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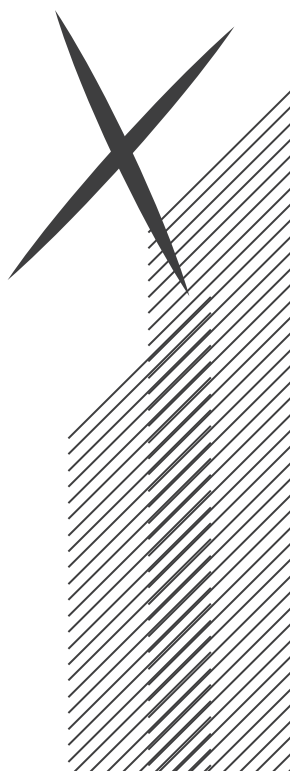
Editor's Note

One of the best things about working with Pegasus is knowing that you are giving students the opportunity to have their work shine and be published for the world to read and enjoy. I thoroughly enjoyed curating each one of the submissions we received from students, and I absolutely loved working with other students to help bring this year's issue of the magazine to completion. There is no denying that Covid-19 has been a huge influence on everyone across the world and there is little doubt that it will be remembered by future generations. With the cover of this year's magazine, we wanted to record this moment in time and use it as a source of creative inspiration. During these times, masks have become a symbol of widespread fear and paranoia. We hope, by featuring a mask on this year's cover, that we can instead turn it into a symbol of widespread hope and inspiration.

I want to thank the student editorial staff and the magazine's graphic designer, Raine May, for designing an amazing cover, and working with me through this challenging yet rewarding project this semester. I'm so thankful for Allyson Gleason and Professor Paul Pat for giving me this opportunity from which I have learned and grown, not only as a student, but as a writer. I think what Pegasus does each and every year is truly amazing, and I am so grateful to have been a part of it for as long as I have. Hopefully, no matter where you are, some of these stories will put a smile on your face like they put a smile on mine.

Gary Hernandez

2020 Editor



Contents

A Sip of the Clouds	7
Trey Whitfield	
An Unruly Murder of North Korean Teeth	11
Eva Isabel Tirado Barrett	
At the Masquerade	16
Grace McFarland	
Chain Server	17
Liam Clark	
Cracking Bottles	18
Samantha Aman	
Early Bird Special	19
Mario Lerario	
In Her Favor	22
Sonja	
Life Sentence	23
Nijah Albright	
Messages From Her	24
Annalyn Procopio	
The Brilliant Light	25
Michael J. Marino	
The Hitman	28
Brett Savage	

A Sip of the Clouds

by Treye Whitfield

I

"Harry? Harry? Are you done getting ready?"

I smoothed my sweater vest. The sun galloped through the window to deliver an Al Capone level beating.

Marie slinked around the edge of the door. Only her head peeked in. Her long brown hair decorated her pink blouse. Her short skirt hovered over the carpet.

"You're overdressed."

"What do people even do at these things?"

"It's this thing on Pinterest called having fun. I know right. It's the strangest thing."

Her eyes rolled slowly like a bowling ball made of stars.

"You're going to be fine. I promise."

I gazed at her. My eyes, a telescope, trying to see if the universe really condensed itself to love. You cannot embrace the stars without bursting into flames, but yet we were.

Her head rested on my chest. I felt as though she could fall through me and be swallowed by my inequities. I pushed her away from me. I slipped my shirt off. Mid-way she wrapped herself around me. I lost myself in her. In the end, I wore a light blue denim shirt pulled over a white T-shirt that smelled of her.

The clouds swelled to the point of bursting. They staggered and stumbled across town. The world pushed and pulled them, until they unbuckled, missed the bowl that was the world, entirely.

I turned to her curiously.

"Do you know who's going to be there?"

"You know, just family and few friends."

"Alright. It's just--- I don't want to ruin this for you."

"You're fine, Harry. Slight overdressed, but fine."

"Oh c'mon! I ditched the sweater vest."

"The fact that you put that thing on is a deal breaker. It's the middle of July and you were dressed for a Christmas party." She zig-zagged across the pavement, doubled over giggling.

"You know what? I'm going to divorce you and marry your Aunt Debbie. She loves Christmas parties and my sweater vest," I said.

I turned away, defiantly.

My wife remarked "My aunt is 65. You take her to bed and you're waiting thirty-minutes for her bottom half to reach the top of the stairs."

"She loves my sweater vest though."

She looked at me as if I could protect her.

"Harry, I just want you to know that I'm so proud of you. I wouldn't let anything get in the way of that. I love you and everything will be okay."

I wanted to believe that like it was water in the desert. Like a devout Catholic. Like the Puritan and the witch. Like a man on death row for a crime he did commit. For as many steps as I climbed, the first twelve were the hardest. But I know it took a few more than that for her to love me back. One for every family member who mocked "I wasn't worth all that."

She is the air in my lungs. She allows me to be above something that has nothing to do with the influence. Lord knows I've failed. She is the air under my wings and the angel to which the knight knelt before battle. I stayed silent and prayed.

II

We stepped onto the light grass. A bunch of little kids jogged through the park in different directions. "Honey, I'm going to go find my sister. Can you grab us something to drink?"

"Sure, what kind?"

"Orange soda."

"Alright, have fun." She smiled and motioned for me to go socialize.

I turned and inched my way toward an outcrop of trees and barbecue food. A couple of coolers were side by side in the cool shade. A speaker blared above my head. I stepped toward one of the cooks.

"Hey, how you doing?" I said.

