is none,

when there is none.

I grapple for the handle of what must be the door, but I can't be too sure because my vision's gone dark, but the voices got louder, and I think someone might be yelling at me, but I just can't quite be sure. I feel a cold

burst of air on my face and I smile because I know I've finally escaped, and there might be a hand on my arm but I know it must have the intention of causing harm because my monster tells me everyone only ever wants to hurt, but you can save yourself, Nichole, you can. Just *step*

step

step

and you will be free of the hand, you'll bear no scars, and that's the plan. Of course I listen, this will keep me safe, will keep everyone safe, so I take three great big steps. The arm is gone, but the air is moving fast around me, and I think I might fall, and there's yelling, and then there's something bright behind my eyes that are closed, and then I'm on the ground and there is no thought.

The smell of cleaning agents and the beeping of machines overwhelm me before I begin to open my eyes. Hushed voices surround me, so I muster up the effort to see what's going on. Upon opening my eyes, I find myself in a hospital bed, multiple machines sending data to some far-off computer. The doctor turns to me, hearing my movements as I assess my many small cuts and bruises that burn. I see his face, and in a blink, my body tightens up and the compulsions come calling; this man is a man I know but I thought I had escaped him, all of him, but now he's here and now I hurt—

“Hello Nichole, I'm Doctor Scott, and I can assure you that you are in good hands,” he takes a step closer to me, holding a clipboard and pen. “Do you know why you're here?”

The man looks at me, and while I look closer, shut my eyes and listen to his voice, I realize he is not the one that haunts me. I take deep breaths,

keeping the monster at bay. Opening my eyes, I shake my head no.

“You ran in front of a car, Nichole. If it wasn’t for the security at the club you went to, you would be dead. They pushed you out of the way just in time, and you will be okay, but you need to be more careful next time. We’re running tests right now, but I assume you just had too much to drink. There’s nothing wrong with you; everything will be okay, aside from a few cuts and bruises. If you take good care of them, they won’t last either.”

The doctor speaks to one of the silently working nurses, then makes for the door. Before leaving, he says, “Since you’ve suffered no real injuries, and assuming all the tests come back clear, you will be permitted to leave tonight. Feel free to contact anyone you like, and if you need, we can provide assistance.”

With that, he walks out of the door, leaving me with my thoughts and the silently working nurses. I assess the situation, contemplating how I got here, cut, bruised, and bleeding. I stare at the ceiling, heart beating its hollow rhythm.

I know I didn't have anything to drink. So does my monster. But there's nothing wrong with me, as the doctor said. Nothing that you can see. Nothing that matters; nothing that's real. If he knew what I had living inside me, I wonder if he would call me sick. I wonder if they would let me go, or make me stay in this place, too worried about the unknown, the possibility of my disease being contagious.

Not to worry, I would respond. My disease is invisible, my silent tormenter, unable to touch those around me. It will kill me before it ever touches another soul. They’re deadly, the things that can hide in plain sight. The things that come out of hiding when triggered by a man or a memory, a fear, or a fury. Perhaps what is most frightening is the fact that sometimes it needs no force of motion to set it on its warpath.

Sometimes all you have to do is breathe. Breathe and

breathe and

breathe.

POETRY



Poetry Tempest (1925) by Zdzislaw Jasinski

DANCING WITH THE DEVIL IN MY HEAD

By Melody Ashworth

In the depths of my mind behind the buzzing of
last-minute study crams and daytime plans,
a little voice echoes to me
The voice is small, yet mighty, begging me to tune in
to dial the frequency of my brain waves to its melody
 I refuse!
The tireless repetitive radio station that is my being drowns it out
 However...
when the station quiets and the static draws near
I cave
A toxin in me, sinking its teeth deeper with every bite
Gnashing...gnawing
My punisher and my captor, swaying to the sweet embrace of the falsehoods it tells
This dance is so familiar, like a mother's touch
Someone I have been intertwined with since birth
The devilish words, twisting and turning, enticing me more and more
As the lies unfold their grip grows tighter
I
 Am
 Suffocating
burdened by how it is, how it was, and how it has to be
I've never danced to a song so infuriated
My stomping of feet in attempts to squander the thoughts that are squandering me
Around and round, we spin and sway
I'm tormented
Trapped in this twisted waltz through night and day
The laughter echoes, cruel and unkind
As I bow down to the devil's dance in my mind
We tango until I am dizzy and green in the face
Praying for anything just to give my mind a break

