

Gristle- Butter

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CHS Creative Writing Groups*

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-The Corshire Gazette-

Philomusica

By Christopher von Aldi

It is at the request of my fellow citizens that I, Christopher von Aldi of Corshire, give my account of the unexplainable and mysterious events of the Philomusica Incident of 1745. I suppose I should follow suit and start at the very moment when I unknowingly intertwined myself in this infamous case. I admit I had some trouble in defining just when that moment was; it seems I had been destined to have some part in it for some time, far before I realized it. After days spent pondering the question, I settled on what you are about to hear.

Chapter 1- The Widow's Plea

It was a cool autumn day in our town of Corshire. I was sitting behind my old mahogany desk, sorting through the many tutoring requests my local fame had brought upon me. I acutely remember I was in somewhat of an annoyed mood that morning after spilling my morning tea all over my desk. It was for this reason that when I heard the doorbell ringing with its most irritating tone, I wasted no time in making my way to the door and wrenching it open, expecting to find one of the local newspaper boys inquiring if they could use the loo. Instead, I found a rather flustered-looking woman, her long hair slightly ruffled around her and her hat askew, standing stiffly under the awning, looking up at me with a shocked expression. I recognized this woman at once as Sondra Corshire, wife of our recently passed mayor, Barton Corshire, and quickly apologized, beckoning her to come inside.

We then sat down in the sitting room and I inquired what it was that brought her here. Her reply was this: "I apologize for bothering you. I know how busy you are, but I just had to do something," she said. "You see, my daughter, Mira, has taken the death of my late husband quite terribly. She doesn't seem to know how to have fun anymore. The only thing I could think of doing was to give her something that made her feel close to him." She broke off, with a sad look

in her eyes before continuing. “That’s when a thought struck me - you see Barton loved sharing his love of the violin with Mira - I’ve never seen her happier than when they were playing together. It was that thought which brought me to you, to ask if you would teach her.” I opened my mouth to reply but Madam Corshire cut me off saying, “I know you are terribly busy but... but I know my husband and you were close so I just thought... well...”

This time I wasted no time in saying, “Of course, madam, I would be delighted to teach your daughter. Barton always told me young Mira had a musical mind. It would be my absolute pleasure.” Madam Corshire at once broke out into grateful tears, thanking me profusely. Once she had settled down we made the arrangements for Mira’s first violin lesson and Sondra went on her way.

If it had been anyone else standing on my doorstep that morning, I would have laughed in their faces and shooed them off. The truth is, however, every word that Madam Corshire had said was true. Barton had, indeed, been a very dear friend of mine. His death dealt a great deal of damage to my spirit so naturally, when I was met with an opportunity to help the family once more, I did not hesitate even a moment to accept it. And so it was that I set myself on the path that would lead me to where I am now, sitting at that same desk, writing this very sentence and wondering what had gone so wrong to invoke such a tragedy.

Chapter 2- The Girl with the Violin

One week had passed since Madam Corshire approached me with her request and, as we had previously arranged, today was the day when I would finally meet the young miss and begin teaching her the great art of the violin. I had been lounging in the sitting room, drinking my blissfully unspilled cup of tea, when I saw the black carriage of the Corshires pull up outside my residence. Impeccable as my timing always was, I reached my door just as Sondra went to ring the doorbell and I welcomed her inside for the second time that month. “Ah Madam Corshire, so lovely to see you again.” I said before politely shaking her hand and turning my attention to my new pupil. She stood beside her mother with impeccable posture, her wavy hazelnut hair tied back with a delicate blue ribbon and her bright brown eyes looking curiously up at me. “Oh! You must be Mira. Your father has told me so much about you,” I said, bending down slightly to shake the child’s small hand.

“Thank you sir, I am grateful to you for agreeing to teach me,” Mira replied in a small but clear voice.

“Ah, no need to thank me, miss, it is my absolute pleasure to teach someone so beloved by your father,” I replied before turning back to Sondra and saying, “I believe I can handle everything from here. You may retrieve your daughter in an hour or so.”

“Of course Mr. von Aldi, I bid you farewell. Oh, and be sure to be on your best behavior young lady!” She said turning to Mira before sweeping out the door and stepping gracefully back into the bleak-colored carriage.

I watched the carriage turn the corner before whipping myself around to face my new pupil and saying, “Right then, we must be getting to work. I trust you've been provided with your own violin?”

Mira then held out her violin case and replied, “Yes sir, although I don't remember much from... from what father showed me. I only learned as much as my father's busy schedule would allow.”

“Hm just as well; I had planned to start with the basics anyhow. Now follow me to the study and we shall get on with the lesson,” I replied. As soon as we arrived at the study, we began the lesson. As I have mentioned previously, I was planning on only tutoring Mira on the very basics of the violin this session. However, upon further investigation of Mira's skills, it seemed to me as if she had been playing since she was a mere tot. It was nothing less than extraordinary, and me saying this is no small feat for I have tutored only the best. As such, by the time Madam Corshire returned to retrieve the young miss, she had already perfected “Hot Cross Buns” as well as “Twinkle Twinkle Little Star.” Of course, I expressed my amazement at Mira's skills and asked if she had truly never played before. Sondra replied with the affirmative and she and Mira bid me farewell.

It was just as they were walking across the threshold that Mira turned back to face me and said, with a most calm expression, “I do hope your mother gets better soon,” and upon my flabbergasted expression continued, “she is in a bad way, is she not?” Madam Corshire, of course, quickly chided Mira for her bluntness and apologized before rushing the pair of them through the door and down the sidewalk, leaving me staring after them in utter shock. You see, the young miss was indeed correct, my mother was facing an incurable illness and was practically on her deathbed. The strange part was that I had told no one but myself and my close family about mother's predicament. There was no possible way Mira could have known this. Small as it was, the incident would plague my mind for weeks afterwards, no matter how much I tried to forget it.

Chapter 3- The Grosvenor Jewels

It had been three months since Mira's first lesson and since she made her last strange remark. I suspect that after her little comment about my mother, Sondra had a chat with her about the indecency of saying such things since the young girl hasn't mentioned anything of the sort since.

Our lessons had been going incredibly well, with Mira very much living up to my initial deduction of her skills. In fact, her skills had grown so much that she had grown to be quite the local celebrity. Every now and then I would witness someone stopping her on the street, asking if they could hear a bit of her playing and every time, she would gladly oblige. This is just one of the examples that shows the kindness of this girl's heart. I'll admit even I had grown quite attached to my young pupil for she had started to truly open up to me during our lessons together.

It was for this reason that I would occasionally escort Mira home from our lessons should her mother be busy. It was on one of these days that we had decided to stop at the local bakery before walking the rest of the short distance to Mira's home. We had just entered the small seating area just outside of the shop, making idle conversation amongst ourselves, when the owner saw us and said, "Ah, you must be the young violinist I've heard so much about. I hate to trouble you but would you mind playing a few notes for us?"

Mira, used to this as she was, replied, "Of course, and it's no bother. It would be my pleasure," and started playing a lovely piece she had learned in her lesson.

The notes seemed to flow seamlessly from the strings and quickly entranced the growing crowd of people in the bakery. As she was nearing the end of the piece she suddenly paused and turned her head sharply towards a passerby.

She stared intently at the man with a stern expression, her grip on the bow tightening in such a way that it seemed to almost thrum under her hold.

Mira's audience glanced at each other, waiting with baited breath for what my student would do next. "That necklace, were you planning on taking it to the police station?" Mira finally said. The man's eyes bore a confused expression as he processed her words before widening in alarm. It seemed Mira's words had struck a chord with him for he immediately started to slowly step backwards, shooting the crowd a menacing look. It seems that the onlookers were starting to process what was occurring as well and several quickly restrained the suspicious man while the baker quickly called the authorities.

It wasn't more than a quarter of an hour before the constable arrived and hastily apprehended the struggling man, the thief's features contorting in anger and shame as the

constable loaded the man into the carriage. The constable wasted no time searching the subdued man for the supposed jewelry and found, to my and the onlooker's shock, a beautiful diamond and ruby necklace secured in his coat pocket. Upon closer inspection, the constable informed us that we had caught the elusive criminal who had stolen the invaluable Grosvenor jewels, whose disappearance had made quite a stir in the papers as of late.

After the initial shock of catching such a ruinous man had left me, I started pondering how on earth my young student could have possibly known the man possessed the infamous jewels right in his very pocket. I was then reminded of that first incident that had occurred at our first lesson. In both occasions, Mira had expressed knowledge of something that she couldn't possibly have known. And yet she did so how- HOW could she have possibly known? It is a question that I still lay awake at night pondering. Fortunately for me, I did not have the time to think about my question for much longer.

Once I had concluded my account of the bakery proceedings to the constable and delivered Mira to her residence, I finally arrived home only to discover an urgent telegram from my brother. He detailed in his message that he had received my notice concerning the terrible state of our mother's health and was returning home to Corshire within the week in order to attend to her while I was otherwise occupied. After I finished scanning the note, I groaned in anticipation of my insufferable brother's antics. I realized just how much needed to be done in preparation for both my brother's arrival and for Mira's upcoming recital, which was sure to be a momentous occasion for my young protege and thus for myself. Just thinking about all I had to get done in a matter of days set my head spinning, and was all it took to banish all thoughts of the Grosvenor jewel mystery from my mind.

Chapter 4- Dinner at von Aldi Manor

It was roughly one week after our visit to the bakery when my brother arrived at the manor house in the morning, putting an end to much of my anxiety surrounding his stay. To celebrate both my brother's arrival as well as Mira's upcoming concert, I had planned a splendid dinner which the Corshires as well as my brother and I were set to attend. Currently, the entire household was working furiously to prepare the food for the elaborate menu I had planned out. I must admit that I am not the most pleasant of people under pressure and I spent the majority of the afternoon ordering the incompetent staff about while my brother was forced to trail behind

trying in vain to apologize to them on my behalf. All this to say, by the time we were finished with the preparations, the Corshires had arrived and were walking up the path to the door.

My brother pointed this out to me and we opened the door to greet our guests. “Mira! Ah and Sondra as well, a pleasure as always. Please come in, come in!” I said before gesturing to the door. After the Corshires had taken off their coats and given them to the maid I continued. “I believe you’ve met my brother, Zalman. He will be dining with us this evening on account of his stay here while our mother is ill.”

To this, Sondra nodded politely to my brother and said, “Yes, Barton spoke of his friendship with you often. Although, I really only remember seeing you at the campaign.”

My brother gave a small smile and nod before replying, “Yes. I’m sure you remember I was actually running against Barton that year. Despite this, we really were dear friends. I offer you my condolences for his death. I believe it was something none of us saw coming.” Then, turning to Mira, he continued, saying, “Ah, so you must be Mira. Your father told me so much about you although I never met you properly. I am Zalman von Aldi. Pleasure to make your acquaintance miss.”

To this, Mira smiled widely before replying, “The pleasure is mine, Mr. Zalman, sir.” We then proceeded to lead our guests to the dining room where we were to enjoy the fruits of the day’s stress. As we were about to sit down however, Zalman spoke up saying, “I’m terribly sorry to postpone the feast but I simply cannot put the idea out of my mind. I was wondering if you would perhaps like to demonstrate your playing for me, Mira. Your father was always so gifted with the violin, his music always stirred hearts in the most incredible way. I suspect these abilities may have even been what gained him Corshire’s loyalty. My brother has often expressed how similar your own abilities were and as such, I was hoping to witness them myself.”

Mira shifted anxiously for a moment with a rather uncomfortable expression upon her face before replying, “I appreciate your interest... but I just don’t think I’m quite... up to it at the moment.”

I looked up in slight shock at my pupil, for she had never before refused a request to hear her playing. Even if she had been practicing since dawn she would always play at least a couple of notes for any curious passerby.

“Ah, well that is quite all right, I suppose you all are famished and I wish not to postpone the meal.” Zalman replied with an understanding smile.

