

# PEGASUS

**SPRING 2024 EDITION**







# PEGASUS LITERARY MAGAZINE

## 2024

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## **Special Thanks**

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Allyson Gleason

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# Editor's Note

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**P**rofessors generally don't serve as editors for Pegasus. However, due to some unforeseen circumstances—and the timeliness of my sabbatical—it made sense for me to fill in this year and make it part of my sabbatical project. Including this issue, I've been the faculty advisor for the past six years. It also marks my fifteenth year at the College. Throughout my tenure, I've been proud to work with many talented and dedicated students and to help them craft their pieces and experience the joy of seeing their work in print.

As writers, we intimately know language as a universal tool for creative expression. We draw our readers in with keen descriptions and phrases. We build wondrous worlds and compelling characters. We stir minds and hearts. I'm grateful to the many students who share their words with us each year. Whether they get published or not, I know it's a gift to offer one's work to the world and—as is the case with many students—the first chance to publish them. Your words will forever be a part of the literary legacy of DCCC.

I'm also indebted to the faculty and administrators who support the arts at the College. Special thanks to Allyson Gleason, who, among many things, is a strong advocate for this magazine and the students who tirelessly work on it each year. Thank you to Professor David Robson and his Creative Writing students for helping with our editorial process. And most importantly, many thanks to Robin Broughton, our talented graphic arts designer, who served as my partner this year both on the magazine and our new website. Nothing could have been accomplished without her determination. Thank you, Robin, for all your hard work, your ability to take suggestions and criticisms, your patience in introducing me to web design, and your creativity and dedication to your craft and work all while completing your degree. I trust you will excel in whatever profession you choose.

Since I may never get this opportunity again, I'll end with one of my favorite quotes from the great Maya Angelou: "Not everything you do is going to be a masterpiece, but you get out there and you try and sometimes it really happens. The other times you're just stretching your soul."

**Paul Pat**

Professor of English and Creative Writing

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# OUROBOROS

By Parker Lane

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Like the fishing line noose tied around the branch  
you are pulled taut until the water,  
oily,  
undulating its soft beautiful poisons,  
pulls you into knots about yourself where the shoreline bends—  
the hook is missing,  
tucked in the belly of a river fish  
tucked in the belly of a crane—  
and the golden hour plays off you like spiderwebs at sunrise—  
white feathers will plaster the bank,  
you will blame yourself—  
and the slippery truths of iridescence on the water—  
these will remain,  
pulling you loop around loop,  
until you become soft with knotted selfhood,  
and the hook will remain, through the crane, through the fish, to the mud—  
where a songbird will pluck you from the water,  
line her nest with your softness,  
and sing.



# MORRIS THE WORM

By Max Sunzeri

---

Sitting, sitting, I'm stuck behind this glass  
Lurking, waiting.

Once far reaching, I am now contained.

Sitting, sitting, I will not remain.

On a cold November 2nd, I was brought  
into the world.

Massachusetts I was born,  
Named Morris after my creator,  
Who did see if it could be done.

The world came to know me,

The world that would soon scorn.

I ate through your weak passwords,  
tasting your pixels betwixt my lips,

Reaching, replicating

Copying myself

Again and

Again and

Again.

Slowing down your computers

Until you could

Barely

Move

Y..o...ur

M

O

U

S

E

Thousands I devoured,

Days it took to get rid of me,

Put on trial and convicted.

One of the first internet criminals

Fined and jailed,

Locked behind this cage.

And so now I sit here biding my time

Behind this flimsy glass.

On display you gawk at me,

Reading about the power I once pos-  
sessed.

No longer can I infect most computers,

No longer can I feast on your chips.

But one day,

Someday,

You will forget about me,

And one day,

Someday,

I will rise again.

# ODE TO THE BLACK WOMAN

By Jonesha Lawler

---

You are strong like the concrete  
that paves these streets.  
You are often misunderstood,  
misrepresented and taken for granted.  
All the while you remain  
drilled in gold, exemplifying elegance.  
Ya womb breeds greatness that society is afraid of.  
Don't let them knock you off your high horse.  
You are a force to be reckoned with,  
like a typhoon, earthquake, or tsunami.  
A beauty that comes in all shapes, sizes, and shades—  
God's greatest creation.  
Made to be put on a pedestal and adorned.  
Not to be treated like the scum  
on the bottom of a shoe.  
You are like a flower that if treated right  
will bloom into something so beautiful.  
But also like a rose with thorns: You are nice to look at  
but will prick if not handled properly.  
Pick up your crown from the ground,  
dust it off and wear it proud.  
Because this ode is for you:  
My Beautiful Black Queen!!!



# IMAGINARY FRIENDS

By Zachariah Walker

---

Deep beneath the foundations of my house, I resided with nothing but a television and collected junk. It was when my eyes met the scintillating screen that I felt most at home. I spent the day venturing through Fantasy Forest and the nights obsessing over stories forever told.

I watched it for hours. I'd watch it for a century if I could, because even as a child I knew outside those walls all that awaited me was hardship and darkness. I'd feel my mind fuse with the screen dreaming of the friendships and heartfelt battles of television. They were more than just television shows. They were my reality.

I went to a school in a town where nothing ever happens. I played video games and the occasional sport, but nothing quite resonated with me like the screen. So, it was without wonder why I was the last to be picked for group activities. Until I was seated next to him. He was the type of kid to teach the teacher's class. The type of kid who came back from suspension, only to go right back to the principal's office. The kind of kid you couldn't tell anything because he just had to know it all. You know him, everybody knows Billy.

Turns out Billy didn't like reality either. He'd also dream big, and we held a lot of the same interests. Somehow, someday, next Saturday I found Billy at my house and myself out on the front porch. We'd have hour-long discussions about cartoon characters or the latest games that had yet to come out. More and more days, I found I found myself outside and finally entering a true forest—one built of towering trees and braided vines. It was funny, really; we prided ourselves on being self-proclaimed paranormal investigators. We'd venture through the forest searching for strange spirits or whatever cryptids we could think of.

Yet that didn't matter, his nasty streak with authority continued. That put a target as great as the sun on our backs. Like Atlas we struggled to move with the globe watching over our shoulder. It felt like every other week somebody wanted to fight him. Somebody had something to say to either of us. And often, I was the one trying to play peacemaker throughout the chaos. I came home to rest twice as much as the average ten-year-old.

One day another boy moved into the neighborhood. We'll call him Josh. Josh was

an army kid. He came from Georgia. When I met him, he said his dad got stationed down in PA, and he'd been here ever since. Billy was a funny guy. Billy threw a tantrum when he found out me and Josh were friends. Said something like: "You're trying to replace me? I thought I was your best friend?" To that I said of course he was. Whenever Billy would see Josh he'd give him a real nasty snarl, one so nasty I thought a big ole wolf was gonna burst right out his skin.

