



**UNDER
CONSTRUCTION**

Issue 54



Under Construction Editorial Board

Student Editors: Kelsey Geleneau, Roy Humlicek-Spindler, Red Humphrys, Romello Lloyd, Mia McGuire, Zoey Morris, Sydney (S.J.) Skoglund, Shue Vang, and Teresa Weber

Faculty Editor: Ed Hahn

Designed by Haley Lasché

Under Construction, published by North Hennepin Community College (NHCC), is funded by NHCC's College of Liberal Arts and supported by NHCC's English Department.

Under Construction, Issue 54 (2021/2022) ©2024 North Hennepin Community College, 7411 85th Avenue North, Brooklyn Park, MN 55445. www.nhcc.edu. Email: info@nhcc.edu.
Phone: 763-488-0391. Out-state: 1-800-818-0395.

Opinions expressed herein are not necessarily those of NHCC, Minnesota State, or the NHCC student body.

NHCC is a member of Minnesota State and an Equal Opportunity Educator/Employer. To receive this information in an alternative format, call 763-493-0555 (voice) or via the Minnesota Relay at 1-800-627-3529.

Author List:

Emily Anose	85
Nicholas Guttormson	46
Magdi Hazaa	23
	26
Roy Humlicek-Spindler	12
	37
	39
Lane Kadlec	64
Kate Kariniemi	78
Gabrielle Orth	06
	08
	10
Abigail Raper	42
Sydney (S.J.) Skoglund	19
Teresa Weber	29
	52

Anna Witry 58
Jacee Vang 68

Pa Vang 31
33
34
36

FICTION

The Room

By Gabrielle Orth

Yellow tape stretched over an inconspicuous doorway.

Police milled about before it with pale faces and hushed tones.

Word of it traveled from student to student. Their voices were quiet and scared, and for a while the only thing people talked about was how fifteen people vanished from campus one day. Eventually, the community college closed for alleged water problems, but that was a lie. The longer the college was closed, the less people thought about it, and eventually everyone went their separate ways. The missing people were forgotten about, just as many cold case victims are.

Before the college closed, there was a room near the library that students always avoided because it stank. The room stank so badly that towels were shoved underneath the door during the nights and a custodian would douse it in a healthy spritz of Febreze. The problem with the room wasn't that it stunk, although the stench of old blood, warm slimy meat, and strange, sweet molasses was certainly bad. The problem was the heat. The heat wasn't like an oven, no, it was a sickly humid summer day. The air was sticky and the desks had just a touch of condensation, and any students attending classes there would become so slick with sweat their hair would start to drip with water.

People started disappearing. First it was one person, then two, and finally an entire nine o'clock class. The room started to smell so rank that it could be smelled with the door closed all the way across the hallway. Sometimes if one were to listen close

enough, the heater inside the room sounded rhythmic, like deep sighs. It seemed darker than it should have been, and the floors gave just a bit underneath shoes.

The rumors, hushed and afraid as they were, all said the same thing.

“It’s *alive*.”

Song to the Heavens

By **Gabrielle Orth**

Cathedrals aren't supposed to look like this. Hell comes from above, not below. Hell is in the pooling puddles of blood and wine, and it stains the rose glass crimson and dark brown. Where is the ceiling, now? The drops from hell hit my face. The scene around me is dripping with violence, and the sound of song cannot be heard above the rumble and droning of the world beyond. I sing louder and stretch my hands towards the stained, broken rose glass and let the drops fall from above into my eyes and mouth. God will protect us, we pray. God will hear our prayers, we cry. And cry, we do.

Tears are like blood, like the blood in our veins and the blood pooling around fallen bodies. I have never seen this much blood before, but end times are said to be hell on earth, and heavens above, I believe this to be hell. This is a cathedral, at least, it was. Me and my clergy came here as soon as the bombs began to drop. We wanted to sing for our nation, to cry out to God for salvation. The song we sing swells from a low note to a lasting wail, and the high note can just be heard over the sounds beyond. We are all crying openly now, and the clear lines turn rusty-colored down our cheeks. The ground below me and my clergy are wet with tears and blood.

I see bursting bombs reflected in the puddles, but instead I turn my gaze to the heavens. The sky explodes and the blast is so bright that my eyes burn. I can't see it when the chapel is decimated around us, but I can hear it. The pleading song the clergy and I sang was cut short and the sounds of war could once again be heard. The taste of blood, ash, and concrete filled my mouth. The song is gone now, and I taste iron and concrete in my mouth. God will hear us, I pray. God will protect us.

I only hope that some of us are still alive. I know I am alive, because my bones creak

and I can hear and taste and smell. Perhaps if God is still here he can hear my cries, but I may be too far for him to hear me. I fear I have delved too far into hell to ever step foot into paradise.

Stella's Art

By Gabrielle Orth

Stella's Art, the sign said in bold bright letters. It was Stella's graduation, and Stella herself was there, smiling and thanking people for coming as her family members and friends filed themselves into the garage where free food and drinks were available. Stella was feeling a pang of nostalgia, though. She walked by the *Stella's Art* sign and stared at her childhood drawings, her teenage drawings, and her adult drawings. As a child her lines were shaky and undefined. The people were too wide, too tall, hair too stringy, and eyes like dinner plates. She remembered doodling at recess on scraps of paper just to have them blow away in the wind. At teacher-parent conferences teachers had strained smiles as they said *Stella's bright and creative! She's just not very... attentive.* She had flashes of memories where she drew in the margins of her notebook instead of paying attention in class. As a teenager her art became more defined as her perception of the world deepened. Her scraggly people turned into rough depictions of landscapes. Stella realized that people were not the thing she wanted to draw. She wanted to look over the edge of a cliff and paint what was below; she wanted to look at the sky and use charcoal to portray the wispieness of clouds.

She began to love watercolor and got decent at it as middle school turned into high school. Stella looked at a landscape of the mountains and was reminded of the family trip that inspired that piece. It was a long weekend filled with rain and miserable hikes but at the top of one of the mountains she snapped a picture and painted it when she got home. She hung it up for years in a frame, even when she began to hate it. Stella doesn't hate it anymore. She finally stopped at some of the pieces she did as a new adult, freshly 18 years old. She had a few watercolor landscapes done, but a lot of her art used texture and bright colors. Stella fell in love with acrylics and bought pallet knives to paint thick leaves on trees and make flowers

pop from the canvas by layering paint. Her paintings came alive with her honed techniques and her love for detail.

Stella stopped there and looked back at her old art and then at her newest art, only a few months old. As a child she would lose focus on her art after only a few minutes, but now her art took her hours, days sometimes. Stella remembered how her teachers used to complain about her attentiveness and had a small chuckle about the irony of her art, which was once a “distraction” was now her focus.

She was going to be an art student this coming fall, and she was confident that one day, her paintings would be in hundreds of people’s homes across the country. Stella turned from the art exhibit and smiled as her friends crowded her.

The Johnsons

By Roy Humlicek-Spindler

“Fine day, I think, yeah?” heard Ronnie as he left Bozho’s bakery. The man continued, smiling. “Bozho sending his best?”

Ronnie leaned on his axe, then bit into the loaf that he had just bought. “It’s great,” he said, slightly sadly.

“I might get one myself,” said the other man as he counted out dull coins in his hand. “Well, see you later,” he said, and walked into the store, humming.

Ronnie sighed and watched the door swing closed. He wondered if that man survived. It was unlikely.

His fingers felt rough upon the heavy axe as he walked down the street. He took several more bites of the bread. It was the best bread he’d ever had. The cobbles under his feet turned to rough ground as he left town and headed home. The woods and the gentle stream gave way as Ronnie made his way there. After some peaceful walking, the trees cleared into grassland, and he was able to see the cottage where he and his wife lived atop the hill it sat on. Ronnie stopped by his animal pen and stared without looking at the animals. His mind was far away from where he was. He was not looking forward to telling his wife about what he had done, or rather what he had not done. In another two bites, Ronnie finished his bread, and with his now free hand, pet one of the goats. It seemed to notice that he was distracted, and bleated loudly at him, maybe to bring him back to reality. He shook his head and resumed his dejected walk toward his house, axe in hand.

The cottage drew near, a tack set into a beautiful countryside. Ronnie and his wife had lived there for three years on the outskirts of the small village, but didn't plan to stay much longer. The three years was a long stay for the pair, as well as a very humble one. They had lived in luxury alongside some of the most famous people the world had ever seen, and while their stay in their current home was nice, they were eager to return to their opulent lifestyles.

The one thing they never told anyone was *where* they were from. And it was this fact that was beginning to wear on Ronnie Johnson. He couldn't stop lying, but he still felt he owed something to the townsfolk.

Ronnie put his free hand on the door, took a last look behind him, and entered the dwelling.

Bella was hard at work inside, packing, as Ronnie hung his axe.

Bella didn't look up when she addressed her husband in their native tongue. They'd bought universal translation pills when they were invented and could speak and understand any language. "Everything done outside?" she didn't wait for an answer. "Get it out, punch in a new place. Somewhere warm this time. It shouldn't take me long to get everything we need."

Ronnie stood still, looking toward a corner. His wife followed his gaze. They looked at Ronnie's helmet, vest of mail, and short sword, all in a heap.

"We shouldn't need those, we can leave them," said Bella. "Come on, quick! Get the Kearney! Those bloodsuckers are going to be through here any day now."

Ronnie didn't say anything but nodded. He walked into the only other room the house had: the bedroom. With all his might, he pushed the bed aside and flipped it against

the wall. A small, discreet handle was seen underneath where the bed had been. Ronnie opened the hatch. He hadn't looked inside almost since he'd moved in, but everything was exactly how he left it. A handgun sat on top of one small box of ammo, beside it a few high-calorie protein bars. He pushed these out of the way and took out the most important thing he and Bella owned. Named for its inventor, James Kearney, the dumbbell-shaped device looked like nothing special. A reading where the hand would hold it read '399,' and a touch screen decorated the side. Ronnie unlocked it with his fingerprint and automatically started searching for a new place to live. Then he stopped. What was he doing? He had to tell his wife about his decision. He stepped back into the other room, still carrying the Kearney.

"I didn't set the animals free." He spoke in the language of the village people.

"Wh—why not? You were supposed to. I told you to. Why are you talking like that?"

"I can't leave them to their fate. The villagers, I mean. I—I'm going to stay."

"What are you talking about? This place was totally destroyed, we knew that. We should have left ages ago."

"I...I want to at least warn them."

Bella shook her head. "It won't matter, and you won't be back in time."

"No, I mean it, we have to stay."

She took the Kearney out of his hands, as if afraid he would break it.

"We? We'd die, Ronnie."

“Bella, those are people! I don’t care when they are from. We’re one of them.”

“No. No we aren’t. Are you being serious right now? Speak English, for God’s sake!”

“I—”

“Face it, Ronnie. You aren’t going to make a difference against four thousand Huns.”

“But—”

Bella interrupted again. “You’re breaking my heart, Ronnie. You’d throw all we have away for some peasants?”

Ronnie spoke in English now, a desperate appeal. “Okay, we don’t have to fight. But we have to lead them to safety. We’ll leave right after that.” He held out his arms, possibly hoping she’d embrace him and tell him she was wrong.

“No, Ronnie,” she pushed his arms aside and pushed past him into the bedroom, grabbed the gun and protein bars and put them in a fabric sack. Then she came back into the main room. “Not we. If you want to stay, you do that yourself.”

Ronnie was silent.

“You come with me now, or you miss out. We’ve only got one Kearney, so you’d better think long and hard about this.” She started to pick out a new destination on the touch screen.