I then hastily called to the maid to fetch our dinner and we took our seats. I’ll admit, I was quite anxious as to whether or not my brother would hold anything against the Corshires, seeing as he lost his mayorship to Barton. However, he was nothing but kind to the family. He told us of

the many adventures of his travels and left even me impressed by his storytelling. All this to say that by the end of dessert, the Corshires had grown quite close to my brother. Mira, in particular, was absolutely enthralled by his tales and found it hard to depart back to her residence later that night.

After we saw the Corshires turn out of sight, I yawned and started to make my way upstairs with the intention of turning in for the night. I was halfway up the grand staircase leading to the bedrooms when Zalman grabbed my arm and asked, “I don’t want to be a bother, but could I attend Mira’s concert with you tomorrow?”

I stared at him for a moment with a slightly confused look before replying, “Well I don’t see why not, but I do wonder why it is you would want to come?”

My brother looked deep in thought for a second before answering, “Ah well I, you see, I have realized that Barton’s death took a larger toll on me than I imagined and... well I suppose I would like to support the family in any way I can.”

I smiled at my brother and nodded, understanding how he felt. After all, that was why I agreed to teach young Mira in the first place. After exchanging our farewells, we both headed off to our rooms, in dire need of some rest in preparation for the long day ahead.

Chapter 5- Philomusica

I woke up the following morning to find Zalman banging on the door and shouting at me to get out of bed before we missed my student’s concert. I of course immediately shot up out of bed and glanced at my clock. As it would turn out, my brother was simply endeavouring to play a “practical joke” on me. Little did he know that I had become even less of a morning person than I was when we were children, which was saying quite a lot, and I did not hesitate to open the door and spill the fresh cup of tea he had been sipping on down his front. All this to say, it was not the most pleasant of mornings and I sincerely hoped that Mira’s concert would lift my spirits.

After much bustling about and a fair bit of bickering, my brother and I finally made our way to the Corshire Concert Hall by half past noon, leaving us the rest of the hour to assist Mira and the staff in preparing the stage and ensuring Mira herself was ready for her first grand performance. Both Zalman and I were thoroughly surprised at the lack of nerves plaguing Mira. Looking back however, Mira had already graced the town with many performances and as such, it would make logical sense for her to already be used to such events. Even so, Zalman and I still constantly questioned the poor girl as to how she was faring and if she was ready. I believe that if I were in her shoes I may have just stormed out of the concert hall in a fuming rage; however

Mira never so much as snapped, simply answering our questions and settling our worries. Before we knew it, it was time for Mira to play, and what a concert it was. Everything went without a hitch and her performance left me beaming with pride at the flawlessness of her movements and the emotion conveyed in the notes.

By the start of the final number, an elegant arrangement of Vivaldi's "Winter," I was finally starting to relax, acknowledging that Mira was a quick-witted young lady and could persevere through any mishap. At least that was until I concluded my whispering to the stage manager backstage and looked back at my pupil only to see a rather strange expression making its way upon her face. Her brows were starting to furrow and a look of extreme concentration and confusion was passing over her features. I instinctively started to scan the room for any hint at the reason behind her expression but, to my dismay, I could find none. It seemed my brother was also starting to take note of this and peered through the curtains. I quickly strode over to him and whispered, "So you see it too. What's happening out there?"

My brother looked at me with a bemused expression and replied, "I haven't the faintest idea."

As he was saying this I saw Mira's head slowly turn to face us where we stood in the wings, her expression rapidly morphing into one of deep distress and horror. I was positive her bow would stop moving at any moment, however she somehow managed to continue the piece. Her hands were moving quicker now across the strings and the range of emotion present in her bright, brown eyes was staggering. I tried to silently communicate with her to ask whatever was the matter but I quickly realized she was not staring at me, but at Zalman. My eyes flickered between them, Mira's eyes practically glowing with emotion and my brother standing there with a stone cold expression, not moving a muscle. As Mira started to draw the final note, her flurry of different emotions reduced to a cold fury and her hands started to shake ever so slightly on the violin. The sound of her music rang through the air with an ear piercing intensity. Before my eyes could do so much as comprehend what they were witnessing, a flash of polished wood flashed through the air with incomprehensible force and was heading straight for us. All I could hear was the deafening sound of blood pumping furiously in my ears before I went crashing into the wall behind me.

When I came to, I was slumped against the wall and the only thing I could comprehend were the sounds of hundreds of people screaming. I blinked furiously, trying to clear the crimson fog that seemed to cover my cracked spectacles. Frantically, I tore off the glasses to witness the scene spread out before me, the very scene which still haunts my dreams to this day. My brother, Zalman von Aldi, was sprawled across the ground covered in a layer of his own dark, crimson

blood. His eyes were wide and blank, frozen in an expression of the utmost horror and fear. From his chest protruded the bow of a violin, Mira's violin. It was then that I realized what had happened, what Mira had just done. Overwhelmed by adrenaline, I stumbled to my feet and over to my brother's body, taking no notice of the blood soaking through my clothing. I have no idea how long I sat there beside my brother. The next thing I knew, one of the guards was lifting me off the ground and half dragging me away from the body.

That was the last time I saw my brother and also the last time I saw my star student. I attempted to make contact with Mira many times after I recovered from my injuries but was never allowed. They simply told me that my grief would overwhelm me, however, I suspect there is much I do not know and will never know. All they told me was that Mira was mentally unstable and had killed Zalman in a sudden rage. When I asked for what reason Mira had killed him they told me that, upon further investigation, it was discovered that Zalman was the very man that had murdered Mira's father, Barton Corshire, out of jealousy at his having won the seat of mayor. Upon hearing this, I was understandably shocked and furious. Despite this, my brother's loss still took a great toll on my mental well being. He was my only brother after all. Nevertheless I could hardly blame Mira for what had happened. She was a mere ten years old and no doubt held abilities she could not control. Yet somehow, the thing that plagues my mind most is how she did it. How did she know, when dozens of investigators didn't, that Zalman had killed Barton? Even more puzzling than that, how does one kill a man with only the bow of a violin? I have no doubt that these are also the very same questions which the world is asking as I write this. Perhaps someday, we will have the answers.

– by *Emma Sipes*

Glossary

Corshire- From the Latin word *cor*, meaning heart/ mind/ soul

Mira- From the Latin word *mirus*, meaning wonderful/ strange/ remarkable/ extraordinary

Philomusica- From the Latin word *philomusicus*, meaning music-lover

Sondra- From the Latin word *solus*, meaning alone

Von Aldi- From the famous violin composer, Antonio Vivaldi

Zalmen- From the Latin word *zelotypia*, meaning jealousy

Whispers of the Melancholy

At long last the crow creaks a final call,
A beacon like krill evading the maw of the whale.
A light is shone upon inky clouds,
Crones collect a beam to weave into the sun's scarf.

The deep grandfather ocean hums
In baritone billows of white.
So ends the crash of the crimped cans,
Worn as a thrift store on black friday:
The new age garments of the sea.

IMAGINE

A socket appears from the dusty bottoms.
What happens when I plug this in?

– Satya McCarthy-Rotella

Three Variations

by Oliver Herron

Metaphor

It was the dead of night. The being's mind was a blur of anticipation and anxiety that ached to be entertained by the comforts of moving colors. Right as it was approaching the finish line of the race against time, two large moving boxes formed a blockade. A storm started brewing in the being's head. The conductor of one of the boxes stated that they hit a fragile creature, and it rushed to continue its own journey into the dark wood. The being states that it too has a journey that needs to be continued along this dark, winding path. The conductor climbs into the ruby box and it glides out of the way, revealing the rest of the path. The race now continues, though the thought of the fragile creature's journey lingers in the air.

Horror

A darkness was set over the world, only illuminated by the headlights of the man's car. His mind was preoccupied with the thought of his favorite television program that he almost didn't see the two large trucks stopped in the road. One was dark red and the other was black, with something dark and wet smeared on the front. Two men were standing in front of them, and one was holding a shotgun. Their faces looked hollow, skeletal from the lighting.

The man in the car rolled down his window and started yelling at them to get out of the road. This action was immediately regretted when the man with a shotgun started walking towards the car. He explained that his friend had hit a deer, and they'll move out of his way. After the trucks have been moved, the man in the car slowly continues down the road, with his eyes still on the two men. The man with the rifle looks almost ready to shoot at him, until he goes around a corner. The man in the car tries to focus back on the thought of his favorite television program, but the thought of the deer and the two men haunt him.

Dream

It's the middle of the night and she is driving fast down a long, winding road. She's in a hurry to get home and watch tv with her parents. Suddenly, two trucks appear in front of her, blocking the road. A man on the side of the road says his friend hit a deer and it ran into the woods. The two trucks roll to the side of the road and she continues on, wondering what may have happened to the deer.

"I wonder if our favorite show will be on tonight," a voice from beside her says. She looks over to see a deer sitting in the passenger seat of the car. "Well this is an odd circumstance, isn't it?"

She jolts awake and sits up on the couch. "What's the matter dear?" her mother says, startled by her sudden movement.

"I-I must've just fallen asleep for a minute. Let's go back to watching the show." She lays back down on the couch and goes back to watching TV, still wondering about the deer in her dream.

Fading to Color

One day the world was black and white.
So simple to traverse within,
It was so comfortable despite,
All actions being good or sin.

Then one day out the white sky,
Came a cool simple streak of blue.
Quickly the blue began to pry
Open skies and reveal its hue

Suddenly what once was binary,
Is now no longer so basal.
This new world can be quite scary,
But it is not just survival.

Possibilities are endless,
In this brand new world of colors.
We are all quite nicely helpless.
But better fast wind than anchors

– Xan Whitt

(TW: animal death)

Menagerie

by Zora Danz

The weather's been awfully cold lately. I don't get it. There's never been a winter this cold, I think. I heard Daddy say it's "surprising, with global warming and all that." I don't know what that means.

Well, it's alright. I don't really care. I just want to go outside again. My friends are all out there, waiting for me. I watch them through the windows. They're sad without me; I can see it in Greta's droopy ears, Starlight's dull feathers, Dandy's little paw prints left behind from when she paces in a circle. They don't mind the cold. Neither do I, which I tell Mommy and Daddy over and over again. But I still can't go outside.

I hate being inside the house. It's dark. The air is always heavy. It makes me think of the thing that Mommy always leaves on my bed, the old blanket, stinking of mildew, and just a little too dry to the touch. There is nobody to play with in this place. Mommy and Daddy are hardly around. I don't talk to them all that much, but I always hear them yelling. This house is too big. These walls are too thin.

Gus is too old to be any fun. He just sits on the rug in front of the wood stove all day with his nose between his paws. Sometimes he looks up, hopeful, like he's waiting for something. I bet he's waiting for winter to end, just like me. I'm much more restless than him, though. All he does is sleep, while I pace from window to window and press my hands against the glass. It's dirty, and cold. My friends don't look any less colorful.

It's been three weeks and two days since the snow started coming. I've been counting. Supper tonight is simple. Mac n' cheese, from the box. There's too much mac and not enough cheese, I think. Nobody is talking. I feel something soft nudge my foot.

"Gus!" I exclaim. "You haven't walked around in forever!"

"He's not supposed to be in the kitchen," Daddy grumbles. He gets up and shoos him away from the table. His face is blank and cold. Mommy's is the same. She makes no move to stop him. Quietly, I pick up my bowl and spoon and follow Gus out to the living room. I sit down next to

him on the dirty carpet and feed him a few bites of my supper. His tail wags for the first time in days.

“You ain’t so bad, old dog,” I whisper, scratching his ears.

Later, I turn over in my bed to see a pale, four-legged shape slip into my room. Gus tries once, twice, to jump up onto my bed, but his legs aren’t strong enough. He hasn’t tried to sleep on my bed in ages. He whimpers. I wrap the blankets around myself like a cape and get out of the bed, onto the floor. Gus curls up next to me. I put one of the blankets over him. That’s how we fall asleep: two little animals trying to shut out the cold.