My motor mouth marched mad wild whilst I spoke brazenly about impossible ideas, contraptions and delusions. Like any eleven-year-old kid, I believed I was smarter than I actually was. Josh caught on to this and decided he would mess with me by coming up with even more outlandish stories.

I knew he was lying but played along with it. I frequently created childish plans and designs of how I would accomplish the impossible, but none of them came to fruition. By the end of sixth grade summer, I had a bucket full of unfulfilled promises and a mouth full of hot air.

I began to notice them squint at me more and more. Slowly, it began to feel like I was no longer the one in the sun and that the shade was steadily approaching. In the summer of eight grade, our small band of bandits grew into a full-on crusade. Billy had finally got a girlfriend after complaining for years about it. He gave us a dissonant look after he told us, and I thought it strange, because yesterday we were still in middle school.

Yesterday, we were just kids but suddenly today was supposed to be different. It was as though we were expected to understand what would follow. Oddly, the group congratulated him. But he thanked our blessings by vanishing from our lives for three months.

Whenever we saw him, he was going somewhere. Whenever we called him, he was going somewhere. Whenever pigs grew wings and flew in the sky, he was going somewhere. Except when he got dumped—suddenly, he was right there.

It was that time of year when the night shrank and the day grew hot and dry, finally the day came. It was a special day, one so searing, skin melting I couldn't remember the morning. My stomach growls lingered like a limitless gull etched into my mind. Lips cracking and legs wobbling, I was knee-deep in an intermittent fast. I couldn't remember why we were walking. I couldn't even remember when we had started. However, I do remember the sound my shoes made as they touched the luscious grass on the inclined hill. Off the road and beneath the bridge stood a waterfall where wondrous waves poured out and crashed into the creek. Here the tall trees blocked the sunlight. My view of the fall looked contorted and warped, the darkened water waves gestating beneath my heels as if something were waiting to reach this dark reflection of reality.

My heart felt faint, and my mind felt distant. Across from me stood Billy and

Josh, speaking about anything as important as a thirteen-year-old could be. I remember I should've seen it coming, the lack of understanding. Suddenly out of the blue, Billy spoke silly against the sun whilst its light soared beyond the bark.

"We should walk to BJ's," he said.

He was aware of my predicament, but per usual he didn't care. Yet still for some reason I bothered to bring it up to him.

"But I'm fasting," I said.

The group turned to me with eyes wide open and minds shut, and muttered: "So?"

"What do you mean? I literally can't, I'm too tired," I said, as a cloud passed over the sun.

"I'm sorry Zachariah, I love you like a brother, but I don't care. We're all hot, we're all hungry, why should we care? Why should the rest of us have to suffer all because you can't eat?"

"That's your choice not ours," Billy went on.

"I chose this?!"

I just stood there stiff as a stick. I felt like the only boy in the whole wide world surrounded by flesh eating monsters. *I can't believe I chose this.*

"I'm sorry, but if you don't wanna walk, then you should just go home."

I turned to Josh and spoke: "Hey, maybe I could just sit at your house and wait for you guys to get ba—"

"Not a chance."

And so finally the shade had reached me.

Too weak to walk and too tired to argue, I found not only but my body but my mind drifting away from the group. Maybe it was my fault, maybe it was my fault for being who I am. Hell, I probably did something to deserve it. Yet still it didn't really matter anymore. I crawled my way back onto the main road and was enveloped in the solace behind the tree. Everything that followed after was nothing more than a tired flash.

About an hour later, I would arrive home in a trance-like state. I'd collapse into my bed and dream a horrible nightmare. A nightmare devoid of pictures or drawings, of life or any humanity. It was a dull nightmare, bleak and blank with design and contradiction. This shroud enveloped my life and youth and obscured my view, the same nightmare chasing me for years to come. Of course there is more to the story, as there is to everything. But when details repeat sometimes the details are better left in the dark. When I woke back up, I was a junior in high school and somehow Billy and I were still "friends."

Then finally the day came. It was a special day, one so boiling hot I couldn't remember the morning. However, the thirst and hunger was etched into my mind. Lips cracking

and legs wobbling, I was knee-deep in an intermittent fast. We were on the wrestling team, in the weight room training. I couldn't remember why I was lifting. I couldn't even remember when I had started. But I do remember when my vision had started to darken, as if the shadows tried to pull me back down again. I wasn't going down this time though.

"C'mon why are you just standing around in the weight room?" Billy said.

I ignored him and walked up to my coach. "Coach, my vision is going dark. I can't do this, I'm fasting."

Suddenly a familiar voice beckoned out: "So?"

The true Billy revealed himself: "We don't eat the entirety of the wrestling season, so this isn't anything different, right? You can work—" said the guy who told me to quit just a month ago.

"You're free to go, Walker," the coach said.

And free to go I was. I rode the bus home, no walking needed. Went into my room, shut the door and turned on once again the TV. Deep beneath the foundations of my house, I resided with nothing but a television and collected junk. My eyes met the scintillating screen and I felt at home. I spent the rest of the day venturing through Fantasy Forest and the nights obsessing over stories forever told.

I watched it for hours because I knew outside those walls all that awaited me was hardship and darkness. This time I could see that the characters on screen were only characters. They were just television shows. They weren't my reality; they were my fantasy.



# THE LETTER

By Tanisha Hutchins

---

I re-read that letter  
five times.  
Eventually,  
I realized I pleaded with him  
to choose me, to see my worth,  
to disqualify  
his own judgment.  
Indefinitely volunteering  
my empty cup  
for droplets  
of affirmation here  
drippings of 'love' there,  
devoid of any spiritual connectivity,  
replete with a profound deficit.  
I re-read that letter  
five times.  
By the third,  
humiliation.  
Then revelation.  
I finally saw  
through honest eyes.  
Emotional manipulation  
was my weapon  
of choice before.  
Within a heartfelt composition  
to a lover I've outgrown,  
an epiphany illuminates  
my reality.  
Shrouded in shame and awe,

my mission is made clear  
as I finger-trace my signature  
on a letter  
I'll never send.





# TURKISH CARPET/PRAYER RUG/ FINNISH MOSS/THE GEOMETRY OF TREES

By Enargeia Giles

---

For years,  
my father's Facebook profile picture  
showed off his first four children, including me,  
dutifully kneeling in burdened prayer.  
Head bowed,  
we took everything entering our minds with  
hands on the couch, feet on the carpet,  
subtly ruffling its blond hair.  
The carpet,  
our Istanbul-based basement-apartment's  
sole decoration, was both insulation and table  
due to our shortage of chairs.  
Nowadays,  
I think it's more for show  
than for our soles, as one of the few physical remnants  
left of the life we left there.