Ronnie walked to his armor and began putting it on. Bella stopped what she was doing and looked up at him. “So that’s it?” she asked. Ronnie was silent for a moment. Then...

“We’ve been running for so long. We went on this journey to feel what it was like to live a simple life. You remember what it was like in the 2090s. It was hell. Everyone was so selfish, no one was... was good to anyone else. That included us. I want to know what it feels like. Helping someone who isn’t me.” he said.

She blinked. “That’s just stupid. You’re going to die, trying to be a hero.” She picked up the knapsack she had been packing.

“Bella, there are more important things than just being alive. I didn’t realize that before, but after all we’ve been through, all the people we’ve seen...If we didn’t leave to be around good people, what did we leave for?”

“We left because America in 2097 was terrible. Anything would have been better, and it has been. We spent half of what we had to buy this to get away.” She held up the Kearney. “It’s been great, seeing the world with you. I can’t believe you’re going to leave, throw what we have away,” said Bella.

She turned to leave the house, then turned back. “I’d really rather you came with me.”

Ronnie picked up his sword. “I know.”

Ronnie followed Bella out of the cottage. Not a word came between them, neither would try to stop the other. Years of living together had let each member of the pair in on a little secret: their counterpart was stubborn.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

Ronnie took a deep breath. “You know, you could probably come back in a few years and see me if... if I survive. Just punch in a few years from now, and you can find me.”

Bella knew the odds of her being reunited with her husband were low. Even if he survived, the Kearney was not precise enough to locate this particular village again. She didn't want to cause any needless pain, so she didn't voice her doubts.

“I'll try,” she said. Ronnie nodded.

“Don't you get it?” Bella said suddenly. “I'm not ready to die. I don't see how you are. This is like a vacation. Why are you taking it so seriously?”

The tall grasses that would soon be ablaze swayed around them.

“I'm not ready to die. But neither are those people,” said Ronnie.

“Ronnie! Wake up!” she was almost in tears. “Those people are already dead! They died *long* before you were born. Even if by some miracle you save them all, they'll still die! It won't matter!”

“Not to them.”

Bella turned away. “I'm sorry.”

“For what?”

“That I'm not as strong as you are,” she said sarcastically.

“Don't do that,” he said softly. “Not when I'll never see you again.”

Bella turned partially back to him, but did not meet his gaze. “So you know I’ll never be able to find you?”

Ronnie looked at the dirt, “I know.”

Bella walked over to her husband. She shifted what she was carrying to the side so she could kiss him. Ronnie’s eyes closed. A tear that was not his fell onto his chest. Bella pulled away, but Ronnie kept his eyes closed.

“Goodbye...” said Bella. Ronnie expected his mind to play that sound in his head a million times, but he only heard it once, crisp and clear.

When Ronnie opened his eyes, she was gone.

I Do

By Sydney (S.J.) Skoglund

She smiled for the people she exchanged words with. And for her pictures of course. Though it didn't really matter. No one would have been able to see the smile she gave anyway. The gas mask that covered her face, as well as anyone who cared enough to live, prevented anyone from seeing her expression. Whether it was good or bad, no one knew except for her. Not that they really cared. It was a wedding. An excuse to go out, drink, and forget about the crumbling world around them for a change. It was an excuse to party. And what better excuse to get away from the same four walls that burned in everyone's mind than a party? She started to tell herself that maybe that's why she wore the gown. Why she found something old and something new. Why she searched for something borrowed and something blue. Or maybe it was her heart? Of which, she couldn't tell, and she feared she never would be able to. And yet, there she stood, making a decision that she wasn't sure she was ready to make.

Was this all a mistake? Her heart started to pound like the beating of a bass drum and the moments crawled by. She was sure everyone had heard it beating. But then again, how could they? And even if they did, why would - should - they care? They weren't the ones vowing to spend the rest of their, probably short, lives with only one person. They just came for the laughs and liquor. And most importantly, the distraction. Not the crushing weight of all the doubtful thoughts that swarmed her consciousness. Regardless, they would have to wait for the booze until they were safe again.

She hoped that having the ceremony outside wouldn't cause as much trouble as she had been told. However, having to wear the gas mask was not something she had

planned on, but she had to take what she could get. Maybe that also explained why she was relinquishing her freedom willingly to a man destined to leave her one way or another. The man that stood across from her wasn't a cruel man, but she couldn't say he was kind either. He was tall and fair-skinned with contrasting dark hair and eyes. Many women fell at his feet with nothing more than a look. It often unsettled her when they did so because he never turned them away. But that reality collapsed when he was chosen to be drafted. He claimed he didn't believe in the war he was forced to fight in. Nevertheless, he had been gone for some time that she could not remember, but she was almost relieved that she was finally alone. But here they now stood, face-to-face, or rather mask-to-mask, and repeated the words of the minister.

The minister spoke for a long while. His accent was one that she would remember because she had never heard a comparison to the uniqueness of it. But he spoke so long that she felt herself zoning in and out of reality. Until something caught her attention. A flying speck of light in the distance shone out from all the fog that surrounded them like a blanket. It wasn't much, but it was moving and that's why she became so engrossed in watching it. What could it have been? Where could it be going? She wanted to know more about it. But she couldn't, so instead, she watched it follow its consistent path to its unknown location. The minister, nor her soon-to-be wedded partner, noticed her lack of interest in what was happening before them. Neither had she noticed their lack of interest in what she was diverting her attention to. Nothing else mattered much to them anyway. He was getting married, and she saw a trail of fire.

Once she realized what the blazing trail of light actually was and where it was destined to land, she smiled the brightest she had all day. She was no longer afraid of the commitment she was about to make. She had no reason to fear any longer. She had no reason to feel anything but excitement for whatever journey that lay

ahead. So, when the minister called on her for an answer, she said, "I do." And she knew where the trail of fire would end.



POETRY

Health Insurance

By Magdi Hazaa

Hello,

I'm calling to check if my insurance
plan covers my various ailments.

For one, I'm always on the verge of fainting,
a body inside my body keeps it afloat and
they're both stuck sick of each other. And worse,
my eyes have been flailing since young and
my back strains, incapable of lifting the
dead cells that gather after
so many years of
wrong living.

And does my policy cover an overwhelming feeling
that my surroundings are ambiguous sets. And
in the process of uncovering these apparitions,
does it revoke my coverage if I perform my own stunts of
blacking out and
collecting wounds and
losing friends and
burying my body and
making a mockery of the eulogies
I used to write?

And how much deductible do I have to pay before
my plan starts covering digestive issues and
broken appetites? See, my hands shake when

I'm hungry, but my stomach, bloated, screams if I eat.
The tension of last bites, lasts suppers and
the screams of my parents
telling me to finish my
plate still rot
on the table.

And how much co-pay do I owe before
my plan starts paying for a public stoning
with a consecutive, multitude of SSRIs?
Does it cover hiding my depression inside
the cotton of my blanket and sinking
beneath the weight for months until
somebody fires me and
my friends stop inviting me places and
it becomes clear that I *need* to cry and laugh again
so I surrender back to the
normalcy of mania and
the zaps of the brain.
Does it cover that?

And tell me while we're at it,
does my policy cover illnesses
of Eros and the longing for love or
do I need a separate plan for that?
Does it cover surgically removing
what men have inked on my body with
their pens of doubt and lust and rage and
now even in acts I dreamt of for years,
twirling in the end, I still feel unfulfilled.

Does it cover the costs of submerging my flesh
in a body of water so it emerges again
capable of love and
capable of reading the
language of touch?

And if nothing else,
does my plan cover pains unknown to me,
aches that ennui has poured in my blood and
how my lungs writhe and heave when
I remember chances I missed and
how my hair sheds when it lays on
a pillow not a chest and
how my throat still feels full since
he said *I don't love you*
while I prayed to him drunk
for another chance
or a final kiss.

Does my plan cover any of that?

Does my plan cover anything,
anything at all?

I Break My Boyfriend's Favorite Cup of Coffee

By Magdi Hazaa

I
The pieces stare at me
from the laminate floor.
Tiny islands of sunny teal
grade into the sharp grays
of a colder weather.
He'll never forgive me for this.
I try thinking of anything else,
of memory,
of hindsight,
of the inertia of water
in warming ravines,
of stories only worth telling in the dark.
I clean,
sweeping from the middle.
I separate this sea of ceramic
masquerading for glass.
An accidental miracle
in which
I'm the clumsy savior of nobody,
the prophet of debris.
April's morning signs
refractions of light
against the splinters

and it occurs to me:
I could blame the sun for this calamity.
I could blame the pull of the earth,
I could.

II

Don't sweat it,
he says.

*It's sad
but I've gotten
sweeter gifts
since then.*

And we sleep together
and I listen to his heart.
Peace is a sound
only sung in his chest.
I try thinking of anything else
but it doesn't escape me that
all this history
between us,
all this memory,
this repetition,
this love and terse tension,
all this fucking
and the dances
that prelude it,
all this geography
of timbre
and pitch
and music

only one another
could understand,
all these stories,
and *a//* this ease
could be
one
glass
away
from breaking.

How to Tame a Broken Heart

By Teresa Weber

(Based on "How to Apologize" by Ellen Bass)

Hold a dandelion to your chest—one
with a large tuft of white umbrella-like seeds, a mass
of misunderstood beauty and fragility,
relentlessly propagating in the slightest breeze.
Conceal it by any means necessary.
It will be easier to carry as a large gray
stone or a wet log, but if the turbulence
is especially persistent, disguise it beneath the sparse
needles of a white pine seedling and bring
it to a boreal forest.
Make sure to check the weather first,
Memories are more easily dispersed in a light
breeze or unsettled precipitation, but
if the fog isn't too thick, an expanse
of forest with Paper Birch and Black Spruce near
the edge of civilization will be best,
where the air always smells like Christmas,
because it is always Christmas,
in your mind, as the silver sedan
pulls out of sight, with her dark
curls bouncing in the back window next to
the over-sized teddy bear that was almost
as big as she was,
and the end of the story never changes,
as many times as it repeats, the narration

through the phone, infused with unwelcome
sympathy, she is not coming back.
She is never coming back.
So, travel off the beaten path,
away from the tapping of the
black and white checkered woodpeckers,
through the tangled branches that
pull and scratch at your skin, sloughing
off the layers of guilt, shame, and life-consuming
heartache. Step over the faded green foliose lichens that
hug the fallen pine trees, beyond the musty rotting
logs bursting with creamy black-dimpled mushrooms,
until the boundary between life and death is no longer discernible,
and the only sound that can be heard, radiating silently
through the trees, struggling under the weight
of the heavy gray sky, is the question permanently tattooed across
the center of your mind,

Why?

When a safe place is found, near a ray of sunlight,
reveal the dandelion,
and let the seeds disperse into the chaos at
the mercy of the capricious breeze until each
parachute of fluff has come to rest on a bed of dried maple
leaves or coarse black dirt, and

let each one go

the weight will lessen just enough to pull your boots out of the
sticky black mud

The Stars Told Me

I Told the Stars

By Pa Vang

The stars told me

about your existence.

The galaxy-filled night sky

showed me your reflection.

The universe promised me

that we would meet one day.

Tonight's full moon

taught me about you.

I told the stars

About who I am.

I let the galaxy-filled night sky

Paint you my reflection.

I promised the universe

To meet you one day.

I asked the moon

to sing my feelings to you.

I asked the summer breeze

Soft summer breeze

whispers your name

Tickling grasses

lull us closer again.

My thumping heart told me you'll come,

and come to stay.

To relay my name to you.

Tickling grasses

lull us closer again.

Listening to your thumping heart,

Telling you I'll come to stay.

