



the
mosaic

spring
2018

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Marist College Literary Arts Society

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Ode to Nothing

Troy Demers

Third Place, Poetry

You awaken with a panic,
“Did I forget to set an alarm?”
You jump up in bed, and check your phone.

Saturday, January 27th.

Ahh. Saturday, the single most relaxing word in the English language.

A great relief flows through your body like chamomile tea through your veins.

“Hmm... what’s there to do today?”

Your brain flies through various responsibilities.

Class. Homework. Work schedule. Social obligations.

Nothing. What a beautiful realization.

The future of your next 16 hours stands over you, arm extended.

So much of life is carefully orchestrated by others, leading many to feel dissociated from their own lives.

Go to school everyday, and learn about some stuff you don’t care about.

Go home, be respectful to your father, keep your feet off the table.

Go to work, and your boss is shouting at you.

But these next 16 hours, you are free to do absolutely nothing. One of the best parts about nothing, is that it can easily turn into something.

Pick up a book and start reading. Call up an old friend and say hello. Get hooked on a new TV show.

But nothing is a rare and special entity, and it should be revered and honored.

And if what you want to do with your rare nothing-time is nothing, you should feel legitimized in your nothingness.

The next time you wake up on a Saturday morning with nothing to do, try to savor it.

Let the sun rays hit your face in bed with the internalized knowledge,

“If I really don’t want to...I don’t have to move from this spot at all.”

It makes all that time spent doing something all the more sweet.

My Most Loyal Friend

Hannah Kirk

She is always with me through the day
When I wake up to when I sleep
She never misses a birthday
And she never misses when I weep

She came into my life in high school
And has been with me ever since
She is calm and she is cruel
And stands there when I wince

She goes to all my events
Is there through all my falls
A guidance as she presents
And is there although I don't call

She is with me when I write every paper
And is with me for every decision
Disapproves as if I would caper
And forces me into collision

She is a blanket over me
Though I am not cold
I push but never does she flea
And keeps me in a tight hold

Her consistency I come to depend
She stands by me through it all
Anxiety is my most loyal friend
Because she doesn't leave me at all

Mountaintop

Katherine Maradiaga

where do you stand
on baseball versus bungee jumps?
traipsing tailgates or ascending mountaintops? it would be a lie to
deny
ignorance of your position

adventures with you
validate visceral desires to share every drop of sweat
every pound of bone
threats unencumbered

grasp my hand while I make the leap—
your fright of heights
and aversion to sunrise
tremble at my cognizance
of us, standing on the bluff

you forgo fear for me
I cannot thank you enough

METHOD ACTING, FOR STRANGERS

Brenden Davis

My life up until this point has been an exercise in

Method acting.

Who I am, or rather

Who I think I am, is an uncertainty.

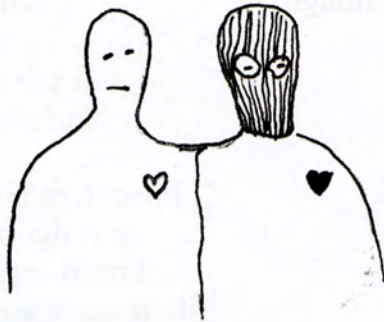
I know myself as much as I know you.

I am my own stranger.

But I am still comfortable,

If this nothing I'm familiar with can be called comfort.

I'm an actor at heart.



Seneca for a Toxic Love
The New York Times



BRENDEN DAVIS

Sestina for a Toxic Lover

Marisa Prezioso

Love until breathing becomes painfully unbearable
Let the waves of lust crash
Into your shoreline as you wait
For him to breathe life into
Your aching lungs, eager and yearning
You need his love, you need his soul

Pure, confused, damaged — that's his soul
But living without him is unbearable
So here I stay, forever yearning,
Praying for our worlds to crash
Baby please let me fall into
Your ocean; I don't wanna wait

He loves games so I wait
For a sign that his soul
Craves my eyes to look into
The thought of another is unbearable
No one else's bodies can crash
Together like ours; still I'm yearning