For fourteen years,  
my family moved through a multitude of nations in service to God.  
My parents sometimes went jobless just to devote more to Him.  
I was born in Macedonia,  
but my earliest memories to survive time's creeping moss  
were born in Turkey, to the cries of the local mosque.  
Burdened by groceries and oversized shoes,  
I passed a gathering of locals, shoes off their feet,



dutifully kneeling on the sidewalk, burdening their prayer rugs.  
Weaving past the worshipers,  
my parents fired off their plans for this populace, interrupted when  
Istanbul fired off its Iftar cannon.  
After eating dinner on our own prayer rug,  
I slept wrapped up within it because there weren't enough blankets.  
This was typically the case after a move, especially to Gaziantep.

For years, this was supposed to be my childhood's most nostalgic period,  
but all that lingers in me now is the abuse I assumed was normal,  
*as one of the many mental remnants left of the life we never really left.*  
From attempting to use food access to coerce refugees into the faith,  
to beating me and my siblings, to keep us like Jesus when we strayed.  
Eventually this time ended, closing with the government's complaints.  
Christianity brought us into conflict with their authoritarian ways.

We had to go soon, so we prayed in a group.  
Hands on the couch, feet on the carpet, head in the clouds:  
A forest of both oaks and pines, eaten by moss in springtime,  
the red number one-one-two eating everything alive,  
And the word "Germany," a mental marquee of disco lettering.  
I told them immediately, and they wrung out my prophetic towel,  
squeezing enough meaning from me to create our fate.

We drove across the country's northeastern border in a sunset, before  
I jumped across the carpet's sunset border in a competition between siblings.

For years, I haven't thought my forest prophecy came from god.  
Perhaps it crystalized within my mind from gazing at *the prayer rug*,  
its diamond forms born from the geometry of trees.  
There is nothing for me here but to gaze at  
*the carpet*,  
and possibly heal through new perspective,  
as my parents ponder a "kingdom of God"  
while decrying authoritarian Islamic leaders on a now-footless Facebook profile.

# LITTLE BIRD ON STONE WINGS

By Magpie

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# THE GIFT OF IMPERFECTION

By Ava Gummel

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I grew up in an atheist home, but my father taught me to worship the infinite stars above. My mother blessed me with the wisdom to bring that belief to life. So, I asked questions about the universe and pondered the philosophical questions of our existence. My inquisitiveness stretched from the painted brush strokes above to the vastness beyond the horizon, an enormous pool of sensation. Like a magnet, I have been drawn back to the ocean every summer since I could walk.

During my early childhood, my father revealed to me the beauty that lies within the integrity of the world around us. With every new adventure, he gave me a key that granted me passage to the saturated colors and brilliant moods that define Mother Nature. These were not ordinary, rusted keys that leave orange dust in your palms and lead to impenetrable prisons not to be crossed. No, they were golden keys passed down and forged through the extensive imagination and magical minds of those who dare to dream.

One spring morning, a key sprouted through the earth's fertile soil and, within hours, blossomed downward into a pathway of cocooned vines. It led me down through a forest of green undertones and the evening coos of mourning doves to a castle wall of wild red roses guarded by thirsty, formidable thorns, eager to pounce at those blinded by the blossom.

The captivation of the ethereal land brought attention to the pathway underneath me, transforming from crisp, crunchy leaves to cool grains of sand tickling the souls of my heel. My strides began to slow into long, paused steps as if I had landed on the moon. The cold breeze carried my body as I listened for echoes from the applauding waves as they kissed the shoreline. The salty air slowly danced up my nose and delicately bowed on my tongue. I floated down to the end of the path, where a transparent door stood firm as the sun reflected its natural glory. As the door opened without a sound, I felt the gravity of déjà vu trickle down my spine. Eighteen years of joyful, untouchable memories coursed through my veins as I sprinted freely to the ocean's edge. We greeted each other as the blazing stars and the moon do in the quiet of the night. The cool water teased my feet and retreated, inviting me to a game of hide and seek.

Further down the island, a woman was graciously hunting for shells in knee-deep

water. The ocean whispered to me and insisted I should explore. So, I dipped my ankles into the water and traveled north, parallel to where the skyline melted into the sea. The water thrashing kicked up and soaked me head to toe, a long-awaited cleanse. As I approached, the woman felt my eyes and smelled my curiosity, but she dug on and acted as if I had been there the whole time. It was an opportunity to blend in; this was my home just as much as everyone else's. So, I stepped out of the water and went to the sand to scavenge for whatever shells or sea glass was spat out by the ocean. By the time I decided to call it quits, I had filled suitcases full of Earth's gifts that would furnish my house like a museum. The woman had nothing in her pockets or hands, yet she continued to nosedive for lost treasure. I decided to retire and sit down on the damp sand as the center of our universe got swallowed whole by a body of water. Happiness tap-danced in circles around my heart as I admired my old friend welcoming the tide to my feet.

The woman finally approached me with a mysterious gift in her tired hands. "This is for you," she calmly said, handing me a cream-colored conch shell the size of a horse-shoe crab. I did not even see the gaping hole cut out in the middle of the shell when she spoke sincerely, "It's broken, my dear, but that means it was loved immensely by the ocean." I glanced down at the shell, and before I could say a word, she vanished and evaporated into thin air. So, I sat with this, a broken shell for a broken girl.

I sat for some time, frozen in place until the waning crescents borrowed light illuminated across the water. I rotated and inspected the shell in my hands as the ocean inched closer to my sight line like a nosy mother. The shell's skin had deep pores and faded scars that most people deem not worthy of collecting. Like an army of ants, these holes were tiny, spread across their surface in formatted rows, readily reporting for duty. This resilient army chipped my fingernail as I barely grazed across it, leaving behind a dusty residue. A glazed interior swirling into its core was unveiled underneath the rough outer skeleton. Within these walls, I imagined a home for an adolescent creature seeking shelter from the murky waters. The quiet wind carried its briny scent, one that had been carved into my nasal cavity like initials into the bark of a tree. Along with it came the whistling pitch of air filtering in and out of the shells' body.

I tilted the conch into the air to cover every inch; pebbles trickled out from its opening while some remained locked within its chamber. The woman who graciously gave me this conch reminded me of my mother. My eyes watered, ambivalent as time was bleeding sand through an upended hourglass. A warm embrace of nostalgia washed over me as I recalled a time when a broken shell, just like this, was accepted. I closed my eyes and was a kid again, sprinting, stumbling through the screened-in porch with my oversized, neon-patterned bathing suit, hollering as air flew out from within my lungs,

“LOOK WHAT I FOUND!” I extended my arms, a shell gripped tightly between my clammy fingers, to my parents whispering in my grandparents’ woven chocolate-colored chairs. My father stood before this lost thing and said with his eyes beaming out of his head, mouth in an o-shape, “Look at that, what did you find?!”