Little Devi

By Pa Vang

There sits a little devil
Whom I call Devi.
Lifeless button eyes of his
Stares at me creepily.
Pink blush on his face,
His fangs creeping out,
A sinister smirk replaces,
As his aura fluctuates about.

Vapor streams quickly
As if he is angry.
Slowly suffocating me
With his overpowering energy.

Shiny red horns he has,
In the darkness he hides,
Through water he lives,
With my vitality he abides.
There sits a little devil
Whom I call Devi.
He is my humidifier
And my very cute buddy.

Winter Wonderland

By Pa Vang

I'm walking.

I'm walking.

I'm walking on the street.

Cars going beside me.

A jacket.

A very big jacket.

I'm wearing a big blue jacket.

Snow falling beside me.

Fingers tight around my backpack straps

Gloveless fingers freezing red.

Breathing out fogging up my glasses

The cold seeping into my soul.

Slowly,

I'm walking on the street,

Wearing a big blue jacket,

Breathing out fogging my glasses

Staring at the clear white sky

The cold seeping into my soul

As if an eternity passed by

I finally feel alive.

It's a winter wonderland.

I'm walking.

I'm walking.
I'm walking on the street.
Cars zooming next to me.

A jacket.
A very big jacket.
I'm wearing a big blue jacket.
Snow falling beside me.

Fingers tight around my backpack straps
Gloveless fingers freezing red.
Breathing out fogging up my glasses
The cold seeping into my soul.

Slowly,
Slowly,
I'm walking on the street,
Wearing a big blue jacket,
Breathing out fogging up my glasses,
Staring at the snow white sky,
The cold seeping into my soul,
As if an eternity has passed by.

I finally feel free,
I finally feel alive.
It's a winter wonderland.

Wind Blows East

By Pa Vang

The wind blows east
But my dream yearns west.

No matter what,
My heart cannot rest.

Looking up at the sky
It's so very blue.

I wonder if
You could've been here with me too.

People are leaving
One by one.
Making up my mind
I followed on.

Staring through the airplane's eyes,
Hearing the engine roar,
Although I am alone,
I finally soar.

FOLLOW THE CAT, DO THAT, BECAUSE THE CAT KNOWS BEST

By Roy Humlicek-Spindler

Money's being waved in his face,
On which something is written
He tries to read it as it moves

Please! I want—

You never hear what he wants
A trapdoor opens at his feet

You gulp
Good thing you are a fast reader
You might just get out of this

The line shifts forwards
Some fall through the trapdoor,
Some are only ridiculed before being let go

The front of the line meets you
Relief melts your heart.
Instructions are written, and they're simple

The trapdoor doesn't move;
You're safe
Good thing you've got no courage.

How could anyone misunderstand?
The instructions are simple
They must be idiots

The trapdoor and floor make a gap
You see frightened eyes below
But that's their problem

The cat even lets you take a dollar
So you'll remember better
You wave to the others in line

They have nothing to fear,
So long as they can read
And are eager to submit

You were expecting to tremble in terror,
After the panicked squeaking
But only the correct people fell, the mice, you joke

Followthecatthecatknowsbestfollowthecatthecatknowsbest drones a lazy loudspeaker

RUN THEM OUT OF TOWN

By Roy Humlicek-Spindler

Army of scarecrows marching
Their stakes prevent movement
But your eyes see them getting closer

They *can* injure, you've seen them
But though you don't notice,
There are no charcoal feathers on you

Army of scarecrows laughing
As you clutch your head.
Infernal sounds, the lot.

If you had a torch,
Those scarecrows would die.
For the crime of excessive laughter

You've been told they'll hurt you
If they come near
But if scarecrows could move, why would you be their target?

Who are you to say what's between their straws?
Or 'if they only had a brain'
You say so much you forget the straw you harvested, then planted in the soil

Those you call monsters would like
Nothing more than to

Shield you from what you *should* fear

Surrounded by scarecrows now

You're given no choice

Shouldn't you be dead already? These are scarecrows after all.

One tells you his story

Scarecrows shouldn't be able to talk:

You were told they didn't even have a brain

You wonder now if

They were crows,

That you got your news from

Could you have,

Only a day ago, wanted to run them out of town?

The one who tells you his story?

That's what he is: like you

Finally, *finally* you get it

You smile so big your stitching almost comes undone

Creative Nonfiction

One Last Goodbye

By Abigail Raper

People always tell kids to cherish their childhood, for it will disappear before they know it. Even with this warning, I still was taken off-guard once it finally hit me in the face. No, it wasn't when my friends moved on to other groups or the shift from elementary to middle school. It was the goodbye to my second home that had been owned by two people who cared for me as their own grandchild, even if they were only daycare providers. While my parents were my only relatives in Minnesota, my family expanded to include a jolly woman named Joyce, and her gruff husband, Richard. These two people were there for me, their doors always open. But now, I had to learn to come to terms with saying goodbye to that place.

My mom rang the yellowing and cracked doorbell as the wind whistled briskly around us. While we waited for the door to open up, I was brought back to the mornings my mom would take my half-asleep-self up those stairs to wait just like this.

Before long, we were greeted by a cheery welcome. "Oh, hi! I was just curling my hair," she said, letting us in before wrapping me up with a big hug. I could hear her distinct Minnesota country accent. "It's so good to see you! It's been so long." She smiled, directing us to the couch. I smiled back, realizing it's been too long since we've last seen each other. The days just seemed to run away from me.

I quietly waited for her and my mom to finish catching up. She looked at me.

"And look how much you have grown! What grade are you in?" she asked.

"8th," I quietly replied, giving a big smile.

“Wow! You are growing up so darn fast,” she began to ramble as usual. “Let me get Richard. He’s out in the garden.”

As I waited for Joyce to tip-toe her way back into the room, I glanced around. I can still recall it, like my memory keeps my childhood alive, even if only for a moment. I remember I cried when they replaced their old, overstuffed fabric couch with a sleeker, modern one. The TV VCR sat below the TV where the other daycare kids and I fought over who would slide the tape in. Their home phone recalled memories of me eavesdropping with the other daycare children on her mundane conversations. My mischief made it all the more exciting. Every picture on the wall, every sticker on the door sat bittersweet in my stomach. This short visit was as if I returned home one last time. My slight hoarding issue aside—manifesting in my youth of holding onto items like written notes and wrappers due to the permanency of disposal—what makes things so hard to let go of is that drifting away from a fond past isn’t a choice. Change is a simple and well-known concept, but its abruptness is what sets the rockiness in motion. Although growing out of those little acts, it rematerialized as a troubling with goodbyes, like I was hoarding a moment in time, fearful of what’s to come.

In no time at all, Joyce had retrieved Richard. His smile always drew me to the stubble of a beard. “Hello there,” He wasn’t much of a vocal carer, but I knew he cared greatly.

In her hand, she held a thick envelope and tip-toed her way back to the couch. “While we were cleaning up, Rich found this,” she slid a stack of laminated photos. “Oh, see, there you are with Rich in the garden,” she said, pointing to a little me with the same curly hair, only blonde. I seemed to be eating some raspberries while watching Richard pick some ripe tomatoes.

She flipped to the next picture, one with my best friend and me sitting on the porch in their backyard. “And there you two are. Do you still see her?”

My mom answered, “She just saw her last week.”

“Aw, it’s great that you two are still good friends,” a smile still residing, she continued on. Each picture had another story she regaled us with, putting a joyous smile on each one of our faces. Time passed and, before long, the stack became thinner and thinner, until all she held was a picture of me and her family on a boat. There I sat, sleepy with my pink life-jacket secured tight on me as I rested my head on Joyce. “And there we are on the boat. You were so little.”

I’m still pretty short, I thought, but I held in my comment. Each picture reminded me of how she and her family had opened up to me. The trips to her family’s farm, the park on the weekends, the holiday parties. All those were memories I’ll hold onto because this family treated me more than some child to take care of, but like a part of their family.

As she filed the pictures back in the ripped envelope, her shaky hands passed it to me. Grabbing it, I looked at her sweet smile as she headed off into her own tangent conversations about who knows what. I looked back down at the dozens of pictures sealed up in this one folded paper. All those pictures are pieces of me, things I’ve lived through even if I was too young to remember, or too old to keep in my memory. Every moment, no matter how mundane or insignificant, meant the world to me as I held onto them fondly in my hands. As she was passing through time, I was still stuck in it. Her ability to rid things and pass them to people she cared about is something I have yet to learn. Even though time passed, I knew I still had her. I had these pictures, and I had my limited memories.

We spent the afternoon with them. Though I sat silently, I listened to the conversations about the little things in everyone's daily lives. The moving process. What they had for breakfast. Their plans for this week. Retirement life seemed fun. But as the clock hit four, I noticed we were getting ready for the Minnesotan goodbye. I quickly took in the surroundings, knowing I had a few minutes before leaving this place for good. With one last goodbye, she sent us off with a warm hug and a bag full of food. Her jolly face only changed slightly throughout all these years; her chubby cheeks kept the lines of old age away. Joyce and Richard are the grandparents that I never had; perhaps they were even more than grandparents to me. I don't know if they will ever know how deep their affection runs in my veins, but their care will stick with me for the rest of my life, just like the memories the photographs we passed around had captured.

Remember Me

By Nicholas Guttormson

Highway 52 runs through the middle of my hometown, Harmony. It's not a very big town. If you drive through on your way to someplace more interesting, you wouldn't remember it. There's a collection of nondescript buildings along the highway between vast stretches of farmland. At a bend in the road, there is a large garage with one collapsed wall and two and a half doors. Towering over the garage, a climbing tree stands guard; a broken rope swing hangs from the branches scratching at the dirt. A small concrete path winds up a hill to a simple, white house where rhubarb grows wild along the edges. I step out of my car into the driveway where the smell of lefse and rømmegrøt hang in the air; although, it's been years since the little old Norwegian woman cooked in this house. My mind stitches together a past scene of family and food and laughter. I will the ignorant teenage boy who would rather be somewhere else to go throw his arms around his grandma and learn to make his favorite foods that only she could make. He can make memories with her. I cannot.

I drove to Harmony today to see Grandma. I'd planned to come earlier to visit, but I didn't. As I drove into town, I was drawn to the bend in the highway to see her old house. When they bought this land after World War II, there was nothing here. My grandfather dug the basement with a shovel and built the house from scratch. They built a business out of the garage. They raised six children who raised fifteen grandchildren who filled the house on holidays. Those lucky enough to live within biking distance, like me, could go to Grandma's for a snack or to get away from parents whenever we wanted.

Grandma's house was sold a few years ago, but no one has moved in. The house my grandfather built from scratch is falling apart. The garage they built a business

out of is crumbling. I step into the garage through the missing wall. Three rolls of carpet padding are still stacked against the corner. I crawl on top of them like I did so many times as a child. Back then, carpet was stacked to the ceiling, and I would climb to the top and hide. Grandma would always find me. She told me my mom used to do the same thing. It wasn't a very crafty hiding spot after all.

In the next room of the garage, tables still line the space where the retail store used to be. While my grandfather was out installing carpet, Grandma would run the shop selling carpet cleaners and tools. When I was a child, after the business moved out of the garage, the space was Grandma's antique shop. Family heirlooms and knick-knacks from their travels were stored on the tables. I'd play in there, even though I wasn't allowed. There were too many old breakable things for a rambunctious child to run around. One afternoon when I was eight, I was crawling through the maze of old breakable things chasing a bouncy ball. I heard Grandma calling me for dinner from the garage door, and when I turned around to look, I heard a crash. Grandma heard it, too. She ran in to see what happened. "Are you okay?" she asked.