Is anyone Here?
Can anyone see?
Oh no.
I must save myself from the devil in me
I wave the white flag as high as I can
On my knees begging
Please spare me!
The devil roars with laughter

its arsenal is doubling in size now:

“You’re not good enough!”

“You’re a failure”

“Do people REALLY like you?”

You’re tolerated!

Unworthy, unlovable, replaceable, unintelligent, alone,
forgettable, useless, embarrassing, pitiful....

I scream in agony

I’m getting closer now

Who is this devil?

I’ve dug so deep that what once was a faint voice

Stares straight at me

anticipating its reveal

Why

am

I

the

staring in

mirror

oh

that devil is me

PILLOW

By Gwendolyn Martin

I'm sure you'll be glad to hear this; I can already see your grin,
And writing this feels too honest, like I'm showing too much skin.
I never really think of you, and this may be hard to believe,
but every night you show up, and it seems you'll never leave.
I used to dream of being late, curled up on my bed.
Nightmares used to haunt me; now I dream of you instead.

I see snow covered lemon trees and things that don't make sense,
Like speaking of the past but only using future tense,
Like celebrating Christmas on the hottest days of June,
Looking up at a big, blue sky, surprised to see the moon.
Not very much happens; we tend to talk a while,
Laugh and go for lunch, swapping sun-soaked secret smiles.
It's not like I wake up and find you, keep you in my sights,
It's only after daytime that you trade away my nights.

You feel like memories from photographs, a blown out birthday candle,
happiness and joy in amounts I cannot handle.
But I know I've never met this side of you that knows me best,
the you that likes to keep me company while I rest.
I say my prayers and "good night" before it's time for me to go,
and my heart only feels you when my head hits the pillow.

IT'S CALLED

By Kristen Tabernilla

the melanin hierarchy. In the Philippines,
the arrangement is [brown in the down below](#).
Sometimes, those in the “below” firmly believe
they need to change, to alter themselves
because they don't look like [power](#).

The melanin hierarchy: it's when the beauty
standard is [mestiso/a](#) and revered like the [moon](#)
against its backdrop of the hours of darkness.
Yet, brown skin is the total norm. You're [moreno/a](#)?
Guess what? “You're no saintlike power.”

The melanin hierarchy is when one must shield
oneself from the warm, loving rays of the sun.
To make sure to remain pale, honoring those
who thought of us as [stepping stones](#). “Better
stay inside,” the elders say. Straight to Christlike power.

The melanin hierarchy loves its commercials,
its advertisements, and its [billboards](#), glorifying
[whitening creams](#), [whitening pills](#), and whitening
treatments. “Bleach it up! Get it to guarantee
yourself a dreamlike power!”

The melanin hierarchy has an [extensive reach](#).

It is in the hair that blanches out the ink.

It is in the eyes that are lured
by the blues and [greens](#) of plastic lenses.

It is in the elders raised on a colonial
mentality that snatches and pinches
your [nose](#) to make it sharper,
less flat, and less wide.

Where can I press Dislike Power?

ON RAINBOWS & WITCH HUNTS

By Olivia Joy

To avoid the stake:
dip my coat in sacrificial red;
 the hours I have worked, the bruises you have made, the lies
We have told.
 You said I should be purified by pouring out

Into endless fields of ashen lavender.
 “The Lord is my shepherd,” I bleat
and repeat the lines fed to me, connected
 to visions of justification in Joseph’s multicolored coat:
where I see a multicolored flag—
 in David and Jonathon’s same-soul-selves:
where I see David’s dirge as confession.