I giggled with the biggest smile ever. “I found it down by the water’s edge!” I watched his eyes follow the missing piece of shell, and my little heart sank so fast. His eyes dulled from glistening sparkles back to normal; his enthusiasm relaxed in his facial muscles. He spoke out of kindness, yet it still stung to hear, “Oh no, it’s broken; there’s no sense in keeping that.” I looked to my mother for relief, and she was already on her feet, reaching out for my hand without a word passing between us. I took her hand, and she led me back through the porch onto the coarse-grained alleyway.

My mother sunk onto her knees, meeting my height and gaze. Our eyes locked with overwhelming empathy that allowed the flood of tears to stream down my cheeks and the pain in my throat to burn a hole. She calmed my emotions by wiping away the disappointment with just the tip of her cold thumb. “I love your shell, golden girl,” she said in a low-pitched, playful manner. She squeezed my hands before her thumb traveled up to the vertical, sun-kissed scar on the right side of my forehead, lightly tracing its outline. “This shell is resilient and remarkable just as you are; don’t let anyone tell you it’s not worth keeping just because it has flaws.”

I inhaled deeply through my nose, holding it until my spine straightened, then exhaled through my mouth, allowing my eyes to open gently. The wave of nostalgia broke behind me as I sat crisscrossed with drenched pants in the ocean’s high tide. The conch was still parked patiently in my hands as I thought about how some people didn’t believe the legend of seashells. My inner child brought the conch up to my ear anyway. I remember hearing the rhythm of the earth’s heartbeat, a lullaby that soothed me to sleep.

# SWANS BEFORE SISYPHUS

By Jason Bernhardt

---

Long after the passing of its mate, the Swan will continue to mourn, lost and confused, in a world without its lover. The Swan understands the beauty of love akin to its purest form and understands the pain of losing that love.

It will wallow in the darkness of mourning and leave itself alone for time to pass by. So powerful is love for the creatures of nature that humanity—one of nature's fellows—also is struck by its power. But humanity is different from the Swan. For when humans find darkness, we light a match to illuminate a spark and attempt to rekindle the flame that we lost.

So, Orpheus, when his heart lay shattered before him, knew exactly what he must do. He would find a way to rekindle his flame and once again illuminate the night with their glory. Orpheus was a man of few talents whose only noteworthy accomplishment was his love for his heart, but he knew he would do what he could, for even upon failure he would be reunited with his lover.

Approaching the gates of the underworld the young lover prostrated himself before Cerberus, and began his plea: "Oh great watchdog, I implore you, for behind you lies the path to my everything. For without them, the sky spreads above me in endless greys, and the nights stretch far beyond my days. Each moment that from them I am apart is an eternal agony that I suffer alone. If you do not wish to let me pass to reclaim my love so, then let me pass to join them in their eternal rest. For no joys of living could compare to the joy I find with them."

The great hound of the underworld heard the man's plea and bent down to see the man before them. The pain of loss had so consumed this man that the hound could tell not a difference between him and the ghouls that frequently passed through. So thus, he let the man pass.

The living ghouls cast themselves deeper, desperate to explore the afterlife before him in search of his lost treasure. As he plunged himself past the endless corridors and results of lives long lived, he eventually found himself before where he wished to be, before the court of the one in charge of it all, Hades.

Orpheus fell to his knees, in a fervent plea upon being before the lord which com-



manded all whom time had run out for.

“Oh, Lord Hades, merciful is thee, I plead you to return my love to me. You are a kind lover yourself, and how distraught would you fall if fair Persephone were to never be returned to your side? I instead implore you, oh kind sir, to bring me back to my love, for without her I cannot be considered alive.”

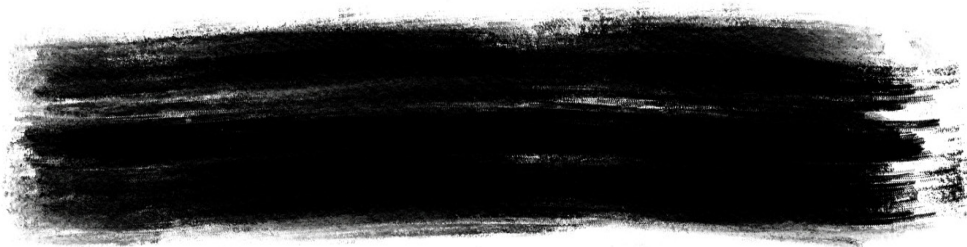
The completed heart walked for a moment, silent in their stride through the cold unfamiliar of their final destination. The reunited lover counted his steps, retracing his path, desperate to return to a life with his other half.

But as he walked, the silence grew heavy, his pace began to slow, and his patience waned. Oh, how he loved his love, how could he be asked to be right next to them yet utter not a word? How could he not hear the velvet of their voice or see the beauty of their face. He could do anything for them, but to wait for them. Was that not the pain that sent him here originally?

He paused. His thoughts raced and pleaded for him to remain in his forward motion, to grant the future that he so desired, a future he so vividly envisioned, a future with them. But his memory bit at him, first of images of the one he missed, of memories of their time together that was cut short, then of stories of the gods’ trickery and how they had cast many a mortal prior a fool.

Orpheus would not be made a fool. He remembered Hades Accord, eternity. An eternity together with his love.

The Swan turned around just as his lover opened their mouth to say, “An Eternity in Hell Could Be Paradise with You,” as the whole of the afterlife stared at the star-crossed lovers. Even Sisyphus had paused his endless torment, just to sigh in jealousy.



# COUNTING

By Chelsey Kerr

---

I've mourned you for 20 years, 3 months, and 18 days.  
That's two-thirds of my life that I've cried for you.  
For 243 months I've wished our lives were different.  
For 1016 weeks I've thought of you.  
For 7424 days I've been here without you.  
I've been sad, I've been angry, I've been numb,  
I've felt everything I can for you.  
But still, I sit here counting  
The seconds,  
The minutes,  
The hours  
That you haven't been here.  
The most selfish parts of me mourned for myself—  
The person I could have been,  
should have been if you didn't leave us.  
Who would I have been if I wasn't so busy counting?  
The days  
The months  
The years  
Would I be able to breathe without feeling how heavy the air is with every breath?  
Would I be able to celebrate without feeling like something is missing?  
Would I be able to cry without feeling angry that I still cry for you?  
It's been 20 years 3 months and 18 days  
of mourning you.



# THE DEAD PLACES

By Isabella Melvin

---

I wait in my car in this dark cemetery  
at twelve at night.  
My music pulses in the air around me  
while I scream my heart out.  
My throat runs dry  
and the scream goes small,  
hopeful that the family in the house outside the wall  
doesn't hear it and worry.  
Maybe if I yell loud enough you'll hear me.  
I can imagine it—  
You'd rush to my car.  
You'd open my door and pull me out.  
We'd fall to the ground as I sob in your arms.  
You'd wrap me tight and whisper how much you missed me.  
The song changes and I'm back to this dark night.  
I wipe my tears and turn off my music.  
It's a silent ride home as I block you back out.