"I'm sorry!" I cried.

"Are you hurt?"

"No, but I broke something. I'm sorry."

Grandma crouched down, old bones creaking, and lifted me to my feet. "That's okay. We have too much stuff anyway. Are you ready to eat? I made fresh lefse." I never saw Grandma get angry. She had a grace and humor about life I always admired. Even as she aged and started to forget where she was or what she was talking about, she would laugh about her fading memory. I hope she wouldn't be angry with me now, sitting on a dusty old roll of carpet padding instead of seeing her again before it's too late.

My phone rings. It's my mom wondering where I am. "On the road," I lie, "I'll be a little late."

I drove to Harmony today to see Grandma. I'd planned to visit earlier, but I knew she wouldn't have remembered me. By ninety-six years old, she barely remembered my mom. Without her memories, we are strangers, and if we are strangers, then what good would it do to visit?

I leave the old carpet pads and trudge outside where the sky is gray and cold; stinging mist blows sideways against my face. The broken rope swing sways in the wind dragging the wooden seat across the ground. There is a scratching sound followed by a thump as the seat bangs into the side of the garage. The other end of the rope has been tied to a large branch for years; new bark consumes the rope making it look like the tree is simply growing a swing from its branches.

I learned to swing here, Grandma pushing me from behind. You straighten your legs and lean back, pulling on the ropes to swing forward, then tuck your legs in and lean forward, pushing on the ropes to swing back. If you could get high enough, you could kick another tree branch at the top. One warm summer night at Grandma's, I practiced until it was dark, and the mosquitoes started biting. "Grandma!" I yelled as I burst through the back door. "Come watch me!" She was making rømmegrøt — a Norwegian porridge made with cream, butter, sugar, and flour. Turning off the stove, she followed me outside in the dark to watch me swing. I don't think she could see in the dark, but she cheered and clapped just the same, excited that I was excited. She gave me a big hug and told me what a good job I did and how proud she was as we walked back in the house for dessert. I was proud, too.

A sudden gust of wind stings my face and slams the now broken swing into the side of the garage again. It's getting later and colder, but I'm not ready to leave yet. I walk up the concrete path to the house my grandfather built. The once tended

rhubarb patch now grows wild near the back porch, and I snap off a piece and gnaw on the edge as I walk up to the back door. Rhubarb is made into sugary fruit pies for a reason. My face puckers from the sour stalk, and I throw the rest away. I miss the rhubarb sauces, crisps, and pies that used to be made inside.

I try the door, but it's locked. Peering in the window, I see the old familiar kitchen where my family would gather to cook, eat, and celebrate. The steep, narrow stairs to the basement descend from the kitchen. When I was six, I fell down those stairs before a family Christmas dinner. I was told it wasn't the first time, but it was the first time I remember. My blanket didn't care that I was going downstairs; it tripped me up just the same. Grandma was in the basement kitchen finishing the mashed potatoes for dinner. She rushed over, leaving the unmashed potatoes butter-less and lonely.

"I fell!" I cried.

After seeing that nothing was broken and everything was moving, she said, "You look all right to me."

Her joints cracked and popped as she sat next to me. "What's that sound?" I asked, quickly forgetting, as only six-year-old's can, that I was supposed to be crying.

Her laugh was booming and genuine. It was a beautiful laugh that filled any room and made you smile and laugh along, even if you didn't know what was funny. "It's the sound of getting old," she said. "Do you wanna help me make potatoes?" I did. We went to the basement kitchen, and she boosted me up on the counter where I could mash the potatoes while she added the butter and cream. I mashed until my arms were sore, sneaking tastes along the way. Grandma lifted me down from the counter, sending me off with a big warm hug and a mouthful of potatoes. I ran back

upstairs, careful to hold my blanket high in the air and away from my feet. The rest of my family started to stream in, ready for another holiday at Grandma's house.

No one streams in this house anymore. I try the door again, hoping to get inside and explore the familiar spaces, but it doesn't budge. I sit on the porch step, hiding my face under my jacket from the cold, wet wind. In the darkness of my jacket, I can see the whole house as I remember it. I see myself sitting on the living room floor learning to knit. Grandma knits behind me in her favorite chair: a simple, wooden, Amish rocker. My grandfather sleeps in his favorite chair: a dark, leather lazy boy by the fire. If you turned off the TV he would wake up and say, "I was watching that." He would turn the TV back on and fall right back asleep.

I can see the panic in the house when my brother had his accident. My aunt paced in front of the kitchen window, and Grandma rushed into action to get him to the hospital. But I have to remind myself I was only two months old at the time. I've been told that story so many times it feels like a memory.

Grandma would also tell me the story of falling down the basement stairs just to get some potatoes before dinner. Are these my memories or just stories I've been told? Part of me wishes a wall had collapsed here like the garage, so I could sneak in and remember. I want to walk through the house and fact check memories with reality. Time has a way of warping and blending details. So many memories here were only shared with Grandma. So much of a relationship is built on shared memories. What happens to those relationships when memory fades? What happens to those memories when they warp and blend with no one to set them straight?

I drove to Harmony today to see Grandma, but I can't bring myself to go see her body before they close the lid. I could have seen her smiling face, hugged her warm body, and told her I loved her so many times recently, but I chose not to.

When I left Minnesota twelve years ago, Grandma was full of life and energy. The last time I visited Grandma was over two years ago. The nursing home she was living at felt foreign and wrong; it was not her home. She looked at me and smiled, then looked at my brother and asked him, "Who is your friend?"

I moved back home eight months ago and have been scared to visit her. What would we talk about? What joy could a stranger bring her? What joy could being forgotten bring me?

I drove to Harmony today to see Grandma, but she's gone. My family is waiting at the church where the funeral will start soon. They are there to say goodbye. I am sitting on the porch of an abandoned house in the rain. I am here to say goodbye.

Dog Biscuits

By Teresa Weber

I was out walking my large white dog, Koda, near my sister's house in Saint Michael, Minnesota when I detected movement coming towards us on the other side of the quiet suburban street. A human-shaped figure was strolling up the hill from the Crow River below, but the small white blob weaving between his legs had me most on edge. While a strange person could set Koda pulling uncontrollably and snarling viciously, crossing paths with another dog inspired the kind of insanity that could earn us a spot on the 5 o'clock news. This type of encounter had grown all too common for us since I had adopted Koda from the Animal Humane Society four years earlier. I watched their movement closely.

"Maybe they won't come this way," I said to Koda, while she followed the olfactory remnants of a squirrel's morning activities up to the base of a tree.

Details of the figure's blue windbreaker and white button-down shirt slowly came into view as he moved unknowingly closer to impending doom.

"Nope, they are definitely coming this way."

The weight pulling on my chest sank even lower as I watched the white figure at the man's feet trot over to a tree in a nearby yard.

"And his dog is definitely not on a leash," I sighed.

I looked for another route through the line of tall houses and perfectly groomed yards, but there wasn't one. Glancing quickly over my shoulder, I wondered if we should turn around, but it was several miles back to my sister's house the way we had

come. Hoping that Koda wouldn't notice the strangers heading towards us, I pulled her to the other side of the road and braced myself. She continued to massage the ground with her nose.

When I first met Koda at the Animal Humane Society, she was quiet and timid. I played with her in one of the visitation rooms while she stared at me with a look that screamed, *are we done yet?* Her quiet demeanor, dark longing puppy dog eyes, and silky soft fur seemed like a good match for my daughters and me.

Although the card on her kennel, labeled "Dog Reactive!!" in red pen, suggested that she might have a behavior problem, there were many other dogs at the Humane Society, and she was not reacting with any of them. I took her for a walk down the trail behind the building, and she plodded along without so much as a glance at the chaotic canines fluttering with energy around us. I quickly adopted her and brought her home.

After a trip to the vet, I learned that Koda had contracted kennel cough, a common canine respiratory condition that can also suppress the natural characteristics of a dog's personality. When her symptoms cleared, the meaning of "dog reactive" became undeniably apparent.

In the presence of any other dog, the hair on Koda's back stands up, her focus becomes fixed, and she pulls, snarls, and jerks wildly - a reaction that occasionally allows her to slip out of her collar and frees her from my control. This reaction is also precipitated by joggers, bikers, small children running towards us, and the occasional passer-by who just plain looks intimidating.

For fear of a lawsuit, I sought help at several training facilities, including the Humane Society where I adopted Koda, but her problems were too great for the typical dog socialization class. They knew better than to let us in.

Despite the grim outlook, I chose to follow the advice of an online dog training article. By drowning her with treats and praising her whenever we crossed paths with another dog on our daily hikes through Brookdale Park, I hoped she would make positive associations with the encounters. However, I frequently found myself apologizing for her behavior and discouraging people from petting her. My only other strategy was to shorten the leash, brace myself, and hold on, but an off-leash dog was not something I could protect us against. We were at the mercy of the oncoming dog.

I hoped that we could pass the unavoidable duo without incident, but the man saw us and decided to walk towards us. He was in full view now, an older man, probably in his 60's or 70's, followed by a stout, stubby-legged terrier with white and brown patches. There was no escape.

"That's such a beautiful dog you have there. What kind of dog is it?"

He continued towards me while Koda froze and stared. I took a deep breath and prepared myself for the altercation.

"She's a shepherd mix," I replied in the friendliest voice that I could summon.

The terrier mix approached calmly to sniff. Koda seemed calmer than usual, but she wore the mohawk of nervousness down her spine. The two dogs sniffed noses, Koda's ears perked up, and her attention was completely invested in the strange dog in front of her. Trembling with excitement, she tried to sniff the new dog's butt.

"She must be a puppy with all that energy. How long have you had her?"

I kept my eyes on Koda. "About four years, now."

“Really?” He reached out to pet Koda, “You must be young at heart like Buddy here.” Buddy gave his tail a little wag at the sound of his name. As his nose neared Koda’s backend, she snarled, but he just waddled casually away. Koda’s hair was still on end as she caught a quick sniff of his butt.

“Yeah, I’ve had Buddy for a good eight years now. He’s starting to get old, like me, but he still likes to play catch sometimes.” Buddy wandered off to sniff around a fire hydrant allowing Koda to ease up a little. The man praised his dog as he reached into his pocket, “Can I give her a treat?”

“Sure,” I replied. If there was anything that would help my training efforts, it was dog treats.

He reached in the front pocket of his jeans and pulled out a small bag of dog treats. After unraveling it carefully and selecting a small dog-bone shaped treat, he addressed Koda.

“Hi there! What was her name again? Koda. Yes? Would you like a treat, Koda? You’re such a pretty dog.”

He reached down as the dog’s ears perked up. She had no apprehensions about taking a tasty dog treat from a stranger. After swallowing the treat, she sat for a while in the road staring at the man. He continued talking with me about the gossip of the neighborhood and the warm summer weather while Buddy parked his butt in the lush grass near the fire hydrant.

“Yeah, we like to get out as much as we can. We both need the exercise.”

Koda sniffed around, searching for the treats that were previously available. She

looked up at him and nosed his pants. The man seemed unsure of how to act, but he reached in his pocket again.

“You want some more of those, don’t you?”

He gave another treat to Buddy, who accepted it with a grunt, then he handed one to Koda. She had picked up on the pattern at this point and kept her nose on high alert for any changes in the light breeze. She watched him intently and surreptitiously sniffed the air around his pocket. I tried to pull her back and scold her, but the man felt obligated to give her more treats each time she begged. The weight of my previous apprehension was replaced with guilt.

“You don’t have to give her any more treats,” I said. “C’mon, Koda. You’ve had enough treats!” Her gaze remained fixed on the man, and her nose twitched with each calculating thought about obtaining more dog biscuits. She sat back on her hind legs to get a better angle on the scent.