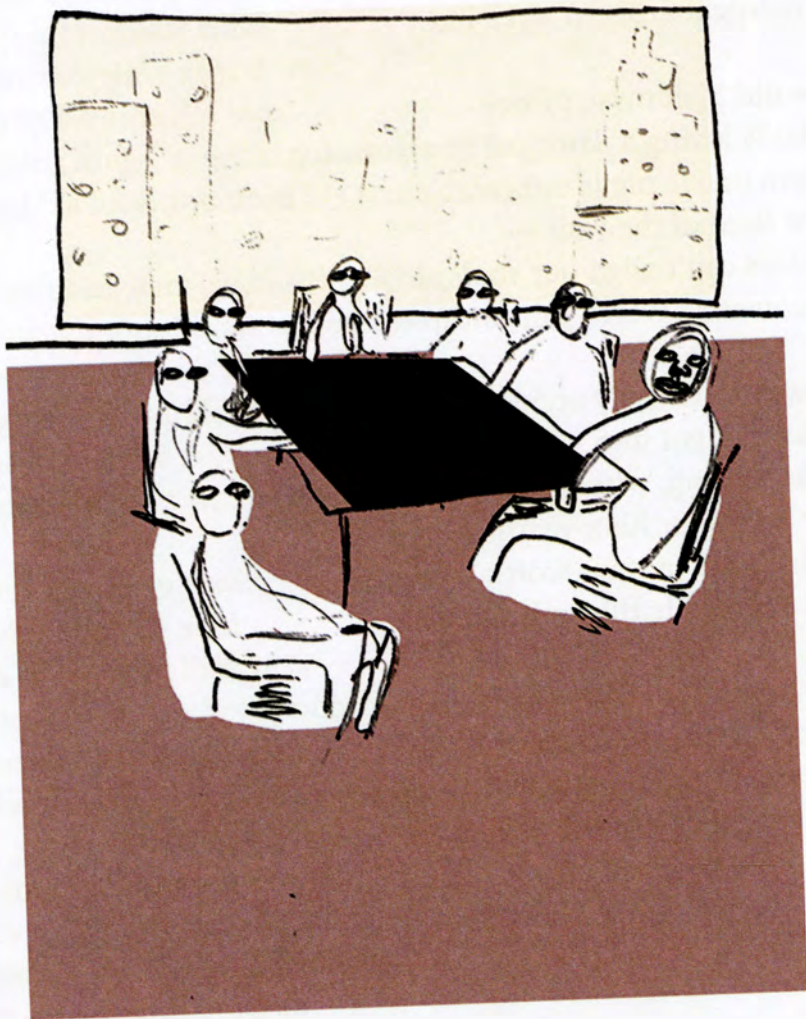
Why am I still fucking yearning
For his touch? He doesn't wait
Around for me, begging to crash
Into my body, into my soul.

The way he leaves is unbearable;
No midnight arms to wake into.

What did I get myself into?
Foolishly loving a damaged boy, yearning
For him inside me is unbearable.
I'm so tired of the wait —
The stars can't align our souls;
Our universes weren't meant to crash.

This was an entirely accidental crash—
Or was it? I got into
His car smiling, with my soul
In my hands for him, yearning
For his touch (always worth the wait).
Is the pain really this unbearable?

My yearning soul will search again,
Begging for a crash so unbearable,
I won't wait into the night
 [For his love anymore].



BRENDEN DAVIS
Third Place, Art

How to Write a Teen Novel

Brian Spiess

Congratulations to all those wannabe Stephanie Meyers, Rick Riordans, Suzanne Collins, and J.K. Rowlings watching this presentation! You've taken the next step in writing the newest young adult novel to take the world by storm! By following these simple instructions on how to make your teen novel a hit, you'll enter a world of laughter, excitement, and sweet, sweet profits!

Step 1 - Form a plot of some kind. This step of the process is pretty easy, as creating a plot to your book is really only limited by the scope of your imagination. However, for maximum success we offer these recommended settings/concepts:

- A post-apocalyptic future where some sort of evil tyrant reigns supreme, to remind your readers that **HUMANITY IS BAD AND WILL INEVITABLY DESTROY THE PLANET.**
- Something to do with the supernatural, preferably with vampires, ghosts, or really just any monster that teenage girls would find attractive.
- You also can't go wrong with a classic romance — boy meets girl, boy and girl are attracted to each other because of angsting or pretentious one-liners, and boy and girl overcome massive obstacles to be with one another. Note that this plot tends to blend in with the previous two.

Step 2 - Create your main character. Again, creating the main character of your piece is really only limited to the scope of your imagination, but here are some tips to keep in mind to create a truly profitable protagonist:

- The angstier, the better. Teens love compelling drama in their novels — somehow it makes them feel like they can “relate” to the main characters, plus it makes them more interesting to certain demographics.

- Have your main character rebel against some kind of norm. Again, this makes them more “relatable” to the angsty teens of today as they fight against their own metaphorical post-apocalyptic tyrants.
- Parental death (one or both is equally fine) is also a great cliché to use — especially if you’re Disney. This can either be in a random incident pre-story (better known as death by origin story), or in an assassination by the main antagonist, to give your main character a sense of vengeful purpose.