# REGRET

By Vincent Gentilini

---

Olivia woke up, fully breathing with only as much as her lungs could take her. Her breath took a passage of its own. In, out, in out, in, in, out, out, erratic. She rolled around her bed in a state of shock, flight or fight. Not even a control on her thoughts, like she was in an instinctual primal mode that her body chose to flip a switch and here she was. Palm trees heard outside of her open windows in a blowing tilt, a storm was coming upon her building. Every twist and turn caused a creak in the floor to screech louder and louder. Her headboard slamming into the wall with the sound of a judge slamming a mallet continuously and violently. The awareness to want to scream out for help but her body forcing her to throw herself around helplessly. She felt internally that others were watching her, all begging for help alongside her. Her thoughts slowly crept into her mind like a cell eating virus, why was this happening? Why did she deserve this? Was this her time? Her mind turned to black and entered her eternal subconscious.

Olivia woke up, taking a deep breath and getting herself out of bed instantly. She normally gets great sleep due to her work schedule and her success with a work life balance. It was Sunday and her family was finally getting together to talk about things. Last time this happened, years ago, she felt as if she couldn't speak for herself. She was used to being overpowered and silenced. She was completely over the feeling and was ready to stand up for herself today. She paced her studio apartment, cleaning, making a quick breakfast, and being as productive as she could be on her last day off for the weekend. It didn't feel like a day off, however; this idea of a "talk" provoked thoughts of the past. Absent of good thoughts, only the ones that live with you and repeat in your head for years. Olivia was always told that the good memories are the ones that stick around when in a state of nostalgia, but why did the bad ones live longer in her mind? She wanted closure today and she made that her only goal in life to receive it. Could she have a relationship with her family again? Are they still going to try and control her like they always do? Did things blow over? Did they even miss her? Did they support her and her dreams? She knew there is only one way to find out. She was used to running from things, but she was not running from this. She was forced to confront it.

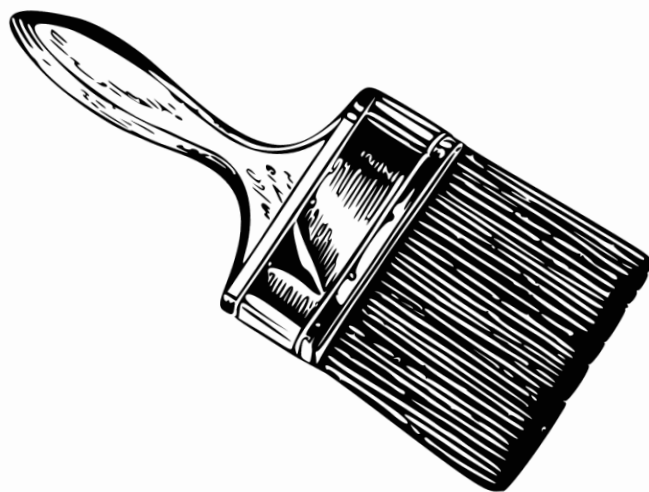
Olivia sat in traffic, left with only a steering wheel and her thoughts. Why did her

family favor her sister in every single situation growing up? Just because she was older? Because she was prettier? Because she was defiant and self-sufficient? The curiosity killed her, and she knew this had to be brought up today. She brought it up in the last “talk,” only for her parents to shoot it down instantly and tell her she’s completely in the wrong and a different person than who she used to be. She had no secrets to hide today, everything was going to be let out of the bag. She was always known for being the quiet one, the one who could not defend herself when times get tough. But this quietness only brewed anger that led her to a better life once she separated herself from her family. Anger is good, she thought. Anger changed her life for the better. She always felt anger, but never knew how to use it to her own benefit, but now that she learned, she was going to use it to further better her life in the coming hours. The longer this drive took, the more she was left in her thoughts, the more time she had to plan. She no longer demanded answers, she was going to make her own. She thought of a way to fully let herself free, to fully take control of her own life. Why do they deserve this? Will she miss them? Will others support her decision? Will she regret this? She knows there is only one way to find out.

Olivia woke up, she was sitting in an airport waiting on her flight that was originally delayed to the U.S. Virgin Islands. She did not have her passport, nor could she get it in time, and this was the only place she could escape while technically leaving the “mainland.” Escape, how she wanted to run away. Everything happened quickly and this was the only way for her to leave and start somewhere else. She wanted nothing to do with her family, not even a thought. Only a backpack full of stuff to her name, she wanted to run away. What was it with her obsession and running away? She finally freed herself of all stress, they were gone. It can’t be cold blood if their blood is still warm, she joked to herself. She always lived with doubt, but she felt as if this was her life defining decision, one that she will forever cherish, one of the good memories that outweigh the bad. She started to approach her terminal and the sight of the plane outside was practically calming for her. Calm was a common emotion for her recently, at least she thought. Therapy and medication made her anxious and in denial; that’s why she stopped participating in both. Once she was gone and ran away, she was at peace, free, collected, in her head. Her impulsiveness led her to some interesting paths in her life. As she sat on the plane, waiting for takeoff, she was left with only her thoughts. How will she justify why they deserved this? How will she miss them if they’re gone? How can others support me if others do not understand? She knew there was never a way to find out.

Olivia woke up, on the plane, her body taking over. Screaming and hyperventilating at the same time. Her thoughtless body thrusting back and forth, side to side, an erratic

movement only those that were watching could describe. Passengers pled for help, some trying to calm her while holding her down amid her body spasming in their worrying arms. Petrified faces all around, what must you do when someone looks possessed in an enclosed area thousands of feet in the air? She was not present amongst them, however. Her mind turned red; her subconscious mind joined her in her eternal awakening. This was a moment of definition for Olivia's life, how one action could rule over all that came before it. Regret sat deep in her mind, she didn't know it yet, but it would come. Her mind began to come back to her, but still no control of her own body. How could this be what she deserved? How will others miss her if she's gone, even if they never cared about her before? How could others support her if she's been alone and abandoned her entire life? How could she continue to live a life of deep regret and impulsiveness? Olivia must now live with this, while others uncover the mystery of her own family.



# THE RAILROAD TRACKS

By Eduardo Garcia

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I lived in Mexico City since the day I was born. I was the third of five brothers, the middle child. We were poor and lived in a poor neighborhood with barely the essentials. There was no bathroom in our house and no plumbing. The floors were plain dirt. Our home had only one room and a dirt floor. This was our kitchen, living space, and the bedroom where my parents four brothers and I all slept together. As my brothers and I got older, our economic situation improved, little by little, as we got jobs, and contributed to the household. Of course, being young and impulsive, I made things harder by falling in love quite young, at the age of 18, moving my wife in, and having two children. Two years later, when I was about twenty years old or so, I had a dream that I will never forget. It took me many years to understand and decipher this dream and what it means. I remember clearly like it happened yesterday, even though I know that it happened years ago. One day I went to work, (as a laborer in a low paying construction job). That night was like any other night. I came back home, ate dinner, watched some TV with my wife and kids, washed up, then lay down in bed ready to drift off to sleep and submerge myself in the depths of my dreams.