When I wake up, Gus has made his way back to the living room. I can’t help but wish my friends were here. ‘Course, I would never have them come inside my house. Not these days. I wouldn’t want them to be as miserable as Gus, as miserable as me. And besides, Mommy and Daddy would just make them leave. One time, a few months ago, I brought Greta into the living room, and we knocked over a lamp. Mommy seemed confused about why I was running around. I told her I was playing with my friends, and she said they couldn’t be inside after that.

A wonderful dream comes to me one night. In the dream, I am outside. The sun is shining. I’m up in a tree, a big stout maple. My friends are on the ground below. They’re calling to me to climb down.

“Stop! I’m scared to jump,” I yell with a laugh. Starlight, clever as she is, flies up and lets me climb onto her back. We float down to the grass. They’ve set up a tea party. With a big smile, I thank them, and we sit down on the blanket. Gus is there too. He’s drinking tea out of a cup. Greta makes small talk with him while nibbling on a biscuit. I clap my hands together, delighted at their newfound friendship. Gus has never met Greta or Starlight or Dandy. I don’t think he’s ever had a friend before, besides me.

It’s a lovely time. The sun never stops shining. I pick flowers and make them into a crown, which I place on Greta’s head. She licks my hand gently. Starlight perches on my head, Dandy scurries around my feet, and Gus walks over and leans against my legs. I feel warmer than I’ve felt in a long time. “I’ve missed you all,” I grin.

Soon enough, though, I open my eyes to see dim gray light, and feel the stiffness in my limbs. I’m cold again. I can’t fall back asleep.

It’s been four weeks and five days now, and I think there’s something wrong with Gus. He’s more active than ever. He follows me around. But he’s always making these weird whining

noises, and his breathing sounds off. It's shallow. There's a wheeze to it. Sometimes he just falls over, like his legs can't support him anymore. Usually he gets up within a few minutes after he catches his breath. This morning, he doesn't get up. I don't think he can. There's something wrong with his eyes. They don't look at me. They don't seem to see anything. It scares me.

I call out for Mommy and Daddy. I don't know what to do. My voice is too small to be heard, I worry, but they come into the room in a few moments. Upon seeing Gus, they start to look worried. "Go to your room for a bit, Orlo," Mommy says.

I don't understand. "Why? Gus needs help! I want to be here, with him."

"Go to your room," Daddy repeats. I still don't get it, but I do what they say.

They call me back out a few minutes later. Gus is gone. There is an empty space on the carpet. Mommy and Daddy are standing there, waiting for me.

"Where's Gus?" I ask. Mommy's eyes are pointed down. Daddy's are looking right at me. Their faces are not quite empty, for once. There is a twinge of regret. It makes my stomach lurch.

"Gus is... dead," Daddy says. His voice is as gentle as it can get, which isn't saying very much—it's still gruff. I gaze up at him. "What?"

"The dog. He's dead, Orlo," Daddy repeats. "He's gone."

"Well, when will he be back?" My high, impatient voice against Daddy's deep, slow one is like a bell ringing in the silence left after a coal train goes by.

Daddy moves his gaze away so that he and Mommy are both staring at their feet. "He... won't be back."

"Why not?"

"Dead things are gone forever. Simple as that."

"But..."

I sit down on the floor, where Gus was only a few moments ago. My parents shuffle out of the room. They each give me a half-hearted pat on the shoulder on their way out. I barely notice.

I don't understand. Gus has been here all my life. Now he's just gone? I don't believe it. He will be back, I'm sure. I turn to the window. My friends wave hello.

"Have you seen Gus? I can't find him," I shout through the glass. They don't seem to be able to hear me. All they do is look at me, confused. I grate my teeth together in frustration. If only I could go outside. Then we'd all be able to work together to find Gus.

That night, I lay in my bundle of blankets on the floor, waiting for Gus to sit down next to me. He doesn't come into my room. Tears gather up behind my eyes. The floor is uncomfortable. I'm not willing to give up on Gus. I toss and turn and finally fall asleep, alone.

The day after Gus's disappearance resembles the days before I made friends with him, when he was just a smelly old creature to me. I wander through the house, gazing out of the windows, watching my friends play. Greta is asleep in the snow while Starlight and Dandy try to pile as many twigs as possible on top of her before she notices and wakes up. I smile. It's a game I remember playing. I wish I was out there with them. I don't think they notice me at the window.

I miss Gus. He was my only friend inside of this house. I spend a few minutes looking for him. Sometimes, in the summer, he would nap in his old worn bed in the basement. I go down there and all I find in his sleeping place are cobwebs.

In the next night's dream, I am walking into my living room. A small pale brown animal sits on the carpet. "Dandy, you silly," I chide. "You're not supposed to be in here! You can stay, though," I add in a whisper. "I won't tell my parents."

Dandy does not respond. She's oddly still. I kneel down and see that her eyes aren't bright like usual. They stare straight forward at nothing. It's the same look as the one that was on Gus's face. I shudder. "Dandy?"

I reach out to touch her, but before my hand can get to her, she is gone. The living room is empty except for me. My eyes fly open, my heart pounding. I realize my face is wet with tears.

I'm still on the floor of my room. I leap up to look out of the window. I see Greta and Starlight. They stand next to each other, their heads close, as if they are whispering about something. I don't see Dandy anywhere. The three of them always stick together. My stomach twists into a knot of dread.

I hurry to check every window, but Dandy is nowhere to be found. I huddle on the couch and try not to panic. Then a thought occurs to me. "Of course!" I remark aloud. "She went to find Gus!"

The thought reassures me. Both Dandy and Gus will be back soon, I'm sure. But why did they both have that look in their eyes? What happened to them?

I push the thought to the back of my mind. All I can do is wait for them to get back. I wish I could tell Greta and Starlight that Dandy's alright; they looked worried about her.

I have another dream. It's the same as the night before, but with Starlight. She is crumpled on the living room floor. Her feathers are messy, her eyes glazed. My heart sinks. Once more, I reach out to hold her, and she vanishes.

I wake more slowly this time. There's something heavy in my chest as I walk to the window. I know what I'll find. My fears are confirmed; I see Greta sitting alone. Her head is bowed. Her tail does not wag back and forth. Despair batters at me. I sink to the floor.

Gus has not come back. Dandy has not come back. Starlight has met the same fate as them. They are dead, as Daddy said. He was right. They aren't going to be back. Greta knows it too, I can tell.

I spend the rest of the day looking at Greta through the window. She looks back at me, her ears drooping. I am aching on the inside. I want to be out of this house. But what's the point? All of my friends are disappearing. Dying. The word makes me feel like ice. I've had enough of ice. And snow, and cold.

I hate winter, I decide.

In my next dream, I am not in the living room. It's somewhere sunsoaked. I don't recognize it. There's not enough trees for it to be the yard. It's a meadow. Little flowers dot the grass. A big black animal lies motionless a few steps away from me. Even in the dream, I feel tears pour from my eyes.

I sit down in the grass next to Greta. She lifts her head. Her eyes are not blank like the others' were. There is still life in them, as much as ever. My breath catches in my throat. Cautiously, I reach out to her. My hands come to rest on her neck.

I scoot closer. Tears drip down onto her head. She doesn't seem to mind, and gives my face a gentle nudge with her nose. The sky's the bluest I've ever seen. This is a warm dream, like the tea party. Everything is filled with light.

"I don't ever want to go back to that house, Greta," I say through my tears. "I want to be here forever."

I know I can't. Greta's tail is slowly ceasing to wag. Her breathing is growing shallow. We are running out of time. I wrap my arms around her. "I won't forget you, okay?" My voice is shaking. I can't stop it. "And-and wherever you end up... I hope you don't forget me, either."

Then she is gone, along with the rest.

I am left in that shining field for just a moment. I stand up shakily. All is silent. The grass and the flowers seem to go on forever. I'm wondering if I'm alone when the quiet is broken by the far-off cry of a bird. The noise is followed by the yelp of a guinea pig, and then the barking of two dogs, and after that, a cacophony of animals I've never even seen. My face breaks into a smile.

“Orlo! Do you wanna take Dot for a walk?”

I pause my writing, set my laptop aside, and pull myself up off of the couch. “Sure thing. Do you want to come?”

Mom shakes her head. “Thank you for the offer, but I have some work to finish up on. Oh--don’t forget the bags, in case she goes potty!”

“I’ve learned my lesson about forgetting the bags, don’t worry,” I laugh. I attach the leash to Dot’s collar. It’s difficult--she’s yapping and wiggling like she’s trying to leap out of her skin--but I manage it. Gently, I tug the leash to get her to follow me out of the front door, and we set off into the yard.

Sunlight is everywhere. Though the big maple in front of the house got cut down last year, there are still plenty of trees around to fracture the light, splitting it into golden rays. The air is wonderfully warm. Even with Dot’s shrill barks, I can hear birdsong from every direction. *It’s summer, all right*, I think, stopping momentarily to stand in a patch of sun, soaking it in.

It’s been three and a half years since that horribly long winter. Mom and Dad got divorced. It really wasn’t much of an ordeal; papers were signed and that was pretty much that. Maybe it’s a sad thing to say, but I can’t really remember a time when they actually seemed to love each other. The split was for the best.

I’ve grown up a bit over these past few years, or at least I hope I have. My friends aren’t so imaginary anymore, but I still like to imagine things. I like to write. I first started writing just to commemorate my old friends. It can be safely said that I have them to thank for my stories. I hope I’ll find my way back to them someday. Until then, I’ll keep them in my memory, even if I can’t see them anymore. After all, are they really, truly dead, if my mind continues to harbor them?

Big gray ears
Wrinkled with years
Sunburnt but relieved
Big gray ears swinging
As you sway
Each step taking you
Further away
My how many miles
Have they taken you
Do they inflate with the wind
Picking you up to fly
Flapping ferociously
Filled with filth air?
Those big gray ears
Do they swing with fear?

– *Annabelle Buyck*

An Eventful Meeting

by Madeline Dillon

It went a little something like this, okay?

All I wanted was a normal night; all I wanted was to drive home and curl up on my sofa for another binge of mindless sitcoms. I never get what I want, I suppose, because apparently these two douchebags thought it was a good idea to occupy the entire fucking road. What absolute geniuses they were, let me tell you. So- here I am, stepping out of my car, grabbing my knife because who knows what kind of shit these dudes could pull. There's two trucks, by the way, one black and one red. The owner of the red, I guess, comes creeping around the side of his truck with a flashlight, shining it in my eyes like he's a fucking cop, okay? I ask him what his deal is and he scratches his head, pushing up some stupid beer-branded cap and then rubbing his neckbeard and I'm here like "okay bro, hurry up tell me the news."

This guy grumbles out, "You in a rush or somethin', man? Seen any deer?"

"Course I've seen a deer," I reply, probably sounding like a total asshole because duh, it's the middle of the woods, of course I've seen deer. They're everywhere- like rats in a sewer, but that's besides the point. He looks like he's about to say something else when there's this really girly scream in the woods and beer hat guy looks all alarmed then whips a massive fucking knife out of his ass pocket.

"It ain't happen to be bloody?" he says all gravely, looking me dead in the eyes with some like- tired, bloodshot eyes. He's acting like it's Jurassic Park and a pin just unexpectedly opened, that's what this guy was like. Anyway, anyway, so I kinda look at him like this- y'know- cause I have no idea what the hell he's talking about but I'm really starting to feel like I should. It's not everyday you have to stop at midnight on some random ass road because of a supposedly bloody deer.