He was young, but a couple inches taller than me. He had on a black shirt with a delta symbol.

"I'm great. Do you remember me?" he taunted.

"You are--- Gail's husband right?"

"No," he remarked flatly. I was eager to end the conversation.

"I'm Sarah's brother, Nick," he said.

"Oh---right. Right. I remember you."

He could have told me that he was the president and I wouldn't have really known any difference.

I reached inside the cooler. I pulled out two orange sodas and scanned the park. There was a house on the far side of the park and a small wooded area towards the right. At first, I didn't see her, but her pink top stuck out from a crowd of people. I danced over to her.

"Here you go, honey." I motioned toward her.

"Thank you. It's just so hot out here," she said.

She quizzed me with her eyes.

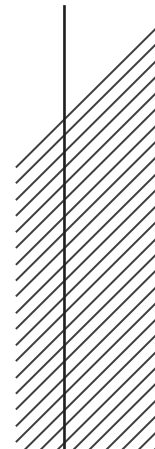
"You remember Sarah and Nick, right?" she asked.

"Yes babe. How could I forget?"

I shrunk down trying to fade into the background.

"Good. Sarah, this is Harry, my wonderful husband."

Sarah glared at me with her preconceived notions.



A Sip of the Clouds

continued

"Hi, how are you doing today?" she asked.

"I'm doing fine, and yourself?"

"Great. How are those little meetings going?" she asked.

It's astounding how much she could pretend to care without actually doing so. She was so concerned with how it looked for her to ask, rather than how it felt for me to answer. She was so judgmental. It was as if she believed that the pearly gates were a form of jewelry. She could take it off and beat me over the head with it and God would just say, "Salvation? Down the hall, past the throne. On the door to your right it should say angels with flaming swords. Yeah, that's the one."

"Fine. Did you put this all together?" I said excitedly.

"Why yes? Me, Kim, and a few guys from our college fraternity. Well, speak of the devil.

They're pulling up now." She motioned toward the parking lot.

A red and black, truck pulled up to the edge of the parking lot.

"WOO!!!! WOO!!!"

The whole party cheered. They lapped the park and shook hands with Nick before jogging back to truck. They dropped the truck bed. A puff of dust, smoke, alcohol abuse support groups and misery sailed out. They brought an entire wine cellar to a barbecue.

Vodka, tequila, and ten cases of beer adorned the vehicle like a bad paint job.

"Harry, we can go now. I'm not going to make you stay." Marie sighed.

I glared at her, then at them, but I didn't move. Sarah made a move toward the truck. They had already started passing out beers.

"You were told no alcohol. Her husband can't handle this. He's been out of rehab for two months." she lectured.

"So what? He doesn't have to drink," he said.

He was clearly a few points of above the legal driving limit.

"This is my party and he's welcomed to leave. I need my buzz to have fun. Lighten up a bit," he said.

He nudged an open beer into her chest. She sipped as if her thirty second lecture really drained her. She refused to make eye contact with me.

III

The back of the park led into the woods. The exit was past the truck. Marie pulled me and eventually I went, if only for a few steps. I had been in and out of rehab for eight years. At one point, I slept under the influence like a warm blanket. Two years in, I met Marie. She was a good Christian girl, who traded in her salvation for me. She struggled with me and only married me after I got clean. I'm ashamed to say that my last slip up was two months ago. Somehow, no, only with her help, I was able to continue on. So, I bought fifty-dollar, pharmaceutical, non- alcohol mouthwash every single month and I gave her a kiss goodbye before work.

Today, I felt my skin crawl off my bones. It waddled towards the truck only to be put out of its misery by a shotgun loaded with my mistakes. My veins, hearing the gunfire, shrank back like an abused child afraid of being touched. The Catholic, Puritan, witch, knight, and angel devolved into the town drunk. I could feel my skin making its way to the truck and if it really wasn't already happening, it would be soon.

At the edge of the grass, the fraternity boys stood at their truck. Marie was past him, pulling me, but I hadn't stepped off the grass yet. He thrust a case of six beers into my chest.

"Here's a few for the road," he said.

I caught the case, but her hand slipped. I backed up. The case felt so light and easy to carry. I forgot what it felt like to feel weightless like a whimsical bird. I walked backward toward her sister's parkside home. The party had dulled to a hum. Nobody seemed to notice anything. Nonetheless, she tugged at me hysterically.

"Baby, please. I need you. Don't do this. I love you. Remember? You promised me," she said.

"You promised too, Marie." I threw back.

She reluctantly reached the top of the stairs still pulling at my arm. Then, she flailed in my direction.

"So, you're going to throw away everything? We've been together for six years. Am I not enough for you? Do not throw me away for a drink, please," she said.

My face felt hot and embarrassed. I set the case down between us. She knelt, but I stopped her. Her tears carved the side her face like a china doll in the making. I pushed her backward. I whirled around so that I couldn't see her catch herself on the railing.

IV

The bathroom door locked with a click. I collapsed against the wall, halfway between sitting and lying. The cardboard folded backward. The aluminum can tensed in my hand. It reminded me of coal a child gets on Christmas for bad behavior. I would use it to heat the home I wanted to return to. Eventually, the fire would slobber on the curtains like Cerberus, the three-headed lap dog. Nonetheless, I was on Santa's naughty list every year and the house burned down the day after.

I gathered my reflection in the can. I reached for the door handle, but it morphed into the seal of the can. It was a broken toy that simply enjoyed being out of the box. I was a poor child who was happy with the thought of it. With it, I was a spoiled brat. I couldn't be bothered to play with the other kids in the sandbox. The sand funneled itself into a time that I no longer recognized myself. Combined with the heat from a burning house and it became a cinematic reflection of failure. Violent sobs began to escape me.