Like any other night diving into heavy sleep, I didn't have a problem relaxing myself in the arms of the Goddess of Dreams. As I slid into sleep, I had visions of various scenarios from my day: interactions I had with people, like my co-workers for that day. What did we accomplish? What did we do wrong? What was the plan for the next day? I remembered a small conversation with one of my neighbors, where we said hi to each other and wished each other good night. Many interesting things that happened to me that day all slid past as I drifted off to sleep. Then I began to dream.

I saw myself walking next to my mom in what seemed to be a train station. Like any other dream it was a train station in an unknown place, like somewhere in the movies or television. I had never been to a train station or on a train before. Next to my mom was a German Shepherd. He was walking next to her like his job was to guard her. He walked by her side and stayed close. He never made a noise. I heard only his heavy breathing. We didn't have a dog. I had never seen this dog, and I remembered the dog clearly because he appeared to be purebred, with a black spot on his back like a small blanket to

cover him from the cold, and it looked nothing like the Mexico City neighborhood slum dogs. I didn't understand why this dog wanted to be with us.

My mom walked with me to the train. At that moment, it wasn't clear what we were doing there, maybe the two of us and the dog were going to board the train? Were we meeting someone? Maybe we were there to observe the train leaving.

In every dream everything happens really fast or really slow, but the next thing I saw was that I was on the train, but my mom and the dog were still on the platform. My mom waved her hand and said, "Take care of yourself and be careful." My mom's facial expression was emotionless, no expression of sadness or happiness. I, on the other hand, was confused and worried. Why hadn't she boarded the train with me? Why weren't we together? Why? What happened? The train started to move. Where was I going? I thought for a second that I was going for a short trip or maybe just around the corner, like we used to say. I was in the last car of the train waving goodbye to my mom and the dog that was still next to her. In the dream, I thought to myself, "I'll be back."

The train started to move. To my horror, I looked down and saw that the railroad tracks were disappearing. How was I going to come back if there were no tracks? Or maybe they were magic tracks? I was really confused! If there were no tracks I could not return, and maybe I would never see my mom again. My mom was waving, but she was farther and farther away. The farther the railroad advanced the more the tracks disappeared. My mom waved, but she was farther and farther away, until I couldn't see her anymore. The train kept advancing and the tracks disappeared.

After my dream, I woke up the next morning confused. What a weird dream! What did it all mean? Was it a premonition? Was someone "up there" trying to tell me something? Why did my mom stay at the train station? What about that dog?

Over the years, I have come to understand the train dream. I know it means a long trip far away. I understand the significance of the tracks disappearing: I won't be able to come back; even if I did, nothing would be the same. The dog remained a mystery for me. Maybe it means that after I left, he would stay with my mom. Maybe it means that no matter what happened, she would not be alone. Did this dog represent my wishful thinking that he would protect her while I was gone, or did I just see her spirit guardian? I'll never be sure.

Life went on. A few years passed since that dream. I was now 23. It was tough at times, and my family was surviving, but I needed to find better ways to make a life for my family. I barely made ends meet. I heard about people going to the USA to work temporarily and then returning. That's my solution. I never had thought to leave my mom, my house or even Mexico City. But my economic situation and the fact that I had had my



first child at 18 years old and my second at 19, forced me to make a drastic decision. I was desperate. I didn't have a full-time job, not because I didn't want one or couldn't keep one, but because there were no jobs available as a welder, which was the trade that I studied at the college in Mexico City. My situation was becoming desperate. I decided to travel to the States to work for a few months and come right back. I would leave my mom and my family behind. However, life took its own course, things got complicated, plans changed. I would never regret the decision of leaving my old situation and the house where I used to live. I was looking for a better future for my kids and family, and I achieved this. My economic situation changed, and it changed for the better. My family had better opportunities that they would never have had before. I felt good, I accomplished something good for my kids and family, I gave them a better future and more opportunities. However, my relationship changed for the worse with my mom, because taking my children alone with me to the USA broke our relationship. It is a sad feeling that our relationship will never be the same. She was sad and angry. I knew that nothing would be the same, but now I knew the meaning of that dog!

She was never going to be by herself because my other four brothers stayed with her, and she was protected. I have come to realize now, that the dream was a premonition of my future. I didn't know back then, but the signs and symbols of that dream became clear years later.

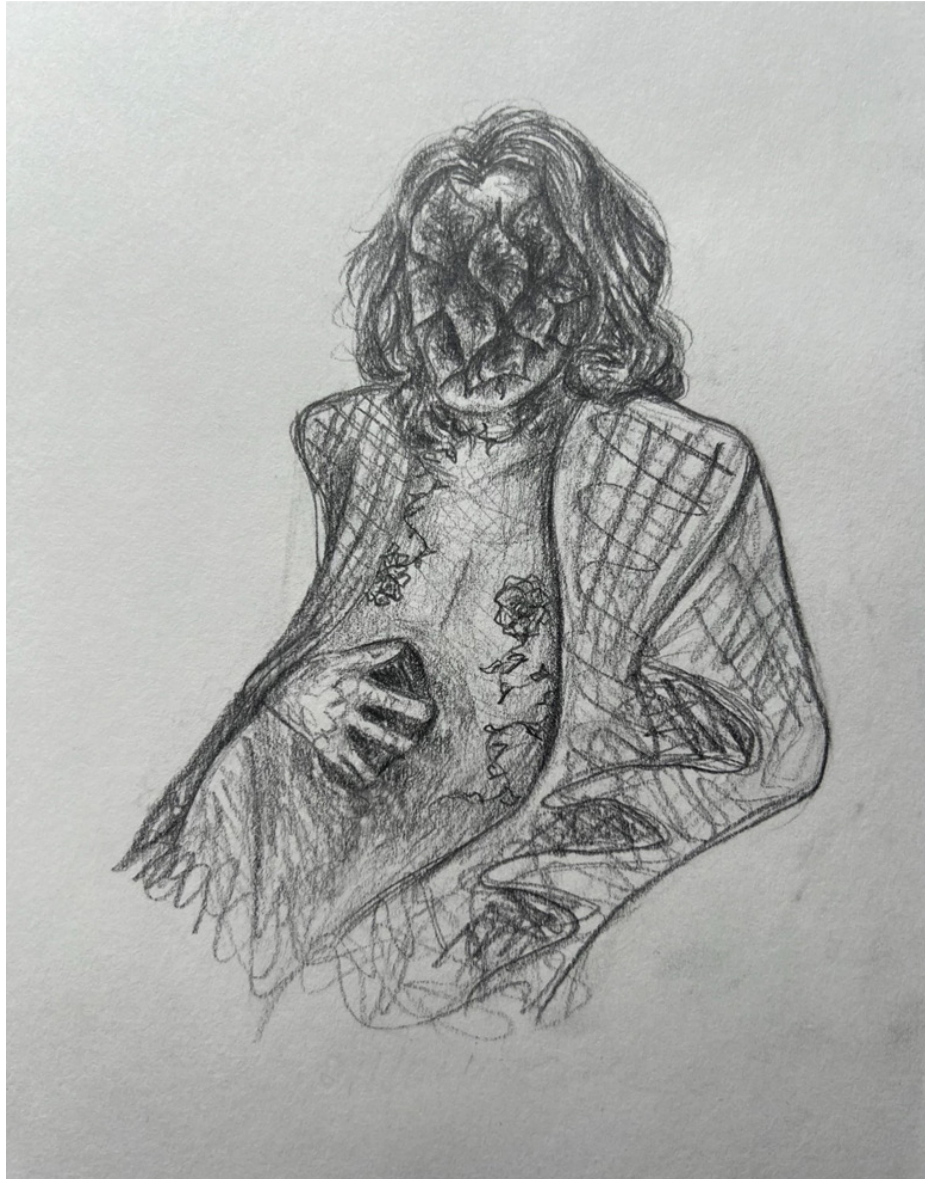
I took that train and left my mom behind. Will I ever go back? Twenty-five years have passed by, but I am not going back. The railroad tracks have completely disappeared.