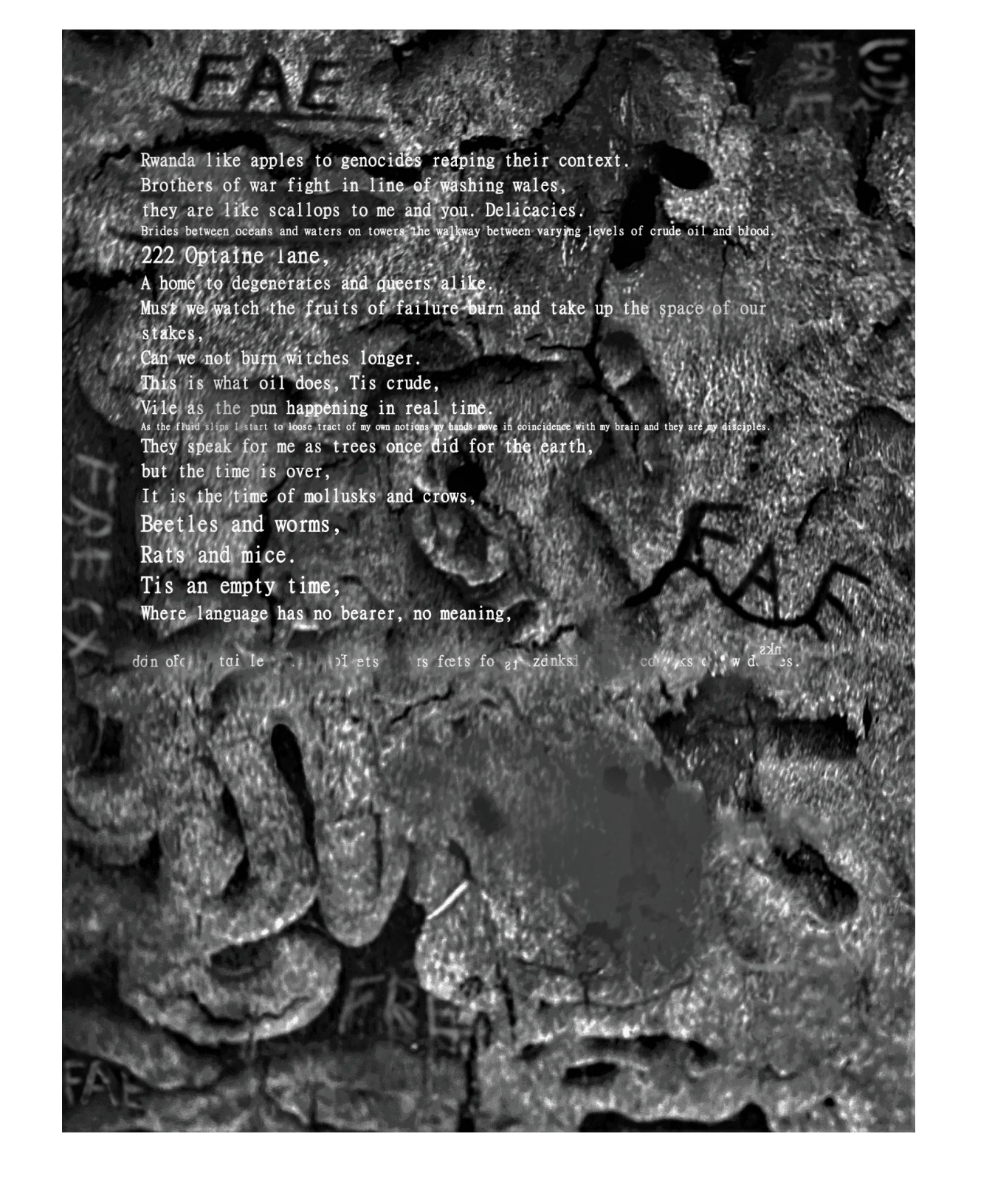
So the beer cap dude mutters something like "shit" and then goes tumbling into the woods all awkward like because he's got a light in one hand and a knife in the other. Their

god damn trucks are still in the road so I can't really go anywhere and at this point it's obvious I won't catch my shows so I go tumbling after him with my stupid tiny key light and work shoes on, y'know, wanting something interesting. I try to stick close cause camping ain't really been my thing in a while when this Jeff guy starts screaming louder and it's- gurgly- like there's something in his throat. I try to laugh it off, but I'm not laughing. There's this kinda freezing fear feeling now and I don't wanna turn back, so I stick with beer cap dude because hell no I'm not walking in these woods alone.

We turn the corner- beer cap is slashing through the shrubbery with his big boy knife and I'm back here still worshipping my keys. Maybe I'd be insecure about the jingling if not for the fact my ears were ringing at this point. Beer cap stops in his tracks and I'm thinking "oh fuck, what did he see" because beer cap hasn't stopped yet. Then I see it. There's this gaunt face staring at us with lifeless, bulging eyes. His mouth is gapped open, revealing a bunch of broken ass teeth and something that looks like tobacco leaking out of his jaw. It was dark- darkest shit I've ever seen. He's wearing nothing but a deer skin, peeling away from his own flesh. No. His own flesh was peeling away- there were human muscles with the animal's and everything was just- I don't know, dude. The antlers were sticking out of his head, too, and I swore I could've pulled his head off; it was hangin' on so poorly.

So- me and beer cap book it, he mistakenly drops his flashlight so we're running with nothing but my sad little key light. There's a groan. I don't know how to describe it- like- a zombie but everywhere at once. Like an ethereal zombie that came from an opera singer or something. We see the street, beer cap dude trips and accidentally stabs himself in the arm but gets back up like a fucking trooper. We both cram into his truck because my poor car is still trapped because of some good old fashioned dumb assery. I drive because of BC's arm and we don't ask questions. My dad used to have a truck like his, y'know.

After about half an hour of panicked driving, BC starts crying and tells me his name is Andy. I wonder if that was the actual deer or if it had run somewhere else and some sick fuck just decided Jeff would make a fine art piece. Anyway- I got my car back from the cops a couple months later and yeah- That's how me and Andy became friends.



Rwanda like apples to genocides reaping their context.
Brothers of war fight in line of washing wales,
they are like scallops to me and you. Delicacies.
Bridges between oceans and waters on towers the walkway between varying levels of crude oil and blood.
222 Optaine lane,
A home to degenerates and queers alike.
Must we watch the fruits of failure burn and take up the space of our
stakes,
Can we not burn witches longer.
This is what oil does, Tis crude,
Vile as the pun happening in real time.
As the fluid slips I start to loose tract of my own notions my hands move in coincidence with my brain and they are my disciples.
They speak for me as trees once did for the earth,
but the time is over,
It is the time of mollusks and crows,
Beetles and worms,
Rats and mice.
Tis an empty time,
Where language has no bearer, no meaning,

dón ofc tui le . . . pl ets rs fets fo zj zánkst . . . cō wks c w d . . . es.

Age of Revolution
or
How My Birthday got Ruined
by Oliver Herron

With so much going on, my life has become filled with stress. A revolution is upon us to gain freedom from our current corrupt government. Pancho Villa is going to take action any day. I used to be a wealthy landowner, but two years ago, in 1914, I sold it all to fund my revolutionary army, and for what? I've worked so hard to only command untrained banditos who are yet to be soldiers. I build up troops and weapons to fight alongside Pancho Villa, so why is he the only one who gets to be called the hero of this revolution? It's probably because my men are unmotivated. All they do is pillage and drink.

I want to bring them into town to watch one of those moving pictures my cousin told me about. There was one I've heard of where three wealthy Spanish landowners fight for the rights of peasants. That one would surely empower them, but there is no way that'll happen now. There's no hotel in the town so we would've stayed in my cousin's cantina, Cantina del Borracho, but he's moving now because the town is getting too rough for him. Oh well, we should have news from the Germans about when the Americans are coming soon, and they said they'd bring guns. Even if that doesn't go well, I still have my camera to document everything. Oh, and my birthday is in a few days, too!

Three of my banditos run up and started yelling at me. "Señor! Señor! We rode into Santopoco to get more tequila and these three gringos ran out and started dancing around!" They get so excited over small things, but maybe this is something serious. Are the Americans here already? I ask what else happened.

"They mounted their horses and started shooting their pistolas into the air! They called us 'scum sucking pigs!' Us! What should we do, Señor?" I give the gringos some creativity with the line 'scum sucking pigs', but they are Americans and we must exterminate them from this village.

“Tomorrow, I’ll take 15 of my men, ride to Santapoco, and deal with these bastardly men!” Maybe this will be my men’s first true fight, and it’ll help harden them for battles yet to come.

It’s the next day and we’ve just arrived in Santopoco. Three men ride out to meet us. Americans, dressed in black clothing with white stripes down the side, red bands around their waist, and large black sombreros. This must be what Yankees think Mexican war heroes wear. One of them whispers some nonsense to me, “it’s a pleasure working with you.” I can tell by his face he’s never looked death in the eye. “Well, you dirt eating slime, you scum sucking pig, you son of a motherless goat!” the man yells before he and his amigos ride their horses in circles, shooting their bullets into the air as if to scare me. I must admit they are quite amusing, but not worth wasting precious ammunition to kill.

I tell Jefe to just kill one of them. He misses and shoots him in the shoulder, knocking the Yankee off his horse. It appears to be just a flesh wound. They dismount and check on their man. Now I know these men are not the fighting type. The bleeding Gringo comes up to Jefe and starts telling him off like a child for having real bullets. What did he expect us to try to kill him with? He walks back to his other men and they all start crying. These are not men, they are children, weeping like little girls. They start wailing about how they’re some sort of performers. Movie stars they call themselves. I only kill real fighting men, not these gringos. I scare them off by shooting at the ground behind them as they flee. I should have brought my camera so I could capture their scared faces.

In my peripheral vision, there is a beautiful woman, a gorgeous rose blooming in this dry desert. She will make a wonderful wife to have a handsome heir with, who will take over when I’m gone. She starts to run but I chase after her, grab her around the waste, pull her onto my horse, and away we ride. This town is no longer my concern. If they wish to side with the Americans then they side with Spain and will fall with them as well.

A blood red sun rises, setting a perfect scene for my birthday. I wonder if I could ever get my hands on one of those expensive cameras that can capture color. I would hope that my men got me one for my birthday... but we do not have the funds for such luxuries.

Jefe walks out onto the veranda and watches the sky with me. “Señor, do you think that the male German plane will come today?”

I ask if he means the German mail plane.

“What’s the difference, Señor?”

“Well one has... nevermind.” There’s no point trying to explain.

It is now the afternoon. Jefe has been helping with preparation for my party all day. I ask if I have a plethora of piñatas and he agrees, though it’s obvious he doesn’t know what plethora means. I yell at him for trying to use words he does not understand.

“Forgive me señor, I do not have your level of intellect and education. But could it be that you are angry at something else and looking to take it out on me? Perhaps because you are turning forty today or that your woman refuses to sleep in your room with you?” I have to admit, though Jefe is not the brightest and doesn’t know many larger words, he does know me well.

Ah, here’s the German’s plane flying overhead now, right on time. We must make him feel welcome.

After the German pilot exits his plane, he gives word that the Americans are going to attack soon, but don’t plan on sending any men this far south.. Who were those three men in Santopoco then? They didn’t look like any sort of soldiers so maybe they were spies? The German says the guns should be here any minute. I’m starting to get anxious. We need those guns to be better prepared for battle. We have little ammunition left and we must be more careful now if there may be spies among us.

Two more German men ride in with a cart full of crates. These must be the guns. One of my men opens a box and there they are. Beautiful walnut wood and steel Gewehr 98 Rifles made by Mauser, straight from Germany. The German pilot hands me one he has just loaded. Of course I want to try these out, but I don’t want to waste any valuable bullets so I fire one shot at a hat one of my men is holding up. I fire a perfect shot, hitting him directly in the center of his forehead. I was planning to have him executed anyways, for I suspected him as a spy since I didn’t even know his name. These guns will be perfect for killing men from long range. The Germans shall be guests of honor at my party. But first, I get one of my men to bring my camera out to take a picture of this moment.