I staggered down the steps toward a brightly lit bar. I did not go home. The clouds swelled to the point of bursting. They staggered and stumbled across town. The world pushed and pulled them until they unbuckled and missed the bowl that was the world, entirely. Then, they guzzled on a backdrop of stars. I did not go home that night.

An Unruly Murder of North Korean Teeth

by Eva Isabel Tirado Barrett

I

Dr. Jura Zerbro regarded the passenger's ergonomics while evaluating the tooth.

With a departure from Stuttgart at 9:24 and expected arrival in Hamburg at 14:35, Dr. Zerbro presented her expertise when an ailing man had entered the cabin.

"Mein guter Freund! A tooth is restorative. Consistency – that is your magnum opus! Oral health in creases or decreases with consistency – irreversibility or reversibility will be its result. Flouride: your solution!"

With a shake of an orange glove, the passenger thanked the dentist.

It was 9:50.

Considering work completed, Dr. Zerbro returned to a previous activity. For 10 minutes, 'Ergonomic Root Canal Procedures' recaptured her literary appeal.

The passenger – holding a watch – rushed to the cabin door.

The dentist stretched out a hand in urgency.

The cabin door closed – the passenger left.

The train was due to stop at Mannheim at 10:05. It was now 10:00.

II

20 minutes later, Dr. Zerbro approached a ticket attendant to explain that a 'Mr. Hul' had left his I.D.

The ticket attendant frowned – clumsily clipping the I.D. to her pocket.

She radioed the train officer.

So appeared a strong faced woman clad in dark blue: Officer Anne Liane. Liane had transferred from Iran to be certified in Germany as a customs officer.

She observed both the attendant's and Dr. Zerbro's reactions to the situation.

Dr. Zerbro smiled:

"Mein Kabinenkamerad – Herr Hul – who left at 10:00 – also left his I.D. I believe his left cuspid was the perpetrator."

The ticket attendant held a device up:

"I stamped Mr. Hul's pass at 9:26 – destination: Hamburg. I saw Mr. Hul disembark then reembark at Mannheim – around 10:07. Officer, I saw that there was a hold up with another passenger – delaying the train's departure from Mannheim by 2 minutes. I did not stamp Mr. Hul's pass a second time – I suspect he disembarked – temporarily – out of confusion due to the hold up."

Dr. Zerbro shook hands with the attendant:

"The fate of one Mr. Hul is unavoidable, yet the other Mr. Hul will live in the genius of the martyr!"

The officer frowned – turning to the dentist: 'What's your deal?'

"I am Dr. Jura Zerbro – a Namibian with a dental practice in Stuttgart!"

"Interesting...er...Cabin 42?"

"Yes."

"When did you board?"

"9:24."

"Wait. Ticketed you in first class – you boarded at 10:07 from Mannheim. I delayed the train for 2 minutes when you asked me a question about 'fate' and 'non-functional watches' or some nonsense as that. Stops are: Stuttgart at 9:24, Mannheim at 10:05, Frankfurt am Main at 10:42, Frankfurt at 10:58, Kassel at 12:21, Göttingen at 12:40, Hannover at 13:20, and Hamburg at 14:35. Please clarify."

Suddenly – delight! Dr. Zerbro grinned – responding anxiously:

"Mein verwirrter Freund! At 10:07 boarded my identical twin from Mannheim: Kov Zerbro. My apologies for the delay. Kov wears non-functional watches – insisting she is broken. Broken! I do not know why – I do not know how..."

Dr. Zerbro shook her head in defeat.

The conversation was concluded – the train employees left.

"Was für eine unglaubliche Erfahrung!" So whispered Dr. Zerbro, 'Sometimes, we cannot foretell instructive regrets...'

III

At Frankfurt am Main Flughafen Fernbahnhof, Emily Greene and Vree Burr awaited the train headed to Hamburg.

It was 10:35.

Greene's eyes hid under a purple hat – her furry companion stuffed inside a garnet coat.

"Vree, do you think they'll allow Ren?"

"Don't see why not? Ren is yet to become a murderous cat. I feed her ½ cup of *nepeta cataria* – to no avail."

Vree Burr pet the cat – lost in thought.

IV

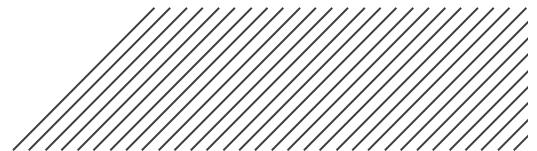
By 10:44, the train skidded to a halt.

A ticket attendant disembarked – blocking entry.

Confusion spread: 'Why are we not allowed to board this train?'

Herr Haddle, a man of 45, with an astounding set of chipped teeth, approached the attendant first.

The reason in forbidding entry was stated: *ein Tatort! A crime scene!*



An Unruly Murder of North Korean Teeth

continued

V

In groups of 5, passengers left the train.

Dr. Zerbro reunited with her sister.

"My good Kov!"

"Broken yet alive."

"We will discuss that later! Kov, your genius is needed: what is the time?"

Kov tapped her cell phone:

"0:50."

Dr. Zerbro smiled – "I, too, prefer non-functional watches."

VI

The ticket attendant had vanished – replaced with a crowd of passengers and passerbys boarding the train to investigate the crime scene.

Kov and Jura entered on the opposite side.