Step 3 - Include twists and turns for your protagonist as they go through the story arc. This makes the story more exciting and unpredictable, and also adds more character development for your hero. There are several kinds of twists in the world of teen novels, including but not limited to:

- The betrayal of a friend or love interest.
- The love interest you’ve been seeing this whole time is not the person the hero ends up with.
- The cliffhanger — where the story ends in the middle of the climax or predicament for our hero and is to be concluded in a sequel.

Step 4 - Sequel-begging...that’s all I can say. Staple a last-minute stinger to the end of your novel in hopes that your fanbase will demand a sequel, regardless of whether the plot ended or not.

Step 5 - Write as many sequels as your plot will allow! Assuming that your novel has a good ending and is loved by at least some people, you now have free reign to keep suckering in your now-rabid fanbase with continuations to your franchise, regardless of sequel rot or if the book you wrote was really any good to begin with!

Step 6 - The Franchise! — Making movies and merchandise out of your teen novel is an absolute must! Here you can follow in the footsteps of Harry Potter, Twilight, and the Hunger Games as you drain your plot and characters dry in the hopes of getting more fans.

Congratulations once again! You now know the insider secrets to creating the next great bestselling teen novel! You now have a piece of literary art that people will praise, compliment, analyze... and inevitably find something to complain about. Don't worry, though! You won't be able to hear the criticisms while counting your money!

Farewell for now!

I only express my feelings in sports metaphors

Caitlin Gaudio

Before Liverpool belonged to you,
It was just a rival crest
With players dressed in the historic shirt

Now the club is
A Swiss knife
With poisoned switchblades
Crisp as alpine air

And your name
May as well be red
Terrifying red
Like drops accumulating
Between split skin

I once believed
You were Istanbul
Where dreams were incarnate
And everything burned red
Magnificent red
But it seems you were actually

The 2015 title run
Your reaction to
Stevie's slip
Was likely comparable
To the way I felt
Hearing your voice crack
Over the phone line

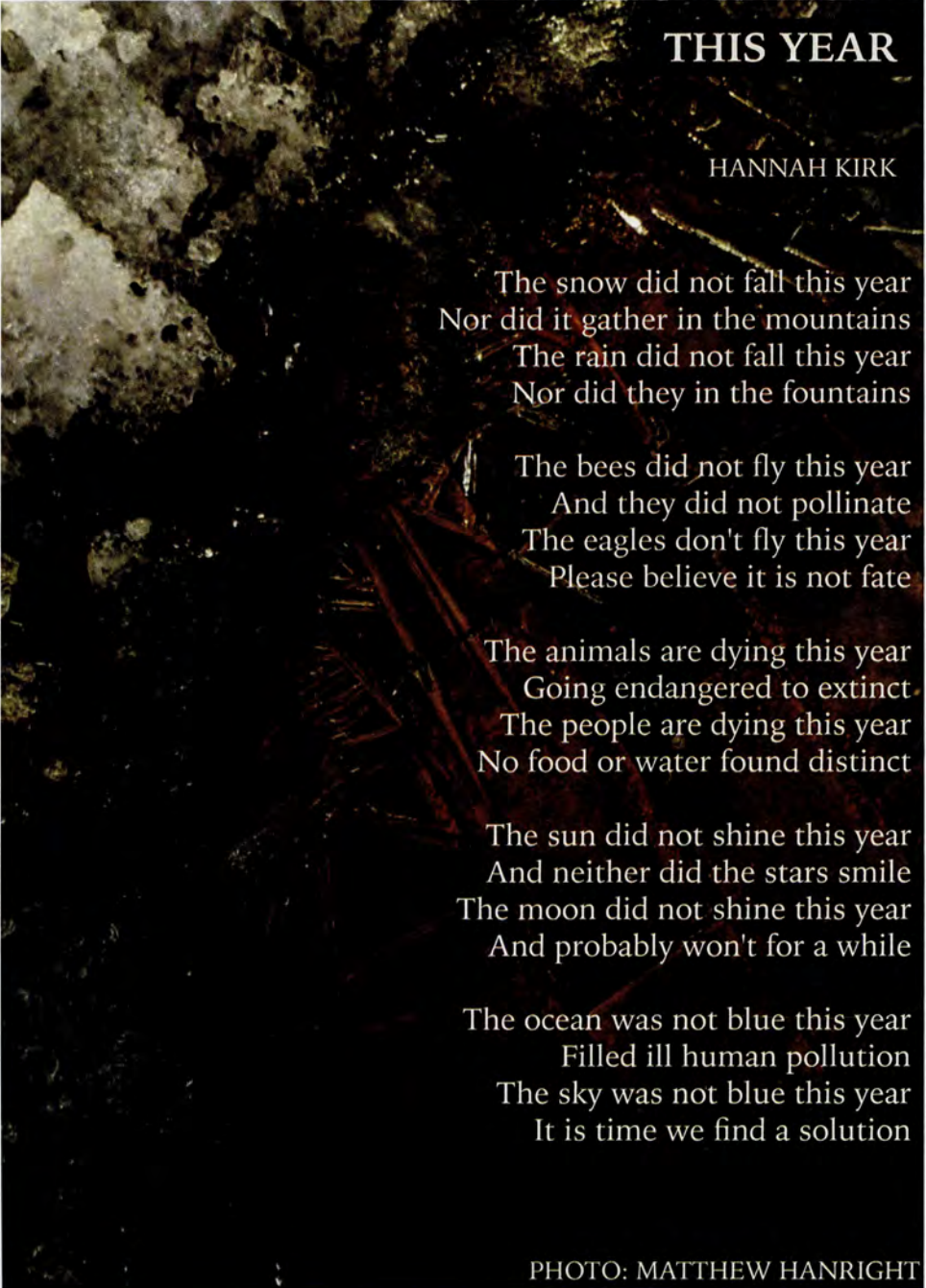
I had not realized
When I dreamed of men
Who loved their careers
Their ambition would be more
Than enough to leave
Loyalty behind