The old man seemed annoyed with her persistence, or maybe his pockets were empty, but it was clear that he was done passing out treats. He looked for a way to politely excuse himself then made the abrupt announcement.

“Well, we better get going. It was nice to meet you. C’mon, Buddy.” He wandered away up the hill without looking back.

Koda and I headed in the opposite direction. Though I felt guilty about letting my dog steal so many treats, I was relieved that the encounter had gone so smoothly. I felt a sense of accomplishment.

The next day, we took our usual hike through Brookdale Park and encountered another man walking. He didn't have a dog, but he greeted us politely, and Koda took the liberty of sniffing his pants pockets to see what he might be hiding.

"Are you looking for biscuits silly dog?" I asked.

She wagged her tail in response, but a definite change had taken place. Every person we encountered now was a potential source of meaty dog bones. Of course, they didn't typically have any, but I kept a stash in my pocket to keep her guessing. She stopped chasing joggers, she stopped chasing bikers, she let children pet her. I don't know if we'll ever see the old man again, and maybe, if we do, he will try to avoid us, but that man that I tried so hard to avoid was able to improve my dog's behavior problem in 10 minutes. Sometimes, she even allows other dogs to get close to her, but there is still plenty of room for improvement.

A Letter to a Father

By Anna Witry

Dear Dad,

As you know I am currently attending school for a degree in human services. This semester I took my college writing 1 class. Our last book, *Worldly Things*, by Michael Kleber-Diggs was a book that worked well with the things I am learning in my human service classes. I was surprised how well it fit considering it is a book of poems, and yet, this one book made me think more deeply about the current climate of the country than any other books I have read during my time at school. I caught myself remembering conversations we had on these topics as I read this book and from those thoughts this letter began to form.

You and I have such different views on things, especially politically, which does, unfortunately, include the lives of Black Americans. I have never been good at explaining my side of things. To me, it seems obvious that my belief in the idea that things need to change, for lack of a better way of putting it, is correct. I believe police brutality on people of color is a huge problem our country is facing while you think a simple “yes sir, no sir” is enough to ensure you get out of any police encounter alive. While you think minorities have all the same opportunities as white Americans, I see the opposite. But like I said, putting these thoughts into words that you can understand has never been a strong point for me. So as silly as it may seem to you, I think it would be a valuable experience for you to read *Worldly Things*. I think it can give you a better understanding of the world like it did for me. A better understanding of the past conversations we have had.

As a white American, and you, as a white male, how can we even think that we know the experiences of Black men and women in this country?

Michael Kleber-Diggs gets us as close as he can with just words. He paints a picture that we all can see and feel for. I know how much you love this nation. I know how much you want it to be great that it can be easy for you to dismiss the flaws as minor. After all, you have all the freedoms are forefathers dreamed of. There is a poem in the book, "America is Loving Me to Death," that has such a powerful passage that I hope can help you understand what the question of loving our nation means to Black Americans.

"Destroyed brown bodies, dismantled homes, so demolition stands even as my fidelity falls, as it must. She erases my reason too, allows one Answer to her only loyalty test: Yes or no, Michael, do you love this nation? Then hates me for saying I can't, for burying myself under her fables where we're one, indivisible, free, just, under God, her God" (Kleber-Diggs 46).

The whole poem is powerful, but this passage here, how can it not make you think? Make you wonder why we must love a nation unconditionally when it fails so many of the people it has sworn to protect. I know you will always love this country and I would never ask you to change that, but I would hope that if you read this book, you could see the flaws we have here and that we must change. For how can we be a great nation when so many of us live in fear, in hunger, and in despair? I believe to love this nation you must see its flaws and not only hope for a better future but to actively work for it. That is why I have chosen the human service field. A difference needs to be made as a whole but also on a singular level. My job would not only be to help people get the resources they need but also to educate them and our communities and the issues that currently plague our population. I cannot change the world, but I can make those minor changes that will help change the world.

Perhaps because you grew up in the cities, where there was more diversity, it does not phase you to see a young Black man in the back of a police car. Perhaps because I grew up in communities that had so little diversity there, that we had only

about a total of ten kids of color in my school, that I do take notice when I see a Black kid in the back of the police car. And perhaps it is even because of my upbringing in this community that my only thoughts on the situation were that he must have done something horrible to be arrested as a kid. Only to forget the whole thing hours later. Their struggle meant nothing to me, affected me in no way. In a way you could still say it does not affect me. I am not that kid; I was not the victim of whatever his crime was. Why should I care about someone I did not know. Someone I would never see again. But now when I see it, I want to scream, to cry. Why is a kid in the back seat of a police car, why does no one care? I know that is not true but there are times when it does not feel that way.

Like me, so many others want to say something, to fight the injustice they feel is taking place, but the fear is overwhelming. To attend a protest is one thing but to confront someone head on, police officers nonetheless, is another matter. A much more terrifying one. How does that make me better than those who do not even notice, who do not stop and wonder if this child deserves it? Or perhaps this has all become so normal that we know it is not right but if it has not changed yet, why should we think our action would make a difference. Kleber-Diggs very first poem reflects this thought to me. The poem I speak of is called, "End of Class." Kleber-Diggs is talking about picking his daughter up from high school, a young Black girl, when he sees a young Black boy in the backseat of the police care. His daughter, who only knows enough to say three sentences when her father asks about him, does not even pause. Maybe due to her age the thought of doing something does not even occur but even to her father the occurrence seems like just another part of a perfectly normal day. He gives it a minute of thought before he moves on. It is not that he does not care, but more about what he can do. He is only one man. A father with his daughter in the car.

I remember when the news of George Floyd's death came out the world was angry. I was stunned. I had spent some years now feeling a surface level anger at the

unnecessary deaths of Black American's killed by police. I told myself that I was against what was happening in our country, but I never truly paid attention. I would read the article following the death of a young Black man, get angry, and then move on. I would like to think it was because of my age, that I was young and naïve. Sadly, the truth of the matter is that I was so withdrawn from these issues that they were easy to ignore. But I was in my twenties when Floyd died. I had been in college for more than two years and had heard in-person stories from classmates who had faced discrimination. Who had feared for their lives or the lives of a loved one from the police. That flimsy excuse no longer worked. So as hard as it was, I watched that video. I cried and raged for the loss of an innocent life. I signed petitions that were aimed at holding his killers accountable. I wish I could say I took it a step further by joining the protest, but I did not know anyone who would go with me (and what does that say about the community we live in), and my anxiety was crippling when it came to handling new situations alone, so I just did not go. It may seem small to you, but it is something I still regret.

It was discussing the protests with you that I realized that our views were so different. When I asked for your opinion on the matter, your thoughts were that while you did not think Floyd deserved to die, he should not have been "resisting arrest." I will admit that I could not understand why that even mattered. Why did you think that it was worth mentioning? Resisting arrest did not mean killing him was okay. I know you do not really think it is okay, but I also am not sure if you think it is wrong. As I said earlier, I know you believe listening is all it takes to make it of those encounters alive. And if he had listened Floyd may still be alive but the fact that he was walking away does not mean his death is outcome that should be expected nor accepted.

As you read this you must think I find you to be this horrible person. That is not true. You are a good man with his own opinions that just happen to be different than mine. I have seen you agree in some of these cases that the police officers need to be sent to jail. You do not believe that Black Americans killed by police deserve to die.

You just think that it can be prevented by simply listening to the police officer and their orders. And why would you not when you have only had good experiences with police officers. When you get pulled over you have friendly conversations. You do not get stopped in stores or followed home. You are a white man protected by your white privilege.

I have watched you struggle for over a decade to understand my anxiety and depression with no success. To be honest, with the way you were raised and your personality I am not sure if you ever will, yet you still try. I know it is simply because I am your daughter but there are parents out there that would not even bother to try. You have always supported my desire to be a social worker, my passion that my calling is to help people. As I have struggled in school you have been right there pushing me forward. You want me to succeed not just because we are family but because you think I can make a difference. You would send me to bed telling me to “not let the bed bugs bite.” We would argue over who loved each other more. Knowing all this how could I ever think you are a bad person. I passionately believe that you are a good man who, despite struggling in life, has had some privilege that allows you to simply worry about issues that only effect you and your family.

There is so much more I could write to you concerning this topic, but this is a letter not an essay. This is me writing down the words that I can never seem to get out, to flustered or nervous. You turn sixty-one this year so I am not sure you can even change, but on the other hand you did change your opinion of my mental health. You may never understand it, but you have gone from seeing it as an excuse to a real illness. If that is possible why not this, too? I am sure that you will never get rid of your “yes sir, no sir” mentality when it comes to police, but at the very least it would be nice to see you not accept a death as a simple result of not listening to orders.

At the end of the day, you are still my father. Always will be. And though we have our differences I will always do my best to support you as you have done for me. If there is one thing that you have taught me in my twenty some years of life, it is that family sticks together. Even when you disagree, when they annoy you, and even when they embarrass you. You stick together.

With love,
Your daughter

A Toxic Workplace

By Lane Kadlec

I was driving into work with knots in my stomach and tears running down my face. I wondered to myself, *is this really my life?* In that moment, as much as I didn't want to admit it, I just knew I couldn't do it any longer. Even though I loved the job I was doing, having a corruptive boss was incredibly toxic to my health, happiness, and relationships.

The company I worked for did garden maintenance and install, it is also owned by a woman named Anita. When I first started, I had no idea what I was doing. I had never done any gardening, hell I hardly even left my house. I was incredibly nervous on my first day, but everybody seemed nice enough and I felt very welcomed. I caught on a lot faster than I ever expected and before I knew it, I had fallen in love with gardening and in love with the company I worked for.

Anita seemed like such an amazing boss. During the slow part of the season, every Thursday she would take the entire crew on educational field trips, we always went somewhere plant related, and it was always a blast. For example, one Thursday we went to Grove Nursery, which is a wholesale nursery. Anita let us walk around and look at all the perennials, annuals, shrubs, and trees. She had us take notes on our favorite plants, or ones we found unique, and we had to share what we learned with the group at the end. It was very interesting to see all the different types of plants, but more importantly I was eager to learn about those plants.

Anita would constantly tell me how fast I caught on, and what an outstanding job I had been doing. Multiple times that summer I got handed an envelope with a gift card, and a short note expressing her gratitude for my hard work, and willingness to learn. It made me feel like I was on top of the world. I could not picture myself

working anywhere else, and even started to imagine my future at the company. All I could think about all winter long was going back to work.

Fast forward to the first week in March 2021, just two weeks before the gardening season started up for the year. I had bought a couple of plants through my boss, and I went to pick them up, it was then that Anita told me she would be training me to be crew lead. I was ecstatic! I would eventually be overseeing all of the gardening needs at assigned job sites and would be in charge of a crew of three to five people! I thought this would be a great opportunity for me, but little did I know what was to come.

Keep in mind that I started in July 2020, and the work that is done in the spring, summer, and fall all differ from each other greatly. On our first day out in the field for the year Anita assigned me as crew lead, and my crew consisted of two new employees who had never done any gardening before. I had almost no idea what I was doing and was incredibly overwhelmed. I had never had any crew lead training and had never even worked a single day in the spring. I called our operations manager, and she walked me through what to do that day and many days in the months that followed.

After a couple of weeks, I slowly improved my crew lead abilities as well as my confidence in my work, but everything else slowly got stripped away. All those compliments Anita gave me my first year turned into insults, the field trips turned into micromanagement, and the gift cards turned into casting blame. My love for the company turned to hate and carrying around all that hate did harm to my health, happiness, and relationships.