A tumultuous crowd of onlookers stood in front of the luggage room door – which the ticket attendant guarded.

"Crumbs!" Growled a woman, "I need my luggage. This one girl needs her cat – open it up, will you? Is there a dead body in there or what?"

Soon, the attendant stepped back – replaced by a group of investigators and officials being pushed by onlookers.

One investigator held an I.D., and declared:

"Herr Hul."

VII

The luggage room door opened – the crowd looked in – then, the crowd decreased.

Emily Greene stepped aside – bumping into a fellow passenger.

"Pardon me! Vree, I need a lobotomy. I cannot unsee what was seen -a dead body!"

Vree Burr was fascinated – appalled!

How outrageous the human mind could stretch!

He nodded in compliance.

As a student of neuroscience, Burr was in tune with his environment in a physiological and psychological sense.

He remarked:

"If it's true – then, we will not be in Hamburg by today, tomorrow, or, the next day. Lack of sleep is taxing – let's find a hotel. A disturbing, odd, backwards, day."

VIII

Amidst the commotion, Herr Haddle adjusted his watch. He loved watches. A watch's 'tick-tick-tick-ing' connected stories and experiences in life – to continuity.

Herr Haddle constantly evaluated literary means with the mathematical.

He swore – positive – that he had seen two Mr. Huls. Was it not at 10:00? He often stood up to stretch or leave a room on even numbers.

How many stories had he read – podcasts or radio shows heard – regarding a murder? Chance versus chaos: was it a fated escape or a fated death?

His finger twitched – the watch fell onto the tracks.

IX

By 11:00, Kov and Dr. Zerbro – among others – were detained in a waiting room to be questioned for the murder of Mr. Hul.

Upon request, Dr. Jura Zerbro and Kov took a break – standing beside the water fountain, outside the waiting room.

"My dear Kov! Why do you wear 1980's relic watches that do not function? I often ask myself: does its functionality diminish appeal?"

Kov Zerbro, the writer, consistently evaluated her twin sister. The dentist's insistence on form and function – was it a necessary evil?

"Discrepancy."

"Aha! Confusing Kov! Well, answer this: 10:00 Mr. Hul left my cabin – 10:07 train's departure from Mannheim – 10:20 I spoke with the train attendant and officer – 10:44 we reached Frankfurt am Main. Between 10:00 and 10:50, Mr. Hul was dead. There is a hole in this hull! Find it."

"Mit der Zeit?"

"Meine Kov – natürlich! Engagieren Sie ihres Gehirns. Wherein lies the error?"

"Discrepancy."

"Again – your strange reply..."

Dr. Jura Zerbro shook her head in wonder – continuing:

"You see, a Mr. Hul is and is not dead. Mr. Hul left his I.D. I looked at the I.D. before handing it to the ticket attendant. Pictured on it was Hul with a missing front tooth. My cabinmate Hul did not have a replacement tooth upon inspection! Between 10:00 and 10:07 – Mr. Hul left the train – at 10:07, Mr. Hul boarded the train. Why? Mr. Hul had an identical twin! After I saw the I.D., I saw two other items: a family photo and a work contract. I read the contract: Hul was North Korean. Mr. Hul – the one who disembarked at 10:07 – did so to live in Mannheim, to escape North Korea. While the pass said Hamburg – Hul left at Mannheim. Then, Mr. Hul returned – except, it was not Mr. Hul. Yes – it was Hul, however, there are two Huls! The identical twin of Mr. Hul. Meanwhile, the attendant assumed Mr. Hul had accidentally disembarked when the train

An Unruly Murder of North Korean Teeth

continued

was delayed at Mannheim – she said he left, ‘out of confusion,’ I do believe. The embarking second Mr. Hul did not show his pass – he had none – from which the attendant assumed him to be the same Hul. Awake, writer?”

Whirs of voices traveled from behind the doors – somebody briefly stepped out to drink water: Herr Haddle.

The Zerbros waited for him to leave.

“Hm. Notice more, Kov! While in cabin 42, I found a small piece of paper under Mr. Hul’s seat: a family photo. On it: identical twin Huls.”

Dr. Zerbro checked her watch: 11:24. Then, she continued:

“Prepare for this, Kov. The second item: a contract from Poland. It stated that Mr. Hul is part of a North Korean labor group. The laborers work seasonally in Poland – some are then sent to Germany for business. The risk is identification: the murderer knew Hul’s North Korean identity! North Korea is a dictatorship – its government does not restrict reentry of defectors. More so: a captured North Korean defector’s family is also executed. Since Hul left at Mannheim and arrived – the murderer was Hul!”

“Wie bitte?”

“Our second Hul killed himself – to free his brother’s identity! It is now assumed Hul is dead – perhaps it had already been assumed that the first Hul was dead – North Korea will now assume that both Huls are dead. If I can guess, the second Hul boarded Mannheim to avoid identification – while the first disembarked at Mannheim to be identified as a North Korean defector – except, under a different name! Would it not make sense for defectors to want to change their names to avoid being captured? I did not show the attendant nor officer the two items – I did not want them to know Mr. Hul was from North Korea. I presented the I.D., so the investigators would confirm Mr. Hul’s death. Sadly, Mr. Hul’s death was not preventable – yet, I knew one Hul would be saved if the other Hul was declared dead.”

Kov tapped her watch:

“Mr. Hul’s escape from a dictatorship warranted his death.”

“Kov! Your genius is apparent.”

“A non-functional watch. Entirely...backwards...Möglichkeiten. They have awoken.”