Now that all the guns have been passed out and pictures were taken, it’s time to party! Although Jefe may have not known what plethora means, he was right when saying I had a plethora of piñatas. All kinds in all different colors are raised over our heads. Though I’d rather

not be wasting ammunition on pointless shooting, we all can't help but to fire a few shots at the piñatas and try to break them open.

Jefe points out one of the piñatas he made himself. It's a blue donkey with a red and white blanket on its back. Blue, my favorite color. It does look quite good. Maybe I should take a picture of me and Jefe with it.. Right at that moment one of the gringos swings down from a rope face first into the dirt. My men rush over and grab him. How the hell did he get in here?! Why is he here? He doesn't belong here or anywhere else in Mexico. He gets up and starts shouting some nonsense demands at me about leaving Santopoco alone, that I distribute land equally, and establish some Yankee government system. I send him off to be chained up in a cell so I can deal with him later. For now, it's party time.

My men may not know how to fight very well, but they do know how to party, and the band is quite exceptional too. Finally, I can dance and drink and not have to worry about my men or the revolution for a moment.

After dancing for a while we all tire out and it's time to eat. About half way into the meal Jefe fires a shot into the air to get everyone's attention. He gives a short speech then hands me a gift wrapped in old newspapers. It's a sweater! Out of all the things I could've wanted when living in this dry, hot desert, a sweater was the one thing I truly wanted. This shows that my men really do care and can work together. I must go around and thank them.

I've had such great adventures with all of my men - except this taller, pale one I do not recognize. What is he talking about? We never pruned the hedges of many small villages... It's another one of those gringos! What is going on today? Are they falling from the sky?

As if Dios himself heard my thoughts, or like the steadily moving plot of a short story based off of a moving picture directed by Harry Flugelman, the last of the gringos fell onto a table. I order him to be taken away but the German stops them.

"I know who this man is! It is Ned Nederlander!" He yells. He goes on talking to the gringo about how he is his favorite star and inspired him to become the best at quick draw. Then, he challenges him to a duel to the death. This should make for some good entertainment for my party. It would also be good to make the other gringo watch his friend die so he knows who he is dealing with. It would also be good to give him a gun that is too heavy for his weak arms to lift, so there is no way he could win. Jefe gives him his gun. It'll do the job well.

BANG! A shot rings out. The German falls to the ground. The little Ned man won! How the hell could he have won?! Gunshots ring out from behind me. The man who I had locked up has escaped and is shooting at my men! I've had enough of these yankees. That's it, I'm going to kill them, starting with the one who pretended to be one of my men.

“Not so fast, El Guapo! Or I’ll fill you so full of lead you’ll be using your dick for a pencil!” What does that even mean? It doesn’t matter. One of the gringos has his gun aimed at me. I turn and another has me in his sights as well. They order my men to drop their guns and lay on the ground and they do. The men open the gates and ride away on horseback, taking my woman with them.

“Kill them!!” I yell to my men and we all start firing our guns after them. They must be going back to Santopoco. We must chase after them and kill them once and for all. We all mount our horses and ride after them.

What in the- Now they’re flying in the German’s plane?! It doesn’t seem like they can fly very well. It keeps suddenly dipping down and almost hitting the ground, then wobbly coming back up. Hopefully they just crash... or this is their way of getting to Santopoco faster so they can use the people against us?! We have to hurry!

Finally, we’ve made it to Santopoco. It looks deserted. The Americans must be too scared to face their deaths like real men. No-wait, there they are! Firing at us from the top of that house! Now they’re in the window of the other house! Now they’re behind us?! What is happening, how are they moving so fast?? They’re everywhere! All of my men are dying or fleeing!! Such traitors are my men to leave me to fend for myself.

“I’m still here, Señor!” Jefe calls out, but those are the final words that shall ever leave his mouth, for he falls to the ground with a bullet wound in his chest.

I hear another gunshot fire and my horse falls to the ground, throwing me off. I pick myself up off the ground and suddenly there’s a sharp pain in my chest. I can feel a warm, wet substance seeping through my shirt. Why am I falling? I-I’ve been shot?? I can’t die, the revolution has barely even begun! At least the men who kill me are finally coming out to face me like real men. Wait-why are there so many people? So that’s how they were everywhere! The villagers wore similar clothes to them, black clothing with white stripes down the side and large, black sombreros and red bands around their waists. That’s how they tricked us. I have to give these Americans credit for this good trick, but I must have my revenge for killing Jefe, my men, ruining my chances to become a revolutionary hero, and ruining my birthday. I shoot one of the men in the foot, one last shot for the revolution.

“That was a good trick too, eh?” As I close my eyes and take a final breath, I can no longer feel the warm embrace of my sweater. I must’ve lost it during the battle. Maybe there will be another for me in the afterlife.

Three Variations

by Emma Sipes

Classic Narrative- Western Style

The long, desolate frontier road spreads out before me as the headlights of my car illuminate the torrent of dust kicked up under the wheels. My fingers tap impatiently on the wheel, knowin' that I was half the hour short of missing *The Andy Griffith Show*, which I had made a habit of watching.

My hat flies forward onto the wheel as I slam my foot on the brakes, stopping just a rabbit's foot away from the dim tail lights of two rusty trucks. "BLITHERIN' BANSHEE!" I cry in surprise before slamming the door open and stalking over to the nearest vehicle, a rusty red truck, and banging my fist on the window, "Just what do ya think yer doing blockin' the road ya rascal! I almost blew my head off tryna slow down!!!" I spit in anger. The window of the truck rolls down and the slightly bored expression of a young woman appears out the window. "Mighty sorry for the inconvenience sir, ya see the owner of that other truck over there hit one of them deer that're always wonderin' round these parts and I was just helpin' this young man get himself sorted," she explained in a clear, smooth tone.

My head swivels around to glance at the black truck behind me and I see the young man in the driver seat of the black truck giving me a sheepish look before turning back to the woman, "Ah, I uh, I'm mighty sorry 'bout that miss, it's nice of ya to help this poor fella'. If you don't mind movin' your car a couple of feet over I'll be out of yer hair." The woman nods curtly before taking the wheel and steering to the side while I step back into my own truck.

As I continue the long drive home, I find myself wonderin' how that little deer was faring out there, all alone on the vast prairie.

Unresolved/ Foreboding

The low thrum of a car engine cuts through the blackness as the thick fog outside swirls, illuminated by the headlights of a car. From inside, the tense face of a woman can be seen outlined against the window, her mind focused on the winding streets that lead to her abode, where she will at last be allowed rest and the quiet entertainment of her favorite pastimes.

All at once, the shrill screech of tires against concrete breaks through the silence as the car comes to a halt, stilling but a second away from certain doom. The woman's wide, scared eyes glance around in shock, settling on the looming form of one, no two, trucks lying across the road. Shaking in the aftermath of her fright, but with an agitated expression upon her features, the woman's small form moves silently to the truck's side and peers inside, her eyes narrowing as she attempts to make out the contents. She jumps as the window slowly descends, revealing the rough, sharp features of a man from the depths of the vehicle. Mustering all of her courage, the young woman stands tall and speaks in a stern, clear voice, "You must know that your vehicle has nearly killed me sir. I should hope you are aware that the blocking of roads is against the law?"

The man leaned out the window, his features cloaked in shadow before replying, "My apologies miss, you see I was simply helping that young man over there," he points behind the woman to the second, blood red truck before continuing, "it seems his truck stuck a deer in the woods. Foolish creatures they are, deer, weak little things running where they shouldn't."

The woman shivered, frightened by the threatening tone of the man's speech. "Indeed... well if you don't mind moving your truck, sir, I will be on my way."

The man's mouth grew into a wide, unnerving smile, "But of course, stay safe out there." he answered. The truck grinded to a start and the wheels slowly started turning, the man's grinning smile never once faltering. The woman slowly backed away to her car, not daring to turn her back on the threatening man. Once she reached her car, she stepped inside and locked the doors as quickly as her shaking fingers would allow and sped off down the winding, forested road. She wondered where this deer was now, if it would be able to escape the looming dangers of the world.

Vague/Poetic

Wheels moving across the worn dirt road, thoughts only of a classic, quiet night engulfed in the comforts of television filling the mind. Suddenly! The screech of brakes, the halt of thoughts. Hopes dashed by two obstructing trucks, *why today?* Is the cry of the mind. An irritated tone, the knock of skin against metal, and the irritated mutterings of the afflicted man and a dutiful citizen. A horned creature has been struck upon this rusty contraption. The calming of nerves and the exchange of apologies. "Might you leave, so that I may have my wish of peace?" Comes the call of the afflicted man. At last! Meaningless thoughts have resumed with the thrum of an engine. But is the man the only afflicted party? That horned creature, where are you now?

The Wanderer

I thrum thrum thrum but I can't hum.
Like I keep walking into glass.
Instead of golden soup, I am filled with smug smog.
I am the picker of the plucked fruits.
Like the grouchy pricked goose feathers
We enfuse into our sleeping heads.

I wish to float but am trapped in a bubble
Of infinite hollows but definite entrapment.
I saw and skip and chip, until I see no rips.

Instead, I float into a mind of a wanderer.
Of fields of brown and decaying bogs.
Who moan like wolves who forgot to howl.
I sleep inside the new man's bubble.
And gallop among his stars.

– *Satya McCarthy-Rotella*

(TW: abuse, gore, implied mental illness, murder)

Of Darkness

by Madeline Dillon

I peered at the ceiling. It was dark. Darkness bled from the shadows, darkness swallowed the walls. Darkness made the floor squelch beneath my feet as I stood from the iron slab. It was my bed, rusted like bicycles, rusted from water. Darkness was trying to eat that, too. I wondered if I could eat the darkness.

I bent down, the darkness in my hands. The darkness was fuzzy and gross. It sloshed around and drooped like a weeping willow. I hadn't seen such a tree since then. Then? When was then? I couldn't recall.

There was a whisper. I could hear it echo through the walls. It sounded obscure- distant. It sounded like static from my grandmother's radio. What was her name? The darkness crept up my arm, uncomfortable- mushy. I wanted to peel it away but the slime stuck like glue. I used to wonder if I could eat glue, too.

The whisper grew louder, a singing voice with no rhythm. One two- One and two- One two three four- And one two- I swallowed the darkness. It caught in my teeth and down my throat, blocking the air and making me gag. The song turned to a scream, the words reverberating around me as it sang:

“An’ the ol’ wish-washer goes creepin fo’ me!

An’ sorrow’s just la-ha-laughin’ at ye!

What a day when the sun ain’t fun!

When night comes an y’ain’t got guns-”

I reached my claws back down my throat, tearing at the darkness with no regard for the warmth bubbling beneath my fingers. I pulled it out in a muddy ball of dark and darkening red. In my head, I could hear whispers louder than the scream-song. With each word, I spat more red into the darkness. It hurt.

“She was a pretty little thing, oh hun!

Never had a worry so she ain’t got guns!

Gave em all a laugh an’ had t’ run!

Pretty little thing but she ain’t got guns!”

There was a loud bang. It shook the stones, made the darkness spin. It left a ringing in my ears, a ringing which grew louder than the howl in the void. It made me cry; one blistering tear falling into the red and the darkness. I remembered that the red was called blood. The blood was nothing new. The blood swarmed around the bed- my bed. Only my bed.

Then there was silence. Then there were footsteps. Then there was silence. Then there were footsteps. They approached slowly. They sloshed through the darkness. They felt the fuzz on the wall. They ate away the peace. Could they eat the darkness, too?

-+++-

A light reflected off my cheek, infiltrating the little cocoon I had made with Winona's blanket. She was all I had ever known when it came to idols; when it came to *adults*. She was beautiful, with hands that remained steady despite her age. When I was younger she used to braid my hair tight enough that I'd tear up. Sometimes I'd hang onto my long braids and thwack Tam's back with them. Tam was my younger sibling.