You blindsided me more
Than Fernando Torres
In the January transfer window
Because at least with him
There was advanced warning

My record for love
Without heartbreak
Is equal to the count
Of Jamie Carragher's league titles

That is to say
Maybe I should hang up my boots
And take myself out of the game

Just so I can stop
Challenging
For something that feels
Much too attainable
To have eluded me
This time



THIS YEAR

HANNAH KIRK

The snow did not fall this year
Nor did it gather in the mountains
The rain did not fall this year
Nor did they in the fountains

The bees did not fly this year
And they did not pollinate
The eagles don't fly this year
Please believe it is not fate

The animals are dying this year
Going endangered to extinct
The people are dying this year
No food or water found distinct

The sun did not shine this year
And neither did the stars smile
The moon did not shine this year
And probably won't for a while

The ocean was not blue this year
Filled ill human pollution
The sky was not blue this year
It is time we find a solution

PHOTO: MATTHEW HANRIGHT

Object Impermanence

Matthew Hanright

Tyler was a solid oak barrel wrapped in just enough floppy flesh to leave a full foot of skin and fur hanging to the ground. The humans he lived with called him a basset hound, usually preceded by a “damned,” and he loved them as they always kept his food bowl full, his water dish wet, and his back well scratched. He showed them his love as he was best equipped to do so, with slobbering licks and chewed up papers, laying like a fifty pound blanket across their feet at night, and making sure that anything that moved watched itself while it crossed his line of sight.

To their credit, the humans loved Tyler as well. His drooping eyes and ears, and unconditional love, however wet, was almost always enough to brighten a dim day. They depended on Tyler as something they all shared in common, and as a keystone that kept everyone upright and stable, but not too close to one another. As such, the humans would often bring home new toys for Tyler to play

with. A fluffy blue bunny, crisp counterfeit newspaper, a wonderful squeaky snake, and his absolute favorite: a lime green plastic toy dinosaur with rotating head, arms, legs, and tail. Of course, the baby was always stealing that one away, thinking it was his, but Tyler knew that when the others had first brought it home and handed it to the infant, that that was just an honest mistake.

Tyler played with that most magnificent dinosaur for many years, more than he could count, and the baby did as well. Eventually the baby started speaking to Tyler as well, and then Tyler got scared. The baby was always calling him a dreaded “bad boy,” or telling him “no.” It got to the point where he needed to fight with the child just to play with his beloved dinosaur for a few blissful minutes.

One day, the infant was particularly persistent. After competing for control of the rapturous reptile for several minutes, the child finally yanked it from his mouth and whacked it down on top of his head. Tyler was hurt, and scared, so he

did what he rarely did: he raised his voice. The child screeched and ran into the other room, dropping the delicious dino in his wake. Tyler snatched it from the ground, and ran to his favorite chewing spot in the backyard. With the leaves rustling overhead and sun dancing across his multitude of folds, Tyler set once more to nibbling and slobbering over the dusty remnants of his once new toy.

He set his teeth to one of his grooves, along the neck, when with a pop the head came free, and shot straight down his throat. Tyler was surprised, and growled in annoyance, but a new protrusion now presented itself for his maw, and he wasted no time in setting to this glorious task.