“Yes! If we were to reveal this information to the investigators – that would risk Mr. Hul’s capture!”

“Willing to reveal?”

“Quizzical, versatile, Kov! No, we should become the detectives. In hopes of selling my dental practice, I request your accompaniment in a life time of detective work. Care to join?”

X

At that, wonderful reader, I am unsure when this story ends – or if it is just beginning. I do hope it will continue – may there be mysteries to stories – may there be justice as a result.

At the Masquerade

by Grace McFarland

Lady Fairest, might I ask?

When did the light fade from thine
eyes?

I beseech thee, remove thine mask!

For a moment, please, forget
thine task and tell me of thine
facade, thine disguise—
Lady Fairest, might I ask?

Thine cheeks flush pale like the
contents of a cask, and while I do not
intend to chastise,
I beseech thee, remove thine mask!

Do not begin to borrow hope
from a flask! What afflicts thee
that now thou sighs?
Lady Fairest, might I ask?

Ease for a moment thine troubles—
relax!

Surely, that bottle will bring about thine
own demise— I beseech thee, remove
thine mask!

Thine face, in its radiance I yearn to
bask!

Though I see now, and hear now, thine
cries— Lady Fairest, might I ask?
I beseech thee, remove thine mask!

Chain Server

by Liam Clark

Fake forced smiles
beguile and disarm
the keenest of
watchers and soon-to-be
amputees—

why do
I even bother
with my name?

It's proudly placed
on my right
breast by employee
handbook and
policy,

in plain view
of any 'guest',
unless blinded by
beer goggles or
twist of birth
or of fate—

the first I
readily and happily
encourage.

Funny that,

I live off liquor
here, and drink not
a drop

on
shift at least,

and lust for
it in my
afterhours.

Cracking Bottles

by Samantha Aman

I can't stand you when you're like this,
with your sneering face and bloodshot eyes.
You crack open bottles, and their hiss
sounds the drop of your disguise.

Your sneering face and bloodshot eyes
spill waste through all my memories of
before the drop of your disguise,
when pain and fear were hope and love.

Wasted are my memories of
the dreams I had before you,
when pain and fear and hope and love
seemed adventurous.

The dreams I had before you
cracked like bottles, now
dismissed. No more adventures; I
can't stand me
when you're like this.



Early Bird Special

by Mario Lerario

The kids always fuss when they're hungry and Joe knows this. However, if they fuss in the back seat while he's driving, it doesn't matter why. It's distracting, and it makes him edgy. "Don't make me come back there!" he threatens. They giggle. The picture of Daddy climbing over the seat while the truck is moving cannot be serious.

Joe Junior, a pudgy eight-year old in a bright, red sweatshirt, continues to taunt his five-year old sister, Kate. "Katie, there's a bug in your hair." He speaks softly, out of Daddy's range, while dancing his fingers on his little sister's head.

"Daddy, tell Junior to stop!"

"Junior, so help me!" Joe stops for a red light and turns to see Kate slap Junior on the shoulder. Her pink sweater stretches, then bunches against the seat belt. Her grimace is playful.

Junior rubs his arm and laughs. "You don't hurt." Kate swats at his arm again.

"Alright Junior, that's enough. Not another word." Joe turns forward scanning the intersection. It's past rush hour and traffic is still heavy. "Where are all these cars coming from? I thought we were in a depression."

"It's Friday," Julie offers. Joe's 12-year-old, Julie, sits next to him, her long, sandy-blond hair gathered and neatly held in place by her Grandmother's barrette. Since she lost her iPod, she has become an active participant in family matters again. Joe notices this and suspects her pleasantness is part of a plan to get him to spring for a new one. "We're okay, Daddy," she assures him. "We still have 20 minutes to get the Early Bird deal."

Joe navigates his Dodge pick-up into the parking lot of the local Denny's and finds a spot way in the back. "Not Denny's again," Junior whines.

"Again?" Joe argues. "What again? I took you to Pizza Hut last week."

"That's because it was my birthday."

"Well, if you want to see another birthday, quit your belly-aching. And help your sister."

The four muster behind the truck and Joe presses the remote to lock it. Chirp, chirp. "C'mere, Kate." He picks the little one up and holding her astride his hip, leads the group across the lot. "Junior! Can you walk any slower?"

Junior races ahead when they reach the steps and holds the door. He stays put while an elderly couple leaves. The woman thanks him.

"You're welcome," he replies, then races to be counted with his Dad and the girls. A little out of breath, he bends over and supports himself with his hands on his knees. He hears his father ask the hostess how soon a table will be ready.

"About ten minutes," she tells him.

"I hope we can still get the Early Bird. I want the Early Bird Special," Joe tells the hostess.

The entryway is crowded with hungry patrons. Julie finds a spot on the bench near the door and Joe sets Kate on her lap. She fusses to stand, and Joe admonishes her. "Kate, I want you to stay here with Julie."

The older girl lifts the tot back onto her lap, then straightens her pink sweater. "Never mind what Junior is doing, baby," she whispers in Kate's ear. "Stay here with me."

Across the foyer, Junior pretends to manipulate the joystick on a GRabbit Crane. Inside a large, glass bubble, colorful stuffed animals hold his attention. "Dad. Can I have a dollar?"

Before Joe can refuse him, the hostess calls his party to follow her. "C'mon, Junior. Forget about the dollies."

The hostess leads the group to a table in the middle of the north dining room and places three menus on it. Joe pulls out a chair for Kate, and Julie sets her down on it. Joe asks the hostess for a booster seat.