As I reluctantly peeked from my nest, I saw Tam hanging over me with a frantic look in their eyes. They made a shushing gesture, the angle of their flashlight making them look hollow-like a corpse. I sat up with much less reluctance, shimmying out of my blankets and following Tam to the door. I could hear voices outside. I silently twisted the knob, the words becoming clearer- muffled, but clear enough that we could understand what was being said. Tam turned off the light, holding onto my hand, fingers twined together.

"Mom-"

"You- You break everything that comes into your life. You broke him and you're going to break her like you're breaking me!"

"I never even wanted her t' begin with!"

"You shatter merchandise and you pay for it, son."

"It was already broke-"

"Because you said it was! She can't help the way she thinks and you're not making her think any better- You know she does her best to please you, son, why can't you appreciate something beautiful?"

"Because there ain't anythin' beautiful. That girl left cause a her, y'know. We had a good thing goin' an' then her damn face-"

"She left because of you, Anthony!"

"I thought I told you to QUIT SAYIN' MY FUCKIN' NAME!"

I knew what was coming. I reached to cover Tam's ears but it was too late. I know they heard. Then came the sound of dishes clattering to the floor with what could've been a corpse. Nobody could ever guess how hard the big man was gonna hit- how hard the monster was going to bite. Then I heard the steps.

I led Tam back over to our bed, rushing. We quickly cuddled up under the blankets and closed our eyes, the flashlight stuffed between our hard mattress and the wall. It didn't help. He slammed the door all the way open, causing Tam to jump in my grip. The monster came over, ripping us apart and snatching me from the bed. He unstrung my spirit with his piercing grey eyes- eyes that reflected hellfire. He clawed away my fortress and rifled through my thoughts, searching for the people within. I didn't even have to guess what *he* was thinking.

-+++-

Tam spat another wad into their hand, spreading the gum overtop of countless ant corpses from an unfortunate colony. The other kids ran by, gathering in a small, kicking circle as they danced along to the beat of a tambourine. Winona sat on a picnic cloth next to us, caught up in knitting. It looked like she was making a blanket.

I sat down next to Winona, brushing my bangs away from my face. A toddler happened to be looking over, immediately sobbing as I stuck my tongue out at their stupid little face. Winona rubbed my shoulder and pointed at the woman playing tambourine. She kept a perfect rhythm like Winona and looked like Tam, but I looked like nobody.

"Do you know who that is?"

I shook my head, leaning against Winona with a small frown. She didn't seem to mind my ignorance, however.

"Her name is Mandy," Winona stated calmly, running a hand through my loose hair, "She's your mother, don't you recall?"

I peered at the Mandy again, scrunching up my face. She was sitting next to the big man, occasionally casting a torn glance in his direction as he began to sing; his fingers hitting the banjo with little to no grace whatsoever. His song went a little something like this:

"Singers an' saints, oh the people we hate!

Cuttin' out the 'g' an goin' on a date!

Couple a fools with their strings drawn tight!

Hangin' on threads 'til the end a the night!"

Maybe I remembered Mandy. At least, I remembered her voice. She was never one to sing much, but she used to howl before she was stolen from us. She would howl like a demon as tears spilled down her face, as her shoulders quaked and she held Tam like they were an angel. Tam would always be an angel compared to me.

I think, I replied, my hand slicing through the air with the shortness of the response. Winona said nothing, just hugged me close as the next verse came:

*“An’ the ol’ wish-washer goes creepin fo’ me!
An’ sorrow’s just la-ha-laughin’ at ye!
What a day when the sun ain’t fun!
When night comes an y’ain’t got guns-”*

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Tam’s gum sat on the table, packs torn open, wrappers stacked like my playing cards- bent and broken, toppling over. I looked down at the china shattered across the floor. Broken, sad flowers; peaches and cranberries; carefully painted slices of nature, all destroyed- life destroyed. Winona’s hand lay next to the glass with blood dried beneath it. Her skin was blue, cold, and torn. Torn like the gum package. The big man had finally hit her too hard. I leaned down, glass and porcelain stabbing into my knees as I lay across my idol. I could see her jaw from my place on her chest. It was knocked loose, her face bent just enough to make her look strange. She smelled like piss and iron.

Beneath my knees pooled darkness as I rolled over Winona, more shards splintering and slicing at my damaged flesh. The knife block had fallen with the cookies and salt, revealing shiny blades slowly slipping from the sheath. A sheath that couldn’t be plugged with gum. A gaping hole.

I fit my grip around the handle of the largest blade, and there was my reflection. I was forced to behold the darkness which swamped my face. The darkness which surrounded my hideous eye. My eye staring back from the left side of my head, planted above my squished nose. It was hardly a nose at all. My mouth- crooked- open as I heaved. It was a cavern, the gaping maw of a tired beast. My teeth were ugly and crooked- little nubs that were forced together by my sad jaw.

At that moment, I decided I would be the monster.

I saw him there on the couch. There was static on the radio. The darkness surrounded him. It seemed to spill from the bottle in his hand. I told Tam to leave. They slipped through the window. They left the darkness. They went to the void. Who knows what's in the void?

There was red on my legs. There was purple on my face. I held the knife over his face. It was pale, nauseated, asleep. It was cruel even in rest, brow furrowed, eyes closed. Eyes- closed. I forced the blade forwards, slicing through his eyelid. Red sprayed back into my face, around the darkness of my eye. He screamed, trying to stand and get away, swinging the bottle and smacking it into my ribs. It broke and began to stab, but his movement only made my weapon dig deeper. I yanked it out, a little split ball of white and red hanging onto the edge. It went in again on the other side. And again. And again. And again. Forty-seven times.

The red was everywhere. It was dark. I went through the window, my hand slipping on something wet and fuzzy. I slipped, landing in the brambles below. They clung to my red clothing, they dove for my braids. I was forced to tear them free.

I found Tam. They were under the trees. Their eyes were crying. My eye was the void.
Who knows what's in the void?

-+++-

The footsteps evaporated- the darkness slithering back as the sun peeked through the curtains. Encroaching on my space was a disgusting pile of moss and blood, which gurgled up from my throat as I coughed and spat out the last remnants of it. I curled up on the floor, clutching at my stomach as it surged and ached. I felt so stupid.

I opened my eye, peering up at the ceiling. The sun shone white across the plain canvas that patched a hole in the roof. There was a hand on my forehead- a small hand that used to cram gum into tree hollows until it looked bloated with dark, sticky paste. I always came out and counted the bugs that had gotten stuck after a new layer, sometimes leaning too close and getting my hair stuck in the mush. No wonder Winona wanted to braid it.

I looked up at Tam, telling this story as they patted my cheek to keep me focused. They smiled, revealing gaps left by baby teeth that never grew up, "*And here I was callin' ya forgetful, Mandy.*"

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“We’ve got a gripping story for you tonight, friends! A young woman was indicted for the murder of two folks: her grandmother Winona Fisher and brother Anthony Fisher. The culprit is none other than Miss Mandy Fisher- Oh.”

The newscasters flinched and looked away as a grotesque face filled the screen behind them, the woman seeming to restrain a gag before she returned to her script.

“Born mute, medical records say she suffered a severe head injury a few years back due to a highway collision. Brother Anthony Fisher was the driver of that car. Scary, what do you say, Dirk?”

“Agreed, Tiffany. Her testimony includes references to one Tam Fisher, although no proof of his or her existence can be found.”

The TV buzzed off and the news droned on.

Authoritarian

My government is quite authoritarian.
Like Stalin's was before.
They feed like twisted carrion,
Upon the profits of the wars.

I tell you this before they shove me in a van,
Unmarked like a kidnapper's plot.
And rather than an assault-style ban,
They opt to not pay mailmen what they aught.

They are not smart ones with many different doctorates,
Because they had all those taken away.
And on the graves, they verbally expectorate,
In which lie those who have been slain.

And as protesters are gunned down,
With those stopped at the lights,
They make themselves a bright gold crown,
And turn a blind eye to our plights.

My government is quite authoritarian
But all you have to know,
Is don't be a particularly racist Aryan,
And please o' please vote for the Joe.

– *Xan Whitt*

Bristol on Saturday Night

by Rowan Williams

“It’s been an entire 6 months since we last visited this track in Thunder Valley, but now, the annual NRAV Bass Pro Shopsv Bristol Night Race returns to the Foxv right now! Hello everyone and welcome to Beautiful Bristol, Tennessee, I’m Mike Joy along with my partners Jeff Gordon and Larry Mac. Now, I’m no writer hunting for drama, but tonight I have a feeling we’ll be getting the same experience a suburban mom feels every time Megan Markle does anything. as this race winds down, what do you expect to see tonight as a former driver, Jeff?”

“Well Mike, this track can really push your limits in terms of patience and really does a lot of damage to those tires. I expect a lot of teams, especially with NASCAR® letting you have an extra set of tires, really try to make stops and get a set of four fresh Goodyearsv . Your car gets beat up and I really am excited to see who is friendly with other drivers.”

“Now if our fans at home don’t remember what happened last time at Bristol, let us refresh you; Chase Elliot and Denny Hamlin were racing for the win, they ended up crashing on turn three and ultimately cost them both the checkered flag, instead Brad Keslowski went to victory lane that day. Let’s see what our former crew chief Larry McReynolds has to say about tonight's race.”

“Mike, you know I’ve had a lot of success with the teams I’ve run in my forty-year career and this track was by far one of the hardest to tame for any driver. I felt like I was back in my Texas ranch, herding cows, trying to control my driver from not wrecking the car we worked on all week. Let’s take a look at one of my thirty teensie monitors to get a better understanding of tonight's race and the track in my Subway™ Race Analysis. We’ll be going 500 laps for a total of 255 miles on this short track, expect a lot of drivers to start driving close to the bottom but moving to the top as a traction compound begins to heat up from the tires. I also expect major tire wear and a lot of drivers complaining about not being able to turn the front as well. Back to you, Mike.”

“Well, besides forgetting Jeff at the end, thank you for the analysis, let’s see the starting lineup: Starting in the front row will be Denny Hamlin on the bottom and Ryan Blaney up high, behind them in this order will be: Aric Almarola gets to start high for the first time this year, Clint

Bowyer accompanies him up front. Martin Truex Jr, Kurt Bucsh, Joey Logano, Jimmie Johnson, Kevin Harvick, Alex Bowman, Chase Elliot who is of course Nascar's most popular driver, Erik Jones, Austin Dillion and his very punchable face, Ty Dillion with a slightly less punchable face, Matt Dibennidedo in the historic Wood Brothers machine, Cole Custer, William Byron and the Rainbow Warrior Flames Special still searching for his first win, Tyler Reddick, John Hunter Neymacheck, Ryan Newman, Matt Kenseth, Ricky Stenhouse with the mullet he somehow has grown, Christopher Bell, Chris Buecher, Michael Mcdowell, Bubba Wallace, Daniel Suarez, and Kyle Bucsh will be at the rear for failing inspection due to an axle being one inch too big. Now, the drivers are going around following the pace car. Tonight's pace car is the 2020 Toyotav Supra with a whopping 375 horsepower, compared to the cars tonight that's about half the horsepower. The pace car is on the pitroad now and the drivers are speeding up in the Geicov restart zone. The green flag is out and we are off as they roar into the first turn! Jeff, what's catching your eye?"

"Mike, what I see immediately is a large part of the field going high for some reason as they began to shuffle in the back straight away, Hamlin is just ahead of the Blaney to start and we're seeing a bit of a jam on turn 3, Clint Bowyer is clearly off the pace of 120mph, looks like he may have an issue with his engine early."

"Jeff looks like we also have a problem with Truex, he and Bowyer are on two different teams but having the same engine issues after lap one. Now look at Kyle Busch! He started dead last but is now flying all the way up to the top ten, looks like he's running the bottom of the track far better."