I had the opportunity to work on containers with another coworker, the homeowners loved the outcome and all we needed was Anita's approval. I sent her pictures of the containers and not even a couple of minutes later I got a phone call from her.

When I answered the call there was immediate screaming, the containers were not up to her expectation. I tried to explain that the homeowners were very satisfied, but she did not want to hear it. Insults kept flying out of her mouth left and right, to the point that I could not listen to her hurtful words alone. I put the call on speaker for my coworker to hear and immediately her jaw dropped, she could not believe the things Anita was saying. At that point I was nearly bawling, and not having the courage to stand up for myself I told Anita we would fix it.

That day was the beginning of the end for me and afterwards things got even worse. It felt as if overnight Anita turned into a micromanaging boss. For weeks after the incident I just described, Anita insisted on, what she called, “shadowing me.” She would ride along to my jobsites and sit in the truck and watch our every move. If I was not doing something fast enough, or the exact way she trained me Anita, would text my cell phone, and normally not nice things. Since Anita told us we were not allowed to be on our cell phones on jobsites, I would not look at the messages. After a couple of minutes with no response from me, she would open the truck door and start yelling across the yard. “Wrap it up,” “move faster,” “what are you even doing?” It felt like no matter what I did, or how fast I moved I was always wrong. Instead of helping me, talking to me, or showing me how to do better, she shadowed me.

It wasn't long after that when I realized Anita loved casting blame on other people. For example, one day she was onsite at a jobsite, and she got a phone call. She quickly told my coworker and I to start planting perennials, and she even showed us where to plant. She then hurried to the truck to take her phone call in private. We quickly did as we were told and by the time she got back we were almost done planting. She ran over to us and started yelling at us because we had done it all wrong, and we were not even supposed to start planting yet. We were both shocked because we had done exactly what she had asked us to. Without even taking a second to let us explain our side of the story, we got scolded and belittled. I couldn't

even tell you how many more times something like this happened to one of my coworkers or myself.

Working under these circumstances was incredibly stressful and exhausting. I was angry too, what happened to the job and boss I loved and looked up to so incredibly much? It didn't take long before I carried all of that stress, exhaustion, and anger home with me. I had so much stress bottled up that I felt like a plant that got too big for its pot. Its roots began to wrap around one another and without intervention they suffocate themselves. I began picking arguments with my boyfriend, even when there was nothing to argue about. I was angry all the time and without realizing it, I started to take it out on him.

After work all I did was eat and sleep, I hardly talked to any family or friends. I did not have the energy to cook myself more than a simple, or microwavable meal, and the house slowly got more and more cluttered. I mean, after a ten-hour day of getting belittled and feeling like I could not do a single thing right, I was beyond exhausted. I dreaded going into work every single morning, I started getting anxiety attacks, and more often than not I cried the whole way there.

I finally found the courage to quit my job in the middle of June 2021. After I quit everything seemed to fall into place, I was more social and my relationships improved, I was able to get out of bed every day without a fight, and I was an overall happier person. It was then that I realized how detrimental having a corruptive boss was to my health, happiness, and relationships. This experience taught me many things but mainly to put yourself first, it is scary and overwhelming, but things will start to fall in place.

A Broken Sink

By Jacee Vang

Growing up, my family frequented a place named Willow Park every summer up until I reached middle school. It had a large field fit for all kinds of sports and a hill tall enough to challenge the trees surrounding it. Our favorite aspect of the park as kids though, were the interconnected playgrounds, one large and one small, that satisfied both the younger and older children.

When I was 7 years old, it was on one of those summer days that my cousins and I sprawled around the interconnected playground's larger infrastructure with no motivation to do any physical activity. The sun made our clothes sticky and hot against our skin, and we figured running would only do so much worse for us. So instead of playing a game of lava-tag like we usually would, we talked. It was random subjects: our favorite colors, who was the worst at games, who hosted the best birthdays. I'm not sure who brought it up, but eventually, it got to the question: who was your favorite uncle?

Some cousins shouted their answers at the same time, some of us waited for the noise to calm down before giving ours. I didn't think much about my answer when I gave it to the other kids. It was the first and only answer I could think of, but it still felt like the most suitable answer for me.

"Uncle Kye," I answered easily.

I don't think anyone had been surprised by my choice. Uncle Kye was one of the nicest uncles we had. He never raised his voice at us, even when we were too loud or made a mess of his kids' toys around their house. Uncle Kye would offer us frozen breadsticks whenever we stayed at his house, kept a stash of ice cream just in case

we needed something sweet after dinner, and called us endearing nicknames like *buddy* or *sweetheart*. It was a bonus that I was close to his son, Alec, therefore adding to my favoritism for the entire family.

I turned to catch Alec's eye and watch for his reaction to my response—waited for a boast of praise for his father, or a teasing comment about how I only liked the endless supply of ice cream his house offered—but found that the fellow 7-year-old had already been looking at me with a look of skepticism on his features, head tilted in an owlish way that made me feel like I had given the wrong answer.

“Really?” Alec questioned when he realized I was looking at him now.

No amusement lingered in the question, nor was there any hostility that I thought I might've caused. Instead, the boy seemed genuinely surprised with the answer I had given; the intensity of the curiosity in his stare said as much. It was as if Alec couldn't fathom the concept of his father being anyone's favorite person. I shifted uncomfortably under his gaze.

I remember being confused, doubtful that he had even heard my answer correctly. I wondered why the answer had been enough to elicit that kind of response, let alone from Uncle Kye's own son. I had wondered again why Alec hadn't realized *why* his father was my favorite uncle. After all, I spent more time at their house than I did at mine at the time. To me, it felt crazier to give any answer other than Alec's father to the earlier question, when I really thought about the other options I had. I hadn't been that passionate about my choice, but Alec's reaction had sparked a feeling of doubt within myself that I wouldn't understand for years to come.

When I was 14 years old, I watched Uncle Kye spit the most degrading words I'd ever heard at his wife while my parents and I sat at their dinner table. We had been invited to dinner, but half of the food was still missing from the table, lost during the

one-sided commotion between my uncle and aunt. The two stood next to a broken sink, its handles twisted far enough that water should've been pouring heavily out of its faucet, yet no water was spilling out. As I listened to Uncle Kye's words become less about the sink and more about my aunt, the only thing I could think of was that conversation on that old playground, Alec's disbelief, and my confusion. *Ah, that's what he meant.*

It's not hard to fix a broken sink. The internet had told me so when I searched for the best options to save a faucet that wouldn't turn on. On average, it takes about a hundred dollars and two hours' worth of someone's time to repair it—maybe two hundred dollars if it's bad enough. I repeated those numbers in my head on a continuous loop, sitting in my aunt and uncle's brightly yellow-lit kitchen and staring at their figures still by the sink. I remember setting my phone down at some point after receiving the information about how much the bill would be.

I had tried to understand my uncle's anger, to see what consequences would make him so red in the face and lose his rationale enough to not care that my family was in the same room with them. I remember thinking that two hundred dollars couldn't be worth the humiliation my aunt was probably feeling, nor could any other price tag for that matter. Even though I thought this, I also remember picking my spoon back up from its place on the table to eat my food again, whatever food had made its way to the table before the commotion had begun. The other eyes in the room wandered as well, as if it would make the scene before us disappear, along with our witness to it. I tried especially to not look at my mother who sat next to me, nor make eye contact with her, not that she was trying to do either with me. She had preoccupied herself with her meal, head tilted down, making a point to only look at the phone in her hand.

I was angry. For many reasons, I was angry at the scene playing before me. I was angry at how small my aunt—usually bright and outspoken—looked. I was angry at

the lack of support she was receiving and the lack of protest from everyone else in the room. But, most of all, I was angry at myself for doing the same: nothing. I looked up only once more to see my uncle, brows furrowed in a fit of anger I couldn't understand; my aunt, head bent so far forward that her hair formed a curtain around her figure and her eyes meeting her feet. She repeated quiet, defeated apologies in between every comment from Uncle Kye. My eyes found their way to the broken sink again. *A hundred dollars. Two hours.* For many years after that day, the thought prevented me from using their sink peacefully.

It was never kept a secret that Uncle Kye had a temper. It was just that I had never been at the end of it nor witnessed with my own ears and eyes the full capacities of what his anger could be like. I only heard exaggerated stories of high school days or complaints from the other adults behind closed doors. I always dismissed it. After all, I couldn't imagine Uncle Kye—who once picked me up in a snowstorm after I'd been locked out of my house—being as angry as the adults had said he often was.

The sink incident reminded me of the summer after I turned 11, when my family took a trip up north for our annual July 4th camping trip. It was a trip like any other. Most days were filled with swimming at the lake and nights of waving around sparklers that burst into yellows and whites. The actual night of July 4th had filled the sky with loud sparks of color that we tried to catch in our hands as they fell back to earth.

I don't know what caused the fight on our last night at camp. When I think about it now, maybe the tension had just been boiling over the past couple of days, or perhaps that day, in particular, had just hit a nerve for my uncle and aunt. Whatever the reason, my uncle and aunt started to argue. I think they tried to keep it small, or at least that's what I hoped. What began as a minor disagreement though, turned nastier by the second, and suddenly, it was as if the pair had started to hold a competition of who could yell the loudest and Uncle Kye was winning by a long shot.

While the other adults tried to ease the ruckus now taking place on the campsite, us children sat in a corner of the campsite with our camp chairs clustered together. Our chairs formed a circle as if to shield ourselves from the outside chaos. The foldable chairs were so close to one another that the legs knocked against each other, clacking every few moments due to one of the restless kids who had attempted to sit still for too long. It felt like background music to the angry words that surrounded us.

We didn't talk to each other; we just twiddled with our fingers and cast longing glances toward the tents. Some tents were too far away for elementary kids to venture to alone in the middle of the night, and some that required putting yourself in the middle of the commotion to get to. It wasn't just that we didn't want to speak, but couldn't, for we knew it would only get lost in the words being thrown behind our chairs and swallowed up by our parents' attempts of peace-making.

Many of the older kids seemed disinterested, bored, even, with the event of the night. They seemed like the ones waiting for the commotion to die down in order to settle into their tents and I had to wonder if this was nothing new for them, if they'd seen it all before. It was easier for the younger kids to sit through the argument, unable to comprehend the hurtful words nor remember this moment the next day, and the older kids seemed numb to the dramatic nature that alcohol always seemed to produce with these kinds of holidays. I was at the age of comprehension but did not have the experience yet to numb the event, toss it into the deepest part of my memory and label it as something that just *happened* sometimes. I was terrified. I felt alone in my fear. I had never heard the kind of voice my uncle was using, nor the words that slipped past his mouth and were directed at his wife. I didn't think I could ever get used to hearing my other aunt crying for Alec's mother, or the panic in my father's voice as he tried to hold back Uncle Kye from doing something I could not see.

Once, during my terror, I looked at Alec. The young boy sat in the chair next to mine with his elbows on his knees, head hung low with only his hands to catch his forehead. He looked like the fight was his own doing. It scared me more. It was unnerving to see someone barely the same age as I was look like he had the entire world hanging off his shoulders. I remember tentatively reaching out to him. I wanted to hold his hand or grab his shoulder, just do *something* that told him he didn't have to look like that. It confused me. Why was he the one who looked like hell when it was his parents that were arguing? When my fingers tapped against the hands holding his head hostage, I saw his eyes slowly peek out from between his fingers before being released entirely from its grip to meet my eyes. I tried to ask with the silence we shared if he was okay.

Alec sighed defeatedly and a puff of air followed suit, the air chilly even though it was midsummer. He looked embarrassed as he whispered for only me to hear, "I don't know why they're acting like this right now."