"Yes, of course," she assures him, then waves to a young man passing with an empty, plastic tub. Turning her attention back to Joe, she asks, "Can I take your drink order?"

"Cokes all around, thank you." Joe tells her, taking the place across from Julie.

The busboy brings the molded, plastic seat and waits for Julie to lift the child.

The smell of seared beef follows a passing tray as the group settles down and begins to look over their menus. "I'm getting a burger and French fries," Julie announces, then turns to Kate. "What do you want to eat, Katie-bug?"

"Handgurber," she replies. "And frend fries. And cats-up."

Joe laughs to himself, reveling in the child's innocence. "You're so pretty, Katie. I love you so much."

"Do you love mommy?" she responds.

"Sure I do. Everybody loves Mommy." Putting an accent on "Mommy," Joe uses his stock answer, trying to distract the child from the bigger issue. "Julie loves Mommy. Junior loves Mommy. And Katie-bug loves mommy." Then Joe changes the subject. "Junior, you decide yet?"

"Maybe I'll get the Western omelet."

"Junior, I thought we were all sticking with the Special menu?" Joe sounds disappointed.

"I don't see anything I like," the lad complains, defensively.

Kate interrupts, "Daddy. D'you love Junior?"

"Yes, of course I love Junior." Joe answers her abruptly, then turns and glares at the boy. "Okay, get breakfast. I don't care what you get. Get what you want. Just hurry up and close your menu so the waitress will come back."

Staring deadpan, Junior shuts his menu with a snap, and lets it fall to the table. It just misses his water glass. A minute later, a waitress appears. "Hi. I'm Naomi. Are you ready to order?"

Kate begins to whimper, and Julie reaches over and strokes her thin, yellow hair.

Joe speaks first. "The girls and I will have the hamburger platter. That comes with French fries and coleslaw, right?"

Naomi, her pen-hand akimbo, looks over her readers. "Yes. That's right."

Joe continues, "You'll have to see what he wants. Junior, tell Naomi what you're having, please."

Kate starts to cry. Julie reaches with both hands and lifts the tot from her seat to comfort her.

Early Bird Special

continued

"I'll get the hamburger special, too," Junior relents, his voice trailing off.

"Okay," Joe says enthusiastically. Turning again to the waitress, he makes it official. "That's four Early Bird Special Hamburger platters. Oh, and make one of those child-size."

Naomi leaves with the order, and Joe looks over the table toward the crying baby. "What's wrong, Kate? Why are you crying?"

Her eyes now red, Kate replies, "You... hate... Junior!"

"No I don't, Kate. I love Junior. We are having a disagreement. That's all." Then he adds, "I love Junior. Honest I do."

Julie wipes the child's tears with a large, white napkin, and lifts her back into the booster seat.

"Don't cry, baby" she coos. Then she turns to her father. "She's hungry. Plus, she had a busy day."

Kate starts to cry again. "I want my mommy."

The hostess returns with the drinks.

In Her Favor

by Sonja

Some people look at the ocean and see forever.
Glittering shimmers of beauty
 rising,
 falling,
therapeutic.

I look at the ocean in wonder.
Not only because she is beautiful,
but more because she is omnipotent.

She is boss
 superintendent,
 almighty.

She gives life
and in return
demands rent.

She beats the beach breathless
as she takes that which is hers.
Her fervent fingers hunger for purchase
 pulling in
 and spitting out.
Pulling in
 and spitting out.
 Her white capped claws tear at the
 land,
 scraping shells,
her precious
 flawless jewels,
 into her depths.

Sometimes she demands flesh.

It's during moments like these
when I sit back.
In fear, yes, but mostly
with respect.

 She is life-giver,
 the sustenance.
She is the quencher,
and the quenched.
She is life.

So when I dip my fragile frame
 into her vast powerful
 expanse,
 I give thanks that I am
 in her favor.





Life Sentence

by Nijah Albright

Release me
From limited conjugal visits
With the glass separating us from experiencing oneness.
I want to be embraced in full contact as our eyes express
What can't be said.
I need to see my reflection in them reassuring me that I'm still a part of you.
Set me free
From the weight of the limitations outweighing my will to exit
The cage where bitterness and envy bore a child named society to hate
Every sight of my existence.
Free me
From the curiosity of experiencing life outside of these confined walls where no fresh air comes
Through.
I want to see the light of day.
Imagination.

Messages From Her

by Annalyn Procopio

Look how you found me.
No one can see this, only you.
You told me if something was missing,
I'd find it within you.
Even if I didn't see within,
I knew a piece of me wasn't there.
Nothing could compare,
To life when I was a young girl.
Messages from Her.
I was broken, broken in two.
I wish I was her.
I know she will be there.
The girl inside stays,
Haunting my youth.
Comfortably indulging.
Constantly evolving.
Messages from Her.
I don't need you to find me,
I found myself in Her.
She is all I need.
She is all I am.
Messages from Her.

The Brilliant Light

by Michael J. Marino

There once was a light, a *brilliant* light, that predated mankind by thousands upon thousands of years. It was known as The Brilliance - a divine, enigmatic entity capable of seemingly impossible feats. While taking on a vaguely humanoid shape, The Brilliance dwarfed even the largest gas giants with its immeasurable size. Its insectile body and wings were like ice - smooth and crystalline in nature. Energy beyond human conception churned beneath the entity's skin like blood, causing it to give off a vibrant, rainbowish glow. While this creature's exact origins are unknown, some say its birth was the direct result of another enigmatic being - The Void. The Void was an amorphous creature of mindless darkness, one driven only by its instincts to erase the very universe itself. It was a demonic entity, one of primitive consciousness, that sought only to swallow up everything in its path. While The Void traveled freely throughout the universe, it devoured planets, solar systems, and even *galaxies* - all by absorbing them into itself. Unchallenged as it was, nothing could dream of standing in its way. When seemingly all hope for the universe was lost, The Brilliance was born with a blinding flash; one so powerful, that it was seen all across the cosmos. It knew only one task upon its conception - to bring The Void to its knees. With its birth, came a glimmer of hope that rejuvenated the will to survive within those who couldn't fight back. To the inhabitants of the universe, The Brilliance was hope.