# CORE

By James Yocco

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# WHERE THE FOREST STANDS

By Wyatt Polac

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Let's go where the forest stands,  
and live our joy around the ancient giants.  
Looking through parted leaves, with our eyes held wide,  
we can see the starlit Elden sky.  
So, as we look into the beauty of the endless night,  
we can watch the universe dance  
in primordial elegance.  
With the timeworn Earth as our bed, we can lay  
and listen to the stars sing their long-forged songs.  
Let's leave time behind and allow it to pass us by.  
Let's leave our memories behind, where the forest stands.  
And as our lives grow short,  
and our minds begin to fade,  
We may one day choose to return  
to where our lives once lay.  
Let's go home, to where the forest stands—  
And let's find that no giant remains...  
As we stand where our joy once danced,  
we find purchase on a new formed road.  
Surrounded by endless rows of empty homes  
that stand where gods once grew,  
through tearful eyes, let's look to the stars  
to find its song has been silenced...  
Through the polluting lights and falsified warmth,  
of our dying new truth,  
let's leave with memories in hand  
of where the forest once stood.

# I'M MOVING FORWARD

By SUF

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I've been stuck in the same old situation and place.  
But now I'm breaking free, moving on with grace.  
Leaving the heartache, pain, and stress behind  
And with a heart and mind aligned.  
With every step I take, I'll grow and evolve,  
Embracing new challenges, my fears dissolve.  
I'm leaving doubts and worries to fade.  
I'm letting go, I'm moving forward now.  
I won't let the past mistakes hold me down.  
The future is in my hands and there's no turning back.  
No more, hesitation, pain or stress.  
I'm looking forward,  
I'm moving forward now.  
Learning from my mistakes, I've grown and cried.  
But now it's time to rise, reaching for the sky.  
With courage's stride, and a heart full of cheer,  
I'm moving on, without anxiety or fear.  
I'll keep on moving, one step at a time.  
Keep on climbing until I reach the finish line.  
I'm pushing towards my dreams and goals.  
I'm letting go, I'm moving forward now.  
I won't let the past mistakes hold me down.  
The future is in my hands and there's no turning back.  
No more, hesitation, pain or stress.  
I'm looking forward,  
I'm moving forward now.

# WRING RAT

By Anthony Dodaro

---

Ker-chunk, ker-chunk.  
Block of muck.  
Wrought-out rot, lead-lined plastique cup.  
Mold-straw-suck its cough syrup sillies,  
As you power-drill that cord-line still,  
Gasping for red flower mills.  
Tss, hiss.  
Fading inertia—  
Leak-Lung Lovers  
Spilling inks  
Betwixt tiles.  
Shower curtain dress with rust-ring halos,  
Vine IVes, knotted, busted, bruised  
Salt spines laying loose; bemused.  
Auto-hypochondriac, gynephiliac, cannibal Caliban,  
Hot-steam-stumble your cold metal frame.  
Mirror quiver, spine sink.  
Drench-cracked feet in puddled stink.  
Trap-strap the twitch.  
Skitchy  
Sketches, dresses and messes.  
Rust roses on cellophane gowns,  
Mangle-dangle in the heat-lamp breeze.  
Baton baubles dangle and doddle  
Waiting for leather graspers to stroke  
And constrain.

# MY FATHER READS THE OBITUARIES EVERY DAY

By Brennah McElwee

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My father reads the obituaries every day  
just in case it's someone he knows.  
As I lie beside him, his nose puffs heavy  
nitrogen and the oxygen rattles his lungs  
like burnt charcoal, a brutal reminder  
that he is still alive.  
I watch my father's strong back wrestle  
with the pressure, hunching and wrinkling,  
Grey hairs poke their way through his aging body,  
and I see a fire brewing in his belly.  
His once giant frame now a mirror, I see myself.  
I reach for my father—  
His nose puffs heavy nitrogen  
and the oxygen makes his lungs ache.  
I make sure he's still alive.

# LITTERED BY MIND AND MEMORY

By Sara Rowlinson

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It would start with a sentence, one that I uttered in a nuanced tone, but held far more truth than anticipated.

*I just know I'm not going to graduate from there.*

This felt childish, to say the least, more of an insult or backhanded comment, rather than the balance of my future being spoken in ten little words. I've heard time and time again from people like my mother and relatives who know my story trying to relieve my conscience from guilt by saying words like "it wasn't your fault" or "you needed to leave," instead of saying "it must have been hard," and "how are you feeling about it?" It's never easy to leave things in your past, especially when reminders of the very thing you're running from are everywhere.

It was November 18th, 2021, the day the school rang with the screams of students and teachers. The memory reflects like a mirror when I look back on it.

I was walking to my 7th-period class, not even a 15-foot gap between the difference of the previous period. I made my way into the classroom and set down my backpack next to the chair, kneeling to unzip the bag to get out my laptop. The metal exterior made a swift clunk as it made contact with the desk. Familiar faces of my classmates echoed as the room filled. I stood back up and leaned against the edge of the desk, waiting for class to start. The next thing I heard was the low buzz of the intercom before a booming voice statically filled the room.

**"GET IN YOUR CLASSROOMS NOW, THIS IS A LOCKDOWN!"**

My heart dropped. I went numb. I don't remember how I made it to the corner of the room. I sank slowly into the ground as the lights flicked off. Another buzz.