The words Alec felt too embarrassed to say sounded like a parent defeated by their child's unruly behavior, and I had to wonder who the parent truly was in Alec's house and who the child was. It made my heart ache to the point of discomfort. And because I was 11 and could comprehend it, but not numb enough to want to understand any of the feelings I felt just yet, my hand, which reached out for him earlier, slowly tucked itself under my thigh for warmth instead. I could not meet Alec's eyes for the rest of the night, nor when we left the next day.

I thought back again, to when I was 13 and I sat outside Alec's front porch steps. A few of us cousins had a sleepover the night before, and the day had begun with an intense game of Wii Tennis that we were taking a break from with ice cream given by Uncle Kye as a treat.

"Your dad's always so nice. He gives us ice cream every time we come over!" Lily,

a cousin three years younger than me, had voiced, pleased with her double scoop of vanilla ice cream. I paid no attention to her words as I watched ice cream drip down onto her shorts, lecturing her for the mess she was creating. Truthfully, I hadn't listened to what her words meant, nor the bitter irony of it, not with my ice cream also beginning to drip down my hands. I also hadn't expected it to give way to any other conversation, but as I attempted to lick away the melted ice cream, Alec hummed in response to Lily's comment.

"He's only like that to you guys," Alec's words were an offhand comment, but it made me stop in my actions.

My mind betrayed me by showing me fuzzy images of a late night, huddled with other kids on folding chairs, and Alec's expression before I tucked my hand under my thigh. No adult or kid brought up the last night of the camping trip after we left the site, and I pushed the event almost entirely out of my memory, to be forgotten. It's easy to forget something if no one talks about it. Alec's words pulled the memories of the event back into my head, fresh again. He didn't seem to notice the effect his words had on me though. He munched the rest of his cone to bits and wiped his hands on the ends of his shirt before jumping up from his spot on the porch. He said something about sticky hands and avenging his reputation in tennis before heading back inside the house. I tuned out the rest of Lily's words and anything else Alec had said before leaving to look at my ice cream, dripping freely now. I thought about Alec's words and the house I sat in front of. I thought about how I told Alec's mother, my aunt, that their house was my second home every time I stepped inside, how my aunt called me her second daughter and the way Uncle Kye called me sweetheart. I recalled the countless sleepovers and mornings after where I ate American-styled breakfasts and indulged in sweets like I never could at my own house. I thought about how unbothered Alec was by his own words, and what that meant. My ice cream melted into a puddle on the porch's wooden surface at some point during my thoughts. I don't think I could've finished it anyway.

That day the sink broke, when I was 14, we had to go home early. I tried not to question the reason why we were leaving so soon and instead made my way toward Alec's room to say my goodbyes for the day. When I walked in, the young boy who had started to grow past my height in the last few months was splayed across a foldable chair in the middle of his room, playing video games. I tried to say a quick goodbye since he looked preoccupied with clicking a few more times on his controller. Alec rushed to assure me that he just needed a minute more, for me to wait a moment longer. I barely had to wait that minute more before he shot up into the air with a shout at his friend for letting him die. Alec then turned to meet me with those familiar eye crinkles, a warm smile on display as he crossed his room to hug me, as he always did when we parted ways. I couldn't help the smile that took over me as well, more of relief than anything, I had realized. The scenes of dinner had played in my head over and over again which made it hard for me to understand that the person who hugged me was different from the man I heard earlier. I felt reassured to know that Alec was still just the soft-spoken, dorky tween who vowed to grow taller than me every opportunity he could and sulked when I forgot to call him my best friend.

I realized then that there was had always been a reason for Alec's actions, aside from his sincerity. I briefly recalled a moment of vulnerability, during one of our many sleepovers where Alec had whispered under the covers about how he wished to be different from his father. I had been half asleep and much too ignorant to understand at the time, but I remember whispering back a quiet question of *why*, fighting off the sleep trying to take over. Alec's answer hadn't hit me at the time, but as I pulled away from the hug of the younger, I understood. Alec made it a point to be kind, especially toward women, even more so to his mother. He was carefully polite and gentle with girls, always patient and always understanding. There had never been a moment in our lives where Alec had raised his voice at me nor any other woman, even if a line had been crossed—and it was because he wanted to be better than his father was.

When I thought about Alec's wish, I wondered if Uncle Kye's dark side had ever been a secret to begin with. I thought about how Alec had probably always wanted to bring the topic of his father up to me. I questioned if I had truly just been in denial for most of my life, choosing to feign my shock at the age of 14. Maybe I just couldn't accept that the person who I saw as a father figure for most of my life had been nothing like I thought he was, at least not to everyone else.

By the time I had come out of my thoughts, Alec was back in his chair, clicking away at his controller once more. I lowered my head for the second time that day, staring at my feet. Alec was no longer looking at me, but I still felt small under his presence, the shame and guilt flooding my insides. I said a quiet goodbye as I closed his door again.

The sink was fixed by the next time I came over, though I couldn't have said the same for my relationship with Uncle Kye. I wasn't sure if my uncle or anyone else had noticed, but if they did, no one said anything. Usually, when I walked through their front door, I'd greet everyone I met along the way to Alec's room, as he lived on the farthest end of the home. However, this time, when I walked into Alec's home, I purposely walked past my uncle in a silent act of defiance against him. *For my aunt*, my heart reasoned. *For Alec too*, I had supplied as an afterthought. I greeted Alec's mother as she washed the dishes and I tried not to let my eyes settle on the faucet. I took notice that it wasn't possible to tell the other day's event had even occurred with the way my aunt was acting. It had only been a couple days since the dinner that was cut short, but my aunt made it seem like nothing had happened. The warmth in her greetings and the animated way in which she conversed with my mother were the same as usual. I tried not to think about why she might've wanted to pretend like nothing happened or why it was so easy for her to brush it away. I especially tried not to wonder if the situation had been so normal for my aunt that it truly was nothing to her.

When I greeted Alec that day, I made sure to meet his eyes. He hadn't understood that it meant anything, but it was something I wanted to keep to myself anyway. I promised myself that I'd welcome his vulnerability with open arms the next time he needed me to. I no longer wanted to be ignorant, I wanted to understand. I thought that it was the least I could do, after pulling my hand away from Alec for so long. If understanding meant losing what I saw in my uncle, I thought it'd be okay as long as it meant being there for my cousin.

Dinner that evening had been hard, to say the least. I realized that the discomfort I used to feel whenever Alec would mention his father's true nature in passing was the same one I felt looking at my uncle now. Most of my interactions with Uncle Kye had been tight smiles and averted gazes. It was almost humorous that he was the one I could no longer look at, as opposed to Alec. I decided then, during dinner, that the worst part of growing up had to be seeing people for who they really were. It was a bitter realization to have during dinner. During the same dinner though, as Alec insisted on giving me the last of the curry, I also decided that the best part of growing up was being able to understand things for what they were and being able to choose what truth I accepted.

The Mile Challenge

By Kate Kariniemi

I ran with all I had left down the last 100-meter stretch. As I crossed the finish line, I gasped out in heaving breaths “wah wasmy time,” and practically collapsed onto the turf as my exhausted body, from my legs and lungs to my arms and facial muscles, gave out. My mom said in a tone that hinted towards her excitement for me, “six fifteen.” I laid on my back, still completely out of breath, and smiled in joy and shock, feeling both numb and elated as the victory sank in. I asked her multiple times in the next few minutes if it was really exactly 6:15, until she finally just showed me the timer. Those six minutes and fifteen seconds represent so much more than a mere measure of time. They represent hard-earned bits of understanding about who I am and what I’m made of. They represent the journey I went on to get that time, grit gained and roadblocks overcome. Those six minutes and fifteen seconds taught me lessons I will carry forever.

For context, the 1600-meter race is a distance run in track and field; it’s not technically a mile but is close enough that I personally consider them to be interchangeable. Anyone who knows anything about running, especially at the high school level, knows that a 6:15 minute mile for a sophomore girl is somewhat fast, but nothing special. In fact, she wouldn’t qualify for any big meets, and if the track program were highly competitive, she might not even make the team. So naturally the question that arises is, does it even matter that I, as a sophomore girl at the time, ran a six minute and fifteen second mile? This is the story of why for me, it did.

I had always enjoyed running, but a few years back, I realized that it was a passion of mine. The fastest time I ran the mile five years ago was 6:42. Unfortunately for various reasons I wasn’t able to do track for the next three years. I still ran by myself

casually in those in-between years, and I made different goals, such as completing a 10-kilometer race which I did one summer. While that was fun, I found myself often reminiscing on the fast, long, lung-and leg-killing, mile. I decided to pursue the mile again, and I signed up for track. I had practice for about a week, and then Covid hit, and spring sports were cancelled. I didn't want to give up, especially with the reminder I had on my door. In bold, black, thick sharpie I'd written on a poster, "Run a sub 6:30 Mile." In my mind, I was three years older, and therefore three years stronger and faster than when I had run a 6:42 mile. This goal seemed like a minimum requirement before I started training for a real challenge. If someone had told me then that I'd have to train, replan, struggle, try not to give up, and learn about myself for over a year in order to accomplish this goal, I wouldn't have believed them.

Shortly after putting this goal into writing, I went to the track with my family to run 1600 meters. I wasn't absolutely positive I'd meet the milestone I had set, but I figured if I didn't, I'd at least be close. A part of me hoped I'd smash my goal and have to set a new, much harder one, maybe in the five-minute range; I had been base training for a while, and I certainly felt ready to push myself. Maybe that's why I was so surprised by what happened next. I ran an awful, disappointing time of 7:50. I was devastated in that moment, and I'll admit that I cried on the way home. My mom tried to console me, saying that I had grown in the last few years, and was no longer a wispy structure of skin and bone, but a fuller, taller person. My sister said she still thought I was fast. I understood what they were saying, but I was still disappointed and angry at myself. Looking back, I see a girl that hadn't yet learned patience or compassion for herself. Despite all this, one good thing came out of that run: it was a wake-up call. I began training more than I had previously and ran almost every day. I completed a mix of tempo runs, intervals, long runs, easy runs, and hill sprints. These technical terms describe a few basic runs that are the building blocks to improve at almost any distance. After consistently following my running schedule for a few months, it seems that the turning point should have been that summer. I

should be able to stop the story here and say, “the goal was accomplished! Hard work pays off and practice makes perfect.” The truth is, I ran all summer, through achy legs, shortened breath, lack of motivation, humidity, and the occasional great day. But it wasn’t enough. I wasn’t getting faster.

I didn’t know this at the time, but I had developed exercise-induced asthma, which meant that what should be an easy run is actually a fairly difficult run as my lungs constrict and the oxygen levels in my blood decrease. My frustration built over that summer and by late fall I actually decided to quit running altogether. I had gone from loving a sport to despising it.

To some, it could seem as though I was overreacting, but this goal had come to represent more than running, it was my way of proving to myself that I could handle a challenge. As I’ve grown and matured, I’ve recognized that my need to achieve could stem from a deeper need to prove something to the world, or myself, but at the time, I had no awareness of this. All I knew was that if I didn’t get this time, I was a failure, and that made me angry. No one was pressuring me to do this, honestly no one really cared either, with the one blinding exception, which was me. I think this, in part, explains why I didn’t just make a more achievable goal after spending so much time and energy without much progress.