Instinctively seeing The Brilliance as a threat to its purpose, The Void sought to extinguish it without hesitation. As it came upon its newest adversary, The Void's sea of twisted eyes quivered in outrage. The Brilliance stood for everything that it did not, and for that, it would *perish*. A cataclysmic battle between the forces of light and dark ensued, one which shook the universe to its very core. The Void swung furiously with its innumerable tendrils, obliterating both planets and stars alike in a fit of primal wrath. It fought with the fury of a wild beast — violent and unpredictable. While The Void held an advantage in strength, The Brilliance's superior intelligence and agility allowed it to dodge and weave between its foe's relentless attacks for the time being. Seeing no other way to prevent more celestial bodies from being destroyed, The Brilliance fired off a volley of energy spheres towards its adversary, each capable of *immense* destruction. The Void, much too large to avoid The Brilliance's devastating onslaught, began to buckle from the immense pressure. Each sphere that collided with its amorphous form brought on a new wave of searing agony, each one more painful than the last. Before long, The Void was caught amidst a swirling explosion of volatile energy; one powerful enough to eat away at its durable flesh.

The Brilliance scanned the battlefield thoroughly with its compound eyes, but saw nothing other than the explosions caused by its own fearsome attack. Foolishly, the divine being let its guard down for a brief moment, thinking that its foe was done for. On the contrary, The Void was still very-much alive. In a last ditch effort to snuff out its adversary, The Void launched its eroding tendrils outward - wrapping themselves tightly around The Brilliance. In a stroke of luck, The Void's desperate attack was masked by the explosion, and caught The Brilliance off guard. The fierce legion of tentacles squeezed firmly around the divine entity's body,

causing its crystalline form to fracture in several places. The Brilliance tried valiantly to wriggle free from The Void's grasp, all of its attempts were met with utter failure. Slowly but surely, it was pulled closer and closer towards its certain demise. Even weakened, The Void would be capable of absorbing The Brilliance into itself, but *only* if it was able to bridge the gap between them. Left with no choice but to muster all of its remaining strength, The Brilliance let loose a heavenly glare of light from its body. The intense burst washed over The Void like an ocean wave, causing the celestial beast to recoil in anguish as its countless eyes began to boil in their sockets.

Now free from its enemy's grasp, The Brilliance watched on in relief as The Void's many tendrils gradually crumbled to dust. In one final bout of anger, The Void rushed forward towards The Brilliance, but quickly lost its momentum to the vacuum of space. Despite its will to continue fighting, its wounds were just too severe. With its powers diminishing by the second, it could only blindly stare up in defeat at its subduer, tears of exasperation welling up in the corners of its now empty eye sockets. The greatest threat to the known universe had finally been defeated, at long last. Only a bittersweet silence lingered over the battlefield now, as The Brilliance lowered its head in recognition. The Void had been cast down for the time being, but a darkness of that magnitude could never truly be vanquished. Despite this, it vowed that it would never allow The Void to return, so long as it existed to protect the universe. The Brilliance's victory ushered in a new era for the universe - an era where the innocents no longer had to live each day in fear.

The Brilliance, seeking to create a planet of its own in memory of those devoured by The Void, used its unimaginable powers to give birth to the Earth, and its people, the humans. For the entity's bountiful supply of celestial energy, creating a planet was child's play; but it couldn't help but wonder if raising one may prove more challenging. Towards the beginning of Earth's stay within the universe, all went according to The Brilliance's plan. It lovingly watched over the Earth as it grew over the millennia, and occasionally aided its inhabitants as it saw fit. The *Earth* soon became the gem of the universe - a perfect example of how a civilization should come to be. The *humans* that called the Earth their home existed in harmony with one another, and lived out their primitive lives with heads held high. Eventually, without much warning, their reign of peace began to crumble. The humans began to succumb to their inner desires, causing them to turn against each other in the blink of an eye. The Brilliance mourned as it oversaw the fall of once glorious kingdoms, and was forced to avert its gaze as it saw the righteous being struck down by the wicked. It thought long and hard as to what could've possibly brought about these changes in the humans, surmising that it *had* to be The Void's doing. Somehow, what remained of The Void's lingering essence must've corrupted both the Earth and its people. It was then that The Brilliance began to feel disconnected from the world that it had created. Perhaps the humans required more of its aid than it had once thought, lest they fully succumb to The Void's clandestine embrace.