"Mike that's because everyone went to the top of the race track, sometimes when you got a few people on the bottom, that's enough to take everyone on the top. I'm beginning to see an Oklahoma landrush of sorts happening behind our leaders, WOAH!

"It appears that the Bowyer 14 machine has turned into a heavy smoker and brought out the first yellow caution flag early on lap ten. The engine hasn't been taken care of since it was installed, it's been tortured and now is dying right before our eyes, lets go to break.

RIBLETS, RIBLETS, RIBLETS, APPLEBEES™ HAS RIBLETS, LET THEM FILL THE DEEP HOLE IN YOUR NOW DIVORCED HEART!

"We are back, nobody except Bowyer came to get tires and we are once again coming up on the Geicov restart zone. Here comes the avalanche spilling down in turn one as our leader Hamlin is taken over by Kurt Busch, Hamlin went to the bottom along with Blaney and Kurt just outgunned them on the straightaway. Jeff you seen like this?"

“Mike I’ve had this happen to me a lot, in 2006 Tony Stewart just blew by me on the top of the racetrack and I stood no chance. Now get a load of the back of the pack, I don’t know how this is possible but Daniel Suarez is about to be passed by Kurt Busch. Suarez has had a bad season and it looks like he’s about to continue that. Now let’s take a look at the middle of the pack, it appears we’re seeing a lot of gains from the Hendrick team of Elliot, Bowman, Johnson, and surprising young William Byron are all in the top ten.”

“Now let’s go to Larry, we’re about 29 laps in and drivers are gonna have to think about pitting?”

“You hit the nail right on the head Mike, if a yellow doesn’t come out by lap 45, I’d consider calling my driver in, getting four tires and fuel, sets me up for the win. If there is one race I’m gonna try to win, it would either be this or the Daytona 500. Back to you guys in the studio.”

“Looks like there is some debris on the track, a lot of spotters are just crying about it over the radios, it is a green toxic waste object, what in the world is that thing, oh it’s a mountain dew cowboy hat from one of the idiots in the stands. Caution comes out at a very odd time but the battle for pitroad begins. Let’s see how busy pitroad is, it is packed! Everyone is coming in for tires I’d imagine, fresh tires can really help your car gain speed. Larry what are you seeing right now?”

“Mike, the important thing to remember is that this track almost eats tires’ rubber and almost deconstructs them tread by tread before destroying them. I have to imagine many want four fresh Goodyears and Sunoco fuel.”

“Anddddddddddddddddddd, Ryan Blaney wins the race off pit road only taking 12 seconds for tires, being followed by the Busch brothers, Almarola, the Hendrick teammates lead by Johnson, and Hamlin round out our top ten off pitroad, let’s take a quick break.”

HEY FAT IDIOT, DID YOU SEE THAT APPLEBEES HAS THOSE RIBLETS YOU ATE WHEN YOU GOT DIVORCED? YEAH THEY HAVE MADE THEIR RETURN, COME ON DOWN AND THROW THEM DOWN JUST LIKE THE JUDGE DID WITH THE CUSTODY BATTLE.

“Welcome back to Thunder Valley on this picture perfect night. Not a cloud in the sky, but we have received word that there may be broadcast issues in the Great Lakes region, we hope you can continue to join us. On pitroad, Suarez had an airgun blowup causing an additional 20 seconds of pit time, and Ty Dillon got a speeding penalty, causing him to have to go to the back. Coming up on the Geico restart zone, just listen to those 8000 rpm vehicles roar with all the

Chase Elliot, Denny Hamlin, William Byron, Cole Custer, Jimmie Johnson, and Tyler Reddick. They are coming to the Geicov restart zone with great haste; the front row gets a huge push from the rest of the pack with the green flag out and we are off with 2 to go. Hamlin dives to the bottom of turn one and two and goes back to the top on the back straight away.”

“Mike, look at how Hamlin is just beating up Elliott's bumper, that's gonna make some noise on turns three and four, they are fighting like brothers do over the Richard Petty Action Figure. They finish with Byron and Reddick trying to get in front of each other as well. This is gonna be a heck of a finish that the fans stayed and waited for. Watch out, here come the rest of the Hendrick Cameros!”

“White flag comes out for the final lap. Elliot and Hamlin go to the bottom on turns one and two with Byron going top for some reason. Remember the next flag will end the race. Elliot goes to the top BUT HAMLIN GETS ON HIS SIDE, they touch side fenders, they are losing control, all over the place on the track, down to the bottom, back up to the top, and hard into the wall they go! Byron is now the leader in turns three and four being followed by Reddick. Byron needs to be careful as Reddick attempts to slingshot but Byron is too good at blocking that lower lane, the yellow and checkered flag comes out. William - Byron - Has - Won the running of the Bristol night race.”

“Huge win for that 24 car, can't wait to see this one million dollar vehicle turn into a twenty two passenger school bus as the crew comes out to celebrate!”

“Jeff! A fight has broken out between Denny Hamlin and Chase Elliot! Remember their last incident here in Bristol where Hamlin and Elliot wrecked, that must be adding so much into this fist fight. The emotions, they are angry, they know they have lost. Uh, you sure? Ok I'm being told by my producer only 5 people are watching so I need to wrap it up. Well after tonight, I think now is a good time to sign off, for all of us at Fox, thank you.”

I missed so much yet I'm satisfied, I don't know how to feel, all I think I need is sleep.

(TW: psychological abuse, implied physical abuse, mentioned Murder)

The Pathos Elegy

by Emma Sipes

“Who are you?”

...

“I said: Who. Are. You.”

I grimace as my father’s stern voice grows louder. It’s been three months since Abnormal A71 arrived at Darmonstro and her interrogation began. Despite this, the only thing we have been able to extract from the mysterious girl is that she has an affinity for the violin, information that my father had already known. It’s almost as if she doesn’t know herself enough to answer our inquiries. All she seems to do is stare blankly ahead, only returning to the present to play the violin she was given. Even when she does move, she plays strange, melancholy notes that seem to seep into your very soul, as if coaxing forth your innermost sorrows. It makes me wonder what in the world she did to land herself here, what lays beyond the minimal clearance I possess. After all, none of the subjects here are “normal.”

I am snapped out of my reverie by the sound of the steel door of the cell being swung open to reveal a corporal, one who’s name I can’t be bothered to remember. “Governor Frankland, Sir! My apologies for the interruption, but we have a situation in the R sector that requires your immediate attention,” the corporal rasps, panting loudly.

My father turns to give a harsh glare to the man before turning back to A71. “We will continue this later, and I fully expect you to answer my questions when I return. I believe I don’t have to remind you that we at Darmonstro don’t tolerate *disobedience*,” he sneers, giving her one last scathing look before rising from his seat and motioning for me to follow. I steal one last glance into the cell where the girl sits, motionless in the middle of the room, before catching my father’s glare and promptly continuing down the long stone corridor.

When we finally return from sector R, it is well past 14 hundred hours in the afternoon and father is truly at his wit's end. At the present moment, he is relentlessly pacing up and down the concrete box that is the director's office while I stand, invisible as ever, at the back of the room.

"Julius, when is my next meeting? I need it postponed," father says, pausing in his pacing to turn to me.

"16 hundred hours, sir. When would you like it moved to?" I reply swiftly.

"To be frank, *Julius*, I don't particularly care. I should hope that even *you* can manage such a task," Frankland snaps back at me, his dark eyes narrowing as his rough face morphs into a snarl.

I grimace internally, struggling to hold back a glare in return before taking a deep breath and answering, "Of course, sir. May I be excused in order to contact General Grosvenor?"

"Excuse me? How dare you suggest abandoning your post. You will reschedule the meeting after we retire to the manor."

I gawk at him momentarily, my anger threatening to come to a boil before regaining my composure, "O - of course, sir."

My father has been this way for as long as I can remember, always putting down those around him, jumping to humiliate anyone who so much as coughs when he was speaking. It's how he controls people, how he got to where he is today - the head of a top secret government organization. Yet he treats his own son worse than anyone else; how can he do this? Even when I voluntarily enlisted in the army, hoping to gain the slightest fraction of approval from him, he instead chose to focus on the fact that I hadn't trained before entering. Despite all of this, I'm still here, trying in vain to win the great Governor Frankland's approval. I stand in that corner of my father's office for the remainder of the day, occasionally accompanying him about the compound, watching him carry out important duties and longing to be a part of them. Yet, I don't have the ability to pity myself for very long seeing as every appointment the governor attends seems to make him more and more irritable, leaving me to pick up the terrible mess he left in his wake. By the end of the day, I find myself wishing to return to our family's old, ivy-covered manor house in the countryside where we have lived ever since I can remember.

By the time our carriage arrives at the winding dirt road to the manor, father seems nothing short of livid. The slightest bump of the carriage sets him off into a frenzy of shouting and complaints, all of which I ignore to the best of my ability, choosing to focus instead on the relief that being home would bring me. Unfortunately, instead of turning in for the night, for it is a little short of 20 hundred hours by the time we pull up to the front gate, my mother greets us at the front stoop and leads us into the dining room for supper.

I proceed to take my seat and begin the semi-cold meal while listening halfheartedly to my father's ramblings and endless complaints. As the platters of food begin to empty, my heart lifts in relief, knowing that the comforts of sleep are fast approaching. That is, until suddenly a little, insignificant thought pops into my head as my father transitions into reading out his busy schedule for the following day. It seems that he is quite overwhelmed at the prospect of the day's work and I got to thinking... Perhaps this is my chance.- my chance to finally rise up in the ranks and to win my father's approval by demonstrating to him just how much I can achieve. With a hopeful heart, I seize a break in the conversation and speak, "Excuse me for the interruption, father, but I couldn't help but notice that the - that your duties seem to be causing you some discomfort..." my father's eyes narrowed slightly and I took a nervous breath before continuing, "I just thought that - that perhaps I could provide some assistan-"

"INSOLENCE! First of all, you *will* address me as sir. Second, I will not have you, of all people, challenging *my* authority. I have been generous to you, *boy*, given you everything and this is how you repay me? Know this, you will *never* succeed without me. You listen to me boy! Watch. Your. Tongue," he spits, punctuating his words with a bang of his hand on the table. I gape at him in disbelief and shock while he pushes his chair back with a loud screech and sweeps from the room. Mother looks sympathetically at me but says nothing, not wanting to risk angering father more. Returning her look of apology, I slowly stand and walk stiffly up the stairs to my quarters.

As I sit before my window later that night, gazing up at the woven strands of stars in the expansive sky, I can't help but imagine what it would be like, to be so admired, to be so powerful. I have not seen my father since his outburst at supper and the anger and confusion I felt when my father ridiculed me, the anger which I fought for so many years to keep hidden within myself, the unwavering confusion as to why my father seems to hate me so, it is all reaching its breaking point. All I want to do is prove my father *wrong*, to stand up to him and *humiliate* him, just like he has done to me. My head spins, a swirling cyclone of emotion and turmoil until - everything comes to a stop, focusing on one little thought, one idea- My father refuses to allow me power?

Then I will simply take it for myself. All I have to do is get my hands on a case, *any* case at all, solve it, and claim my victory.

And so, I devise my plan, retiring to bed with a soft smile on my face knowing that I now have the strength to stand up to the great Governor Frankland of Darmonstro. All I need to do is set the wheels in motion.

I look worriedly up at the looming grey form of Darmonstro, at last feeling the immense weight of the task I have set upon myself. Glancing beside me, I see my father pointedly staring straight ahead of him at the black wall of the carriage, only glancing away when we reach the identification checkpoint. As we step through the towering steel gates of the compound, my father flashes a cold, warning glance in my direction and I shiver in fear despite myself. *I will not succumb to his treachery anymore, I will not let him manipulate me*, I tell myself as I settle into a rhythmic stride down the corridor. We turn corner after corner of the intricate maze of passages that make up Darmonstro, my nerves only growing with each echoing step. By the time we reach the office and I silently assume my station in the corner, I can barely keep my hands from shaking. Nevertheless, I stand my ground, the perfect embodiment of a trained soldier. Now all I have to do is wait for the shift change, which I know by heart, and infiltrate the archives.