A succession of fortunate events caused a turning point. It began when I talked to a friend about my building frustration. Almost in tears, I explained how I felt that everyone else who trained consistently improved except for me. I described how I once ran a 6:42 mile, and now I was stuck in the sevens, pursuing under 6:30. She listened to my rambling thoughts, as they spilled out of me. Then when I was finally silent, she suggested I make a change. I could either work with a coach, join track, or find another goal, because doing the same thing and expecting different results would not end well. Finding another goal was parallel to giving up, and I wasn’t into that idea. I also didn’t want to give up on my love of running just for the sake of it,

regardless of times or paces. After considering my options, I ended up doing track, which I signed up for three weeks late. I completed some of the hardest workouts of my life on my first days, when everyone else had already been conditioned for the season. It was a rough beginning, but I was ready to become fast and strong again. I also was finally with like-minded people, one of whom asked me a pivotal question, “Do you have exercise-induced asthma?” The team and I had just finished a fairly difficult workout of nine-by-300’s, basically running 300 meters at a fast clip and walking back to the spot you started and doing it again in three sets of three, and I was breathing heavily. I had never heard of exercise-induced asthma and my immediate response to my teammate was that I was just out of shape and would be fine. However, after further discussion, I realized there was a good chance I had developed it, given my constant shortness of breath and occasional feelings of dizziness. A few days and a doctor’s visit later, I tried an inhaler, and the confusion I had about why I hadn’t been improving despite my efforts last summer disappeared. With an inhaler, I could now breathe at a normal tempo. Instead of gasping for air at the slowest pace my legs could move, I was feeling the exhilaration of running hard and knowing I could hold that pace. Running became something I did for enjoyment again, rather than out of pure stubbornness. As I continued to run with an inhaler, my once-forgotten hopes for my mile time increased. In track, I ended up being better at the 400-meter than the mile, so that was my distance, and for about two months, I didn’t run a single mile for time. Track ended in late spring, and I was back on my own. I had developed a dramatic tan line and what was later diagnosed as a minor stress fracture, but I also met new people, won some ribbons, learned a lot, and best of all, my love for running was back in full color. That season helped me build back my confidence and aggressiveness as a runner, and getting an inhaler made things finally click into place as I realized that the summer before had been a challenge because of my asthma, not because I lacked the grit to get through tough workouts.

After track season, with my new understanding and all-around strength, I felt ready

to once again attempt a sub six thirty mile. It was a perfect, early summer evening. My uncle challenged me to a race, though we both knew he was more of a pacer. We went to the track, and I felt a little nervous. I had been working towards this goal for years at this point, and I felt that if I was going to accomplish my goal in the near future, it would be during the upcoming run. But, I also no longer needed time to prove to myself that I was strong, mentally and physically. This sort of full circle moment I didn't recognize as possibly equally as exciting as what came next until much later reflections. In the moment, all I felt was that slight tension in the air that spoke of a hard moment to come, and my own nerves, that both excited and grounded me. Then my mom lined my uncle, siblings, and myself up, and said, "ready, set, go."

The first lap of a mile, in my experience, generally feels a little weird. On one hand, you want to get a fast start. This is because going too slow means you didn't use the "free energy," as my coach calls it, that builds up from all the adrenaline and excitement that you feel before the race. However, going out too fast means you'll crash midway through the second lap and not really recover, while still having a lap and a half to go. The best method for me is to not think too hard and just get the rhythm speed that feels right, which inevitably means I end up overthinking, though averaging out with a pretty good speed. However, occasionally I have a run that goes perfectly, and this was one. All I thought about was how great my pace was and how good my form felt. My legs seemed to be doing their own thing and my mind was just along for the ride.

By the second lap, I realized I had to speed up. I had to consider that maybe the first lap had felt good because I had, in fact, gone out too slow. On top of that, it's easy to feel like you have to conserve energy on the second lap, but after that one is the third, which just requires keeping the pace as fast as you can, and the fourth lap doesn't need any planning because you already know what to do—push with everything you've got left. Because of this, I chose to pick up the pace midway

through the second lap, and I never slowed back down. The end of the second lap was turning into a challenge, but it was supposed to be. I reminded myself of all the hard runs I had done and how little distance I had left and ran faster. By now the muscles generally start to fatigue and your entire body starts yelling “stop” in any way that it can. Personally, my vision gets less bright, which is probably related to the area behind my eyes that starts to feel pressured. My form wants to fall apart, and my legs feel like lead. I mean, even areas you don’t think would be affected, like ears or arms, start to feel tingly. In a way, at this point the physical part is done, and the mental game has begun.

Just beginning the third lap is where you see how determined you really are. I don’t actually grit my teeth, but that’s what my mind does. I was trying to do anything but think negatively, and my mom yelled, “dig in now!” I had just passed her on lap three and that bit of encouragement pushed me to leave everything on the track. After the hurt of lap three, lap four is a relief in a way only a miler can really understand. I guess it’s because while you now have to go harder than you have during the entire race, it’s also the last lap. The nerves and jitters are gone. The muscles aren’t fresh anymore, and people’s cheers aren’t heard. It’s you, and you. I don’t remember what I thought about, but I know that somehow I kept going. Suddenly there were 100 meters left. I was full out sprinting, raising the knees and swinging the arms. 50 meters, telling myself to hurry up, 10 meters, going through the finish line! I kept moving long enough to end up on the turf and lay there while every part of me tried to process and recover from what had just occurred. I make this sound like an awful experience, but I was flooded with pure elation. It was like I was one big smiley face, even if from the outside I looked like a mess. All I knew was that six minutes and fifteen seconds after starting, I finished 1600 meters, smashing my goal of a time under six minutes and thirty seconds.

Six minutes and fifteen seconds won’t win gold. There’s no fame, no recognition. However, I earned something more valuable than that. In the days after my

breakthrough run I journaled my thoughts. I realized that trying to meet some invisible standard for no clear reason isn't nearly as good of a motivator as simply trying to achieve the strongest, healthiest version of myself. Hopefully by reading this you felt inspired to run. However, if you didn't, that's fine too. More importantly, I hope you commit to something big and have a why that's solid. While it's true that the more you commit, the more you risk, it's also when you grow the most. My running journey could have ended at many points, but it didn't. Instead, I pushed a little harder.

The China Cabinet

By Emily Anose

My cheeks burn as my grandmother reaches for my hair, lifts a curl near my face, and scrutinizes it. I stare straight ahead at the old China cabinet across from me and ignore the hand grabbing near my face. “You know, *makkale*,” she starts, “I think your hair will stay this way.”

I raise an eyebrow, silently urging her to continue. “It is becoming less curly, you know, less...”

My grandmother must not know the term for “frizzy” in English and mimes it instead. I inwardly groan, but she does not drop the topic. “When you were younger, your hair was *too*...” she trails off, waiting for me to fill in the fact that my hair was “too thick”, “too frizzy,” or “too curly.” I do not, and I feel a bit of power at that moment. I am 15 years old now; finally mature enough to know that my curls will never be “too much” of anything.

Today, I’m sitting at a dining table meant for four, surrounded by my grandmother and grandfather. I’m alone on today’s visit to my grandparents’ house, so the fourth chair at our table is empty. I have no company to redirect this relentless attention to my hair. I keep staring ahead at the little China cabinet squeezed between the dining table and the wall, and I wish that the conversation would simply end. I don’t know how to respond to my grandmother’s comment. At the moment, I feel only pity for the woman who has the same thickness and hair texture as me. If she dislikes my hair, I can’t imagine how she must feel about her own.

A moment later, my grandfather pipes up. “I think it is becoming less and less curly. Look at it now,” he praises, “it’s very relaxed.”

My pity is quickly replaced by irritation. “No! It’s not,” I blurt, as bitterness claws its way up my throat. “No,” I try again, swallowing the venom down for a more deserving recipient. I am well and truly annoyed now, so I remind myself of my earlier pity.

“It’s not like that. I pulled my hair back today, which pulled the curls straighter.”

I declare this with stubborn confidence I do not ordinarily have. “My curls are typically ringlets, and my hair’s usually poofier too. I like it that way.” Surprised by my own defensiveness, I break eye contact and look away.

There’s a mirror in the cabinet, so I watch a reflection of myself shift in my seat. Embarrassment and annoyance color my features. My grandparents are quiet. The hand-built grandfather clock ticks; the dining table creaks. I stare at the teacups in the China cabinet and toy with a curl that’s fallen onto my face. I stare at their perfect shininess, and I’m reminded of the many times that I’d hated my hair’s lack of shine. For a long time, hated my own hair in general. I hated the volume, and the frizziness annoyed me to no end. I hated the awkward bend of my ringlets after they’ve been slept on. I hated the heaviness of such thick hair; it gave me regular headaches. I hated it so much and for so long. However, in this moment of quiet, of clock-ticking and table-creaking, I realize something: I *hated* my hair, but I do not *hate* it now. I don’t know when this change occurred, but my defensiveness proves it to be true. I do not hate it now.

Looking back to the mirror, I watch at the three figures in its reflection. My grandparents shift stiffly in their dining chairs; they’ve stopped staring at my curls and are instead observing the tablecloth with growing intensity. I wonder, quite suddenly, why my grandparents wished for my mother’s white traits to cover up the hair that their own blood has provided me with.

“Oh,” my grandmother interrupts my silent musing. “Your hair is still like that?”

I finally look up at her. “Yeah,” I murmur.

I should leave it at that, but I don’t. I am stubborn *and* defensive tonight, so I continue, “Actually, I like it this way. The style is fun. It makes me happy.”

My grandparents have never wished for anything but my happiness, so they are quiet once again. I’m on a roll.

“You have such similar hair to me, Grandma. Was it ever curly like mine?” I’m pressing ahead now, a new determinedness and curiosity burning within me.

“When I lived in India, it was curly,” she tells me, “but when we came here, it seemed to straighten out naturally.”

As soon as she says this, I doubt her words. I doubt her curls disappeared as swiftly as the Indian landscape beneath the plane she rode. I don’t tell her this, because I’m not interested in starting another disagreement. I nod with fake understanding and our table returns to silence.

Like a coward, I look away, back to the cabinet in front of me. Near my face in the mirror, a pale bowl is sitting upright on display. I observe the paleness of the bowl next to my face and am abruptly reminded of Fair and Lovely face cream. It’s an Indian cream whose only purpose is to make skin look dramatically fairer. It can be applied all over the face and body. I’m still staring at the pale China when I begin contemplating tanning lotion. Americans are also bombarded with advertisements. Instead of being encouraged to look fairer, white Americans are told that “sun-kissed”, olive-toned skin is best.

It’s suddenly clear to me at that moment: everyone loses in this strange, warped beauty game. I lose; my hair is too similar to that of my Indian ancestors. My white

mother loses; her skin is too pale for American beauty standards. My grandparents lose; they are both ebony-skinned and have coarse black hair. My grandparents *especially* lose; they are called the n-slur while trying to change a tire on the side of the road as a group of teenagers shoot by in a mud-covered pickup truck.

At this moment at the dining table, where the passage of time is marked only by an ancient grandfather clock's ticking, my grandmother stares at my hair. She isn't happy with it, but she doesn't say anything else about the topic. It's over for the night, and I feel I've won some battle with her self-hatred. Her adoration towards me trumps her annoyance towards our shared hair. At last, I don't look down this time as she watches me.

"I like my hair this way," I assure her again, "and I think yours is beautiful too." I mean it. I realize that during this quiet, awkward conversation, I've completely overcome the last of my self-consciousness towards my hair.

Now, I begin to wish the same for my family. I hope that someday, my grandfather can find hair products for his coarse hair with ease. I hope that someday, my mother doesn't feel pressured to use tanning lotion every summer. I hope that someday, my grandmother can see hair that looks like hers in American beauty magazines. More than anything else, I hope that they'll call it "beautiful."