In an attempt to make its existence known to the humans, it decided to appear before them in the form of their sun. The people below could only watch in amazement as the ball of fire hanging in the sky above them spread open to reveal a celestial being of pure and undeniable righteousness. With a voice as soothing as a spring breeze, it referred to itself as the human term for their Creator - *God*. In an attempt to sway its people from darkness, The Brilliance told them that this meeting marked the dawn of a new age. It spoke of how the afterlife would lead those righteous enough to an eternal salvation by its side, and warned of how

The Brilliant Light

continued

those who followed in the footsteps of evil would know no future beyond death. Dropping their swords and bows to the ground, the humans couldn't help but bow down before The Brilliance. To them, it was the most beautiful thing they had ever seen — an angelic union of man and insect, with a body like ice and an aura of fire. The humans begged and pleaded for the forgiveness of their God, not wanting to offend it with their foolish actions any longer. For The Brilliance, this submissive display was quite perfect. It had never intended to instill fear in them, but if fear is what the humans needed to stay upon the path of peace, then so be it. Satisfied, The Brilliance lowered itself down towards the green pastures of Earth, drastically diminishing in size as it did so.

With a confident flutter of its crystalline wings, the celestial being landed before the crowds that had gathered to witness its arrival. The blades of grass beneath its feet seemed to waver anomalously, almost as if they were freezing over and burning away, all at the same time. As if to break the uncomfortable silence, The Brilliance outstretched its arms to the crowds before it, and began to speak. It asked for a single man or woman, whoever was brave enough, to step forward in order to know the embrace of their Creator. This would mark the dawn of a new age, and would represent humanity's eternal promise to stray from evil. For a few moments, no one stirred within the anxious crowd of onlookers. Suddenly, a young girl managed to break free from her mother's grasp. She ran fearlessly to her Creator, with a beaming smile spread across her face. Leaping and nuzzling into The Brilliance's arms, the little girl giggled with a pristine innocence. Taken aback by the young girl's fearless embrace, The Brilliance felt a sudden wave of complicated emotions wash over it. A single tear cascaded down the entity's cheek as it felt the loving touch of one of its own creations for the very first time. Overwhelmed by sentiment, it gently wrapped its arms around her, returning her embrace with an affectionate hum. The crowd cheered with both joy and relief as they watched the dawn of a new age blossom before them.

Appeased by humanity's heartfelt display, The Brilliance began to lift itself back into the skies from whence it came. The girl was reluctant to let go of her Creator at first, but she soon slipped from its embrace, falling back into the arms of her mother. The Brilliance, with its head and hopes held high, folded its colossal wings together and became their sun once more, hanging brilliantly in the ancient amber sky. As long as the humans held faith closest in their hearts, their sun would never set.

The Hitman

by Brett Savage

FADE IN:

EXT. APARTMENT COMPLEX– DAY

It's a warm day in South Philadelphia. **JACK**, middle aged, is having a cigarette leaning up against the wall. He flicks it and enters the building.

INT. APARTMENT COMPLEX– DAY

JACK looks around the lobby and see's it empty. He goes into his pocket and looks at a piece of paper. He gets on the elevator.

JACK gets out on the fifth floor and starts walking down the hall.

INT. ROOM 523 – DAY

CHUCK is sitting at his kitchen table having some cereal. He's a younger man with boyish features.

CHUCK hears a knock on the door. He opens up the door.

CHUCK

Oh, hey Jack! Umm how are ya?

JACK stares at him, saying nothing, and budes his way through the door entering the apartment.

CHUCK

Please come in.

CHUCK reluctantly closes the door.

The camera pans inside the apartment. A couch and TV area lead into the kitchen. **JACK** walks into camera view.

CHUCK

Make yourself at home. Do you want some food?

The Hitman

continued

JACK looks around the place ignoring the question. CHUCK is still standing nervously by the door.

JACK

Wow! Nice vinyl collection.

CHUCK looks on nervously.

JACK pulls out a Led Zeppelin record and starts humming to himself.

CHUCK

Well, yeah you know over the years I've kinda been collecting as I go.

JACK with his back turned still staring at the record.

JACK

So you've got time to collect vinyls, but you don't have time to pay your gambling debt, is that it?

CHUCK

Aw jeez, Jack. Look I'm sorry it's been tough for me lately. I've barely had enough money to...

JACK turns quickly and cuts him off. He slowly walks toward CHUCK dropping the record on the floor.

JACK

Nope, don't do that. Don't give me that story. I've heard it all before. You don't wanna pay, that's what it is. You degenerate gamblers are all the same.

CHUCK

No, Jack, I wanna pay you, really. It's just my shifts have been getting cut down at the bar. Do you think I don't know who you work for? Of course I wanna pay you and I'm going to. I just need more time.

JACK again starts roaming around the apartment. He starts going through the collection again pulling out records. It's clear he's in control here.

JACK

Ya know I like you Chuck. I really do. You've always been a good kid. However, there's a certain way my organization and me do things. Like for example, people that don't pay get hurt. Now I've been asking for this money for a month now and you still disrespect me. People are starting to whisper that you've gotten over on us. How can I let this slide?

CHUCK is starting to sweat. You can feel the nervous energy pouring off of him.

CHUCK

Oh God please Jack. I'll get it to you. I promise.

CHUCK gets on his knees and starts pleading.

JACK walks over to him again.

JACK

Jesus, get up. Don't beg for god's sake you look like a fool.

JACK helps him up and starts smirking.

JACK

Relax; sit down finish your cereal.

CHUCK reluctantly sits down.

As he sits JACK pulls out his gun with a silencer attached.

JACK is standing behind CHUCK at this moment.

JACK

I'm sorry son, bosses' orders.

JACK pulls the trigger.

CHUCK lay on the ground dead. Cereal milk spills all over the floor.

JACK texts someone and starts to leave the apartment. As he's leaving, JACK stops and turns around. He picks up the records he pulled out and walks out of the door. He walks outside and puts on his sunglasses.

JACK

Man, what a nice day.

JACK starts walking down the street, without a care in the world.