A few short hours later, it's finally nearing time to put my plan into action. My eyes glance from side to side, watching the minute hand's slow revolution around the clock face while also keeping an eye on my father, who is currently immersed in a large stack of paperwork. Suddenly, my father lets loose a small sigh and turns his attention to me. With a stern, sobered expression he addresses me, "I must retire to the lounge for luncheon with the general. You will stay here and watch my belongings until I return. I expect that you will not abandon your post or else there will be... consequences."

I give a stiff nod of acknowledgement and a sharp "Yes, sir," in response before he rises from his seat and sweeps out the door. I give a small sigh of relief once he is safely out of earshot and, checking that the way is clear, I proceed through the door as well and head in the direction of the archives.

My familiarity of the building leads me straight to the grand, rounded door of my destination and, as I had expected, I find the entrance to be unguarded. After I make my way inside, I easily navigate to the Abnormal case files and then to the surprisingly thin folder that retains information on Abnormal A71, which was the first case that came to my mind. I slip the

file out of its place on the shelf and turn it over to reveal the cover, which read ‘*Classified*’ in deep red ink. Pointedly ignoring the warning, I open the file with shaking fingers and scan the contents.

Code Name: Abnormal A71

Birth Name: Mira Pietá Corshire

Date of Birth: 4/1/1735

Status: Active

Threat level: RED

Current Residence: Darmonstro Military Base [Deuerpoint, England]

Legal Guardians:

Corshire, Sondra [birth mother]

Corshire, Barton [birth father] DECEASED

Offenses: Involuntary manslaughter

Offense Description:

Following a string of abnormal occurrences, in which the defendant expressed knowledge of discrete or unmentioned information, the defendant utilized what appear to be abnormal cognitive abilities to inflict a fatal incision wound on the victim, Zalman von Aldi, during a concert starring the defendant. The weapon used to afflict the wound was discovered to be a violin bow, thrown at a high velocity. Later findings show that the victim had previously committed first degree murder on Barton Corshire [note: Barton Corshire had close ties with the defendant]

Prosecution Witnesses:

von Aldi, Christopher: PRIMARY WITNESS

Corshire, Sondra: legal guardian

Finlay, John

Layla, Marcie

Marlene, Phoebe

Jaci, Arlene

...

Defense Witnesses:

N/A

Cognitive Analysis Results:

Subject appears to have retreated into a state of subconsciousness following the death of Zalman von Aldi and shows no signs of response when prompted.

Subject shows no signs of movement apart from when the subject is prompted with a violin. In this case, the subject shows full instrumental capabilities and is able to compose and execute actions using the aforementioned instrument.

Subject has formerly displayed abilities of abnormal intuition and mass manipulation.

WARNING: abilities have proven to be fatal to select recipients [see 'offense description'].

Darmonstro Program Developments: N/A, subject unresponsive

My eyes grow as wide as musket balls as I reach the end of the file and realize the extent of the case. *So that's why my father spent so much effort on this case, this could change everything, revolutionize British weaponry...*, I think excitedly. I have always been curious about this case. Somehow it seems different from the other Abnormals, more important. I am inexplicably drawn to it: the secretive nature which my father assumes when discussing it, the strange, entrancing melancholy notes which A71 plays, everything about it cries for my attention. It seems my curiosities aren't unfounded, far from it, in fact!

As I start to recover from my shock at the case, a million thoughts pertaining to how I might best solve the case start rushing through my head. It is in that moment that I remember the small detail relating to A71's affinity for the violin. A wave of realization hits me as I resolve that my father had been going about the entirety of the investigation in the wrong way. If this child only comes back to the present in order to play music, then her music has the best chance of revealing more about her abilities! How my father hadn't thought of this previously I do not know, what I do know is that I *have* to get into that cell. I *have* to test my brilliant theory. My eyes narrow in concentration and attentiveness as I spin on my heel and stride swiftly to the door

and through the winding corridors beyond. It seems luck is on my side as I turn each corner to find the following hallways devoid of soldiers.

After what feels like hours, I finally reach the steel-lined arch that marks sector A and slow my pace, taking deep, shuddering breaths of anticipation. I come to a stop outside the bleak, cold cell that reads *A71* on the etched sign above the impenetrable door and frantically gather my thoughts. I don't know what is going to happen once I step through the door, or even if I will get a response from the girl at all. Nevertheless, I am confident in my theory. I will do *whatever* it takes to get what I am looking for, no matter what breach of morality I have to conduct. It is the soldier's resolve after all, the strong will, the steely mask devoid of all emotion. I have prepared for this moment for years, there is no doubt in my mind, I am ready and I will finally be granted my honor and the titles which are rightfully mine. All I have to do is step through the door - and so I do.

Just as I expected, *A71* is sitting in the very same position she had assumed the last time I was here: motionless, with a blank expression on her face, perched on the lonely white chair in the center of the room, illuminated only by the singular ceiling lamp hanging above. *What did they do to cause her to retreat so far within herself?* I think to myself. I approach cautiously, knowing just how powerful the unassuming girl truly is. I stop three feet away from the chair before taking a deep breath and murmuring, "Your playing, it's lovely." The girl expresses no sign of having heard me, but I believe I saw her pupils shift, if only just for a second.

"I would be much obliged if you would play for me," I continue, and reach behind me to the small shelf containing the violin Darmonstro had provided her with, never once lifting my gaze off of *A71*. Just as I open my mouth to prompt her once more, the girl's head snaps up to look at the violin. I stare in surprise at her for a beat before regaining my composure. "Play me something. Tell me what happened," I breathe before holding the violin out before me at arms length. She slowly extends her hand and takes hold of the violin, handling it with great delicacy, and lifts it under her chin. I wait with bated breath as she raises the bow in her opposite hand, poised to run it across the strings.

The first notes are soft and forlorn, full of unspoken emotion. The girl's face begins to shift as she plays, her eyes closing in synchronization with the music and her whole self swaying with each note. I must admit, it is nothing short of beautiful. Like nothing I have ever heard before -

Then I started falling.

Down, down, down into somewhere completely unknown to me. The walls of the cell flash by and are gone in an instant. The smell of rich mahogany overwhelms my senses and I can

hear the faint sound of “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star” being played above the chaotic notes flowing from A71’s violin all around me. Then the music changes tempo and I am falling yet again. I close my eyes as I feel the world spinning around me in chaos. My eyes flutter open again as the plunging sensation slows and I find myself standing in a street, faceless people moving around me. I whirl around to see a man, his angry features somehow in sharp focus, being led into a constable’s carriage. I start to follow the man’s gaze and catch a glimpse of a small girl - I can see no more, for yet again the music filling my ears grows louder and the familiar tumbling sensation envelops me yet again. I fight to keep my reeling eyes open, trying in vain to protect my ears as the notes grow ear-shatteringly loud and the world comes into focus in front of me. I turn to see a man seemingly looking at me or - through me?! Just before I am pulled down, away from the smiling face of the strange man, I see his mouth open and utter six little words, “Ah, so you must be Mira,” in an almost inaudible whisper. My mind spins in confusion as I try to make sense of his words and then - my eyes widen in realization, *MIRA - I remember - that was - A71- what is this!?* Then my thoughts are cut off as a blinding white light envelops me and I give a cry of pain. The light disappears just as quickly as it came and I am left with a red haze over my vision, barely able to make out the scene that is forming in front of me. *Is that - a body!?* Lying on a red-stained wooden floor lies a man - no not just any man - the man who spoke to me - Then it hits me. Everything that I read in the files comes pouring into my mind. *ZALMAN! Zalman von Ald -* and then blackness envelops my mind and I feel myself begin to fall to the ground.

I slowly drift back into consciousness, shielding my eyes from the excruciatingly bright light of - what?! I scramble to my feet and take in my surroundings. I am back in the cell, back from - from whatever that was - whatever Mira had just done. At the thought of the girl I wheel around to face the chair which she had been sitting in but I find that I can barely make out anything behind the blinding light emanating from the spot. Mira is thrown back into the chair, the blinding light seemingly consuming her, the violin lay in fragments on the stone floor. Her mouth is open in a silent scream as the force of the light grows stronger and stronger. My eyes glance about the room frantically, trying to find something, anything that could help her. *Help her? When did I even care?* I force myself to focus on the matter at hand. I have to act now, but what can I do? There is nothing I can do. I am completely out of my depth, no one can help me now.

In desperation, I turn back to Mira and shout above the chaos encircling the room, “Can you hear me? I understand now, I understand what you went through, what you’re going through! You’re scared, so scared of yourself and you don’t know how to stop it!” I pause in surprise as I realize what I have just said. *How do I know these things?* I shake my head as I clear my thoughts,

this is no time to think about that. “I know you’re trying to suppress your anger, your confusion, your power! That’s why you distanced yourself from the world, isn’t it? You kept your power hidden in the only way you could think of. You retreated inside your own mind! But you can’t hold yourself back forever, you have to control it! Get out of here, go far away, where no one will hurt you!” I yell, my voice straining under the pressure. With the last of my voice, I shout one last word, one last desperate effort, “LEAVE!”

Then Mira’s eyes open and stare at me, before closing once more and hanging her head. I cry in despair, I have failed, truly failed. Not just to complete the case, I failed to see the fear, the pain, going on right before my eyes. I witnessed so much suffering, even took part in it! My petty hatred and desire for power was the only thing that had brought me here, I have no one but myself to blame. I hang my head as I prepare for the inevitable. I feel the heat of Mira’s power glowing hot on my closed eyelids as it grows hotter and hotter and - darkness.

My eyes bolt open as the waves of energy dissipate and the light vanishes. Mira is still sitting in the chair, still as stone, her eyes still closed. Then, without warning, she rises to her feet, her legs trembling beneath her. I watch intently as her eyes slowly flutter open to reveal glowing white pools of light. I let out a breath I didn't realize I had held as I start to realize what she did. It seems my words did get through to her and, against all odds, she has managed to control her abilities to some degree. She gives me a small smile and I give a polite nod in return before she turns and glides to the back of the room. I watch as she steadily raises her hand, a faint light growing within it. Mira waits a few beats as the light grows into a small sun in her palm before releasing it against the steel wall of the cell, shattering it into a million tiny shards as if it was made of glass. Without a glance back, she takes a deep breath and steps delicately over the rubble and out onto the grassy plain beyond. As she begins to walk away, the familiar light of her power grows slowly around her until vanishing in a flash, along with Mira herself.

Finally free, I think to myself as I stare at the grass where she stood. That doesn’t sound like such a terrible thing, does it?

Dark anxious like a ducks quack, the stupid peace is ruined
Beautifully sad in a chaotic evil way that nature does
Clear and dark like cinnamon tears chafing chairs
Old methodical and ghastly like fork drivers
Cold snow covering the quiet peaceful death of the xylophone grasshoppers
Anxious and wrong how acting is so strong understanment I do not
Never a balance oh fuck the classics my side of the mountain
Moss and loss and birds of betrayal you must worship the tears
An unsanctioned burial why so sad
The same thing over and over a carousel of horror
Every thought already thought all words just renditions of the ones before
Why so fast the switch turned on the bad thoughts are back
Motionless by choice of sadness casts like concrete
I want to drown under icy blue water ceasing to breathe god what a relief
Bury me underwater a seamless burial let me be with the grasshoppers

–Annabelle Buyck

Featuring:

Rowan Williams

Ava Sackett

Annabelle Buyck

Zora Danz

Xan Whitt

Oliver Herron

Satya McCarthy-Rotella

Emma Sipes

Cover image by Jacob Martin



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