Not much later, at least he thought so, but he wasn't so good with time, his stomach started to growl at him. He growled back, but instead of stopping it just started to hurt. Leaving the decapitated dinosaur alone for a few minutes, he wandered about the yard, searching for some relief from the growing pressure in his bowels. He scratched his side

against the tree to no avail, ate the grass to little effect, and finally rubbed his butt along the ground but aside from the scratching of an annoying itch, the pain his tummy did not go away.

Finally, an idea popped into his mind. There was one bush he had always stayed away from, with bright red flowers and painful thorns. It made his skin hurt whenever he went by it, not to mention how much the human the others called "mom" seemed to dote over, so he generally let it keep its space. But now, since he was already hurting, maybe the bush could help it go away?

He lumbered over to the lower branches and licked at a blossom. It attacked his tongue, so he fought it back, pinning it to the ground with his paws and biting it only to have it fight back more. In the middle of the fight of his life, the pressure in his stomach finally settled farther back in Tyler's barrel of a body. Normally, he would have went over to the far corner of the yard, but when nature calls! He squatted in the middle of the rose bed, and tried to expel the

extraneous bit from his bowels.

With a whimper, the head of his favorite dinosaur popped out and landed in the middle a fresh turd among the now trampled roses. With a final good shake Tyler set back to his tattered toy, already forgetting whatever had just had him preoccupied.

The clanging door at the back of the house slapped against the frame, and Tyler turned his head towards it. There was the human called "mom" and she looked like she was about to call Tyler a "bad dog." He pulled his head back in apprehension as she stepped over to the shade dappled spot under the tree and picked up his surprisingly headless dinosaur.

She spun around and stomped over towards him. He cried as she opened her mouth to say the dreaded words, and froze as she saw the remains of her rose bed. With a shriek she looked back at Tyler, threw the dinosaur at him, luckily she missed, and with tears welling in the corners of her eyes stomped back to the house. Tyler crept to the door, eager to apologise, only to hear the hu-

man "mom" yelling with the human "dad." He heard his own name several times, along with "that damned basset hound," and then the human "dad" was walking slowly towards him.

He murmured "sorry" to Tyler, who found that confusing, but then picked him up and carried him to the car. Maybe he wasn't in trouble after all! A car ride was always a good time. The air carried his floppy ears over the roads until the human "dad" stopped the car in front of a low grey building. He clipped the leash to Tyler's collar, and suddenly he didn't feel so good. Where were they? Why did the human "dad" look so sad? Before he knew what was happening some new human was carrying him away from the human "dad" and put him in a cage in a line of other cages with other, strange, dogs.

Luckily for Tyler, he's not so good with time, and already forgot what was already preoccupying him earlier. He couldn't help but feel like he was missing something, though. Especially every time he played with the lime green chewy bone in the corner.

JULIA FRANCO

PHOTOGRAPHY FEATURE

“It’s fun taking something easily mundane and spicing it up a bit. In terms of photography, I’ve had a camera since I was really really young. I’ve also been breaking cameras since I was really really young. Ironic, I know. I’ve had video cameras break and duct tape back together or corrode. But I’ve always enjoyed taking photos and making short movies even before I knew how to edit them. Since having a cell phone, I’ve always had a camera on me and I’m known to pull it out and take a picture of an artsy ally in Philly or a random Wawa. **I take pictures because I see potential in them** and anything can be photogenic if you frame it the right way and the right angle. I just do it because it’s fun. Writing wise, poetry isn’t typically my thing. I’ve been writing narrative prose since I was in kindergarten or something. Needless to say, it’s improved. A common thread I’ve noticed is that a lot of **the stuff I’ve been writing is kind of weird and quirky and different.** Most of what I write takes place in the real world and theoretically could happen, although it likely wouldn’t. **I write to tell stories** — stories leading up to the specific present of the narrator, or the story of a few moments, or of a couple days, weeks or years whether it’s the story of 5 strangers meeting in a cafe, or a girl who’s afraid of oranges, or a cat sitting on a string and unraveling reality. I don’t buy into the whole poetic metaphor thing — talking about a thing in flowery language for 8 or 10 lines, then it all clicking together with the central metaphor and some statement about the nature or life or reality. If I’m writing something, there may not be a deeper message or truth about life or poetic point I’m trying to make. I’m just telling the story, **leaving meaning up to the person reading it.** If I ever become famous, the English teachers are going to have a field day trying to put meaning in it.”

RARE PHOTO OF JULIA, TAKEN BY HER SISTER. TYLER STATE PARK, NEWTOWN PENNSYLVANIA, JULY 16TH 2017.





The Art of Missing

Isabella D'Addario

I was walking across town.
The sky was dark
The road was slippery
My