To avoid the stake:
mold my coat about my mouth
 so I cannot howl the agony of my splintered canines—
Because I am a sheep drenched in righteous blood.
 Jesus loves the little children, but

I cannot howl the word that oozes from the pulpit like
 frankincense and myrrh;
the word that tangles in my throat and tactfully targets my tattered coat
 And I tailspin.

Tie my coat around my throat so I may
 cross the Jordan and see The One who
spits on sheep but sanctifies snakes, glorifies gruesome mistrials.
 So I will destroy my coat, weighed by time and

tragedy, dyed by lies, and become
the wolf you fear in me
and I will howl my wild witchcraft
until the path to Paradise is painted rainbow

So I may bare my teeth and spit back for
people proudly parading "GOD HATES FAGS" while preaching to the choir.
You may smoke me in the UK; but here,
I do not burn.

REMINDERS

By Lexi Evak

Mom,

*As I took a step in the kitchen today,
I almost mistook my daughter for you.
Her soft voice,
Her dark hair pulled into a knot on the nape of her neck,
Her piercing blue eyes
She placed a hot platter of food in front of me.
The smell brought me back, Mom, to when you were still here.*

Thinking back to long summer days...

*Freckled cheeks,
Skinned knees,
Chlorine smelling skin,
Bleached hair stained by the sun,
Coming inside after days of play to supper cooking.
Each day ended with a belly full of your warm, homemade meals.
We would lie on the couch and I'd snuggle up beside you.
You would run your long fingernails down my back until I fell asleep.
You would carry me to bed and wake me up just enough to whisper our favorite bedtime
prayer to one another.
Our days were long but the years went fast.
I wish you were still here.*

Love,
Your son

I glanced up, my eyes locked with my daughter's, her sweet smile revealed curiosity.

“Have I ever told you how much you remind me of your grandmother?”

AN UNEXPECTED DEATH

By Sarah Orr Aten

After he died, we went to the local Wal-mart
And bought the nicest clothes we could find there
What I would have worn, had I known, was in the closet at home.
The brown corduroy skirt and striped button up
Would just have to do.
It snowed,
Those enormous, wonderful flakes
Falling faster than we could drive
Down the dark country road back to his dark country house
Where a reunion that we all imagined would take place
Was instead met with sullen, mournful silence
And the image of my cousins carrying the casket down the steps of the
funeral home,
And the memory of sitting at the gravesite, freezing in the winter chill.
My mom had her scarf wrapped all the way around her head
Her posture as stiff as the wind
As those men from the military folded up the flag
Painfully, poignantly slow,
Before handing it to her.
I don't think she cried, not then.

But I cried.

And sometimes I still cry

Thinking about his laugh and his jokes and how he put peanut butter on everything

Including Cheez-its and radishes

And how his friends toasted his memory after the service by doing the same.

I can still see the handwriting on the flower arrangements,

“We’ll miss you, old friend.”

His was not the first death I had grieved,

But his was the first that was unexpected

Sharp, and fierce, like a stab or a burn

Leaving a scar that never feels quite right.

After he died, as we drove away from the house,

Returning home with our Wal-mart funeral clothes in tow

I watched the red sun rising over the fields

Thinking

I can never come back here.

This was like another unexpected death,

And I wiped away a fresh set of tears, knowing that even if I did return

He would not be there,

And I would never be the same.

WENDY DARLING

By Karson Dickinson

She couldn't find her glasses.

I watch her like a ghost, her wrinkled hands
search through her purse, unpainted nails scratch
specs, but those that are for her
eternal-summer climate,
not the ones she's looking for.

She searches high and low,
into the kitchen she goes,
catching a whiff of the dinner that's cooking.