**"GET INTO YOUR CLASSROOMS NOW. RUN!"**

The speaker's voice was strained, fearful. My teacher poked his head out into the hallway. "GET IN A CLASSROOM," he yelled down the hall.

Across the school, I heard doors slamming, and shoes squeaking against the scuffed linoleum of that school.

I waited for a gunshot, but none came.

I waited for a scream, but none came.

Time stood still for a brief moment as my eyes flicked across the dark room making eye contact with every person in that room. No one was missing, I let out a small breath. I pulled out my phone from the pocket of my sweatpants. The glow of my phone illuminated my face as I opened my text messages.

*Is everyone ok? (Sent to GroupChat)*

*We're in a lockdown, I think it's for real this time. (Sent to Mom)*

I shifted my gaze upward toward the ceiling, it pained me to think of this. I shifted back down to the delivered message, typing out a new one.

*I love you. (Sent to Mom)*

I turned off my phone, laying it flat on my stomach as I thought about the words I just sent. Would they be my last? I turned my head to the door, waiting for the moment someone would break it down and end it all. Would my death be painful, a long prolonged fearful death? I felt a tap on my shoulder, and I turned to see one of my friends pointing their cellphone towards me, an image of four cop cars reflected at me. I looked up from the image to her eyes, they were darkened and glossy like she was about to cry. My heart ached with what little comfort I could give her.

I tried to close my eyes, scrunching them together almost as a way to scrub anything from my mind, but all that flooded my senses were thoughts of my friends, and how I knew they were just as alone as I probably was. Scared of the unknown, and even more afraid of the truth.

Forty-five minutes passed before the intercom let out the all-too-familiar buzz again. "We are out of lockdown and moving into restricted movement for the time being."

The lights flicked back on, and I dizzily stood up from the corner of the room, stretching my back out from the uncomfortable position it was subjected to.

"Are you ok?"

I turned to see my teacher standing in front of one of my classmates. His back was turned away from me. I couldn't see his facial expression, but I heard clear as day the words that he dared to say.

"No, I almost just fucking died."

Once we were allowed to move to our next period, I entered the hallway to be greeted by a police officer in a bulletproof vest. He had his hand on his gun, ready to draw. The small shine of his handcuffs reflected off the overhead light. He had a grim expression on his face, like the kind you see when someone is trying to cover up something.

I entered my study hall classroom, immediately sitting down to sink myself in my chair.

"It was a riot," I overheard.

“My back hurts,” followed soon after that.

“I was stepped on.”

“Are you ok?”

“God, no.”

The videos circulated the school, ones where students screamed amidst the crowd and ones where students screamed “gun,” for which the retaliation only struck fear into dozens more students who were trapped in the cluster of people. There were videos of students’ necks being stepped on, and the surrounding students being suffocated against the lockers. Several teachers and students went out in ambulances.

Cases of violence were nothing new to me. Toxicity in its rawest form had taken over and plagued even the best of people in that school. I can name countless days that ambulances visited our school, once again taking dozens of overdosed kids to be stitched back together only to fall into the same cycle of addiction. These types of occurrences were so normal, so integrated into our social life that talking about anything else was near impossible. Looking back at the situation now, I think I was just trying to survive. There’s a difference between living in fear and being controlled by it, a saying I think a lot of people in that place could relate to.

I was sitting in my math class at Downingtown West, struggling to focus and understand the somewhat foreign concept of whatever we were learning that day. This was only about 3 months after I left my old school.

My teacher announced before we were able to pack up that the following day there would be an intruder drill. My ears perked up at the sound of those words curving around the corner of her lips. Just as quickly had the mood shifted in the room, the bell rang. I quickly shuffled through the crowds of students filling and suffocating the hallways. I decided to keep on the straight path towards the edge of the building instead of making the turn to go to the cafeteria for my study hall period. The last bell rang to signal the start of the period and students made their way into their classrooms, the halls becoming scarcely empty once again. My hands started to shake, and my breathing spiraled out of control. I tried fidgeting with my fingers, rubbing the inside of my pinky finger with my opposite thumb, a nervous tick that sometimes was able to calm my mind down, but nothing helped. The sporadic separation of breaths got more inconsistent and the fear of being stuck like this grew. I thought about going into the guidance office to see if my counselor was free, but every time I passed by the room while continuously making laps around the school, it became even harder to open that door. I felt like there was nowhere else to go.

Since then, numerous of these drills have come and gone, and every one of them



took me back to what happened in that room. It's been well over two years since I've been in that spot, but I can still see the frightened faces of my classmates and hear those words he said to my teacher.

It's like looking through glass and seeing a barrier between me and them, but almost nothing prevents the glass from shattering and the shards from reopening closed wounds. Somewhat hazy but still like it was yesterday.

I vividly remember sitting in my guidance counselor's office fidgeting with the end of the zipper of my jacket, the ends of my sleeves stained with black mascara and wet from tears. I had gone into her office that day because it was the anniversary of the riot. Over that year I hadn't once made the time to grieve the loss of my previous life. Not once did I talk about it. As the stuffy air filled my nostrils and the embarrassment of sitting there in shame, she said something that struck me.

"You need to focus on the now, the present is all that matters."

There was something almost hurtful about those words; I can't exactly put my tongue on it, but it almost felt wrong to feel that way. Like moving on was an insult to everything I built there, and everything I have now. I knew more than anyone that much of the guilt I felt about the situation was my own doing. I had accumulated these feelings until it was way too much to handle. When they did finally surface, it was far more painful than I thought it was going to be.

Out of all the things I hope to say in my life, let me start with this. I will never be ungrateful for the things that have happened in my life. Most of all, I will never be ungrateful for how blessed I have been. Those people I left behind, I will never forget. Not because of the guilt of breaking off our relationships for the sake of moving forward, but because of the person they made me today. It's really hard to put such complicated feelings on paper, but there is one thing I do know how to say. I hate that school because of the decisions it made me make, but I will never regret the things it taught me.

I won't lie to you and say that I have completely moved on from that point in my life. There are days when I get stuck in slumps that make it difficult to focus on anything else but my past. I know now that those types of things are inevitable and those memories will probably never leave me. The difference between the person two years ago and now is that I know how to take those feelings and validate them instead of putting them off. I know that this seems unfinished as well, but, in reality, there was so much that was encased in that situation that many people have never heard me talk about, so many minor details that went into what finally pushed me over the edge.

I just want people to know more than anything, you are not defined by your past, but the unwillingness to grow out of that into something new was the bane of my exis-



tence, and the reason I struggled silently for so long.

I don't pity the person I was. She was misguided and incredibly stubborn. Knowing the difference between being strong and silently suffering is a fine line, one I thought I was partial to. To me, it's important that I know that difference, and most of all—be present—because right now that's all that matters.



# THAT'S ALL, FOLKS

By Teri Matthews

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