I watch her mind wander to the groceries on the counter,
practically hear her think:

I have to wash the grapes, the grandkids are coming,
so she turns on the water, cold drops gracing her hands,
only to realize she never found her glasses.

I hate that she did it again,
her mind running like a river,
similar to the one she
talks about
traveling with her boys
when they were younger.

But now they're older,
like weeds that won't stop growing,
and all she can say is *why couldn't there be Peter Pan?*

Her words sink deep, killing some part of me,
though I realize she doesn't even remember I'm here.

Truly, none of this was ever intentional.

For I know she wants to be like Peter,
with his power to keep life eternally youthful,

free of forgetting,

of overlooking,

of being

lost.

But alas, Wendy never could fight
the moving of time, the infinite churn
that takes her delicate mind with it.

I know she's tired of this,

but she'll never say it,

so I watch while her heart crumbles because
once again, she realizes her task has slipped
from her mind, swift as the glimmer of pixie dust in the air.

I steel myself for the worst, her unbecoming,

(my unbecoming)

but she only puts her head in her hands,

refusing to give up

—always stubborn to the bone—

knowing in the end she'll find her glasses,
knowing that won't stop this from happening again.

CONTRIBUTOR BIOGRAPHIES

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Addison Rainbolt is a recent graduate of the College of the Ozarks, where she majored in English. She has had articles published in the College of the Ozarks' newspaper, the *Outlook*; a play review in the *Northland News*; and various advertisements for The Keeter Center on The Keeter Center website, Facebook and Instagram pages, and *417 Magazine*. She prefers to write creative non-fiction detailing real experiences that illustrate universal truths. Her creative pieces often grapple with social balance and giving a voice to the underdog.

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Jenna Brown is an creative writing undergraduate student at Ohio University. She has several other published works in Sphere Magazine.

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Karson Dickinson lives in Louisville, Kentucky and attends Spalding University. She is in her Junior year, and is studying Creative Writing; upon graduation, she will have a BFA, and plans to get her MFA following college. Karson has been writing her first fantasy novel for the past few years, and plans to finish it post-graduation as well. When not writing, she is playing with her dog Momo and four cats—she is an avid animal rescuer!

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Melody Ashworth currently attends Heidelberg University as a Health Science Major .

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Gwendolyn Martin is currently double majoring in English Literature and English Writing at Huntington University. She is an avid reader with an overactive imagination and dreams of traveling the world. Gwen believes every sunny day should be accompanied with a windows-down drive, every coffee or tea with a fabulous book or person, and every kitchen with dancing. She loves her vivacious family members who continue to support her every step of the way, as well as her dog who mainly just follows her every step of the way to whine for treats.

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Kirsten Tabernilla is an undergraduate student at Northeastern Illinois University pursuing an English degree and a Creative Writing minor. She writes with a family-oriented mind — her inspiration from silly memories to nostalgia, heartening musings, and those mighty, hard pills to swallow. She also writes contemporary poetry, focusing on the Philippines' social complexities as a nod to her Filipino heritage.

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Olivia Joy is a nontraditional student at Illinois College pursuing an English major (editing & publishing) and theatre minor (stage management & operations). She hopes to enter the publishing world not for her own work, but to pull the underrepresented voices out of the slush pile and bring new creativity to the market. She is currently working on a collection of science fiction poetry and a Western one-act play.

LEXI EVAK

I am currently a senior at Heidelberg University majoring in Early Childhood Education. I have a passion for writing and have since I was young. Writing is an outlet for me to be creative but also express my emotions.

SARAH ORR ATEN

Sarah Orr Aten is an author and freelance editor in Louisville KY. Her favorite genres are fantasy and speculative fiction, but she also writes "everyday" fiction and poetry. Her published works include *The World Between*, *The Chaos Within* and the accompanying novellas *The Power Beneath* and *Other Stories*. She published a short collection of poems titled *The Circle* in 2022. You can read more of her work at www.sarahorraten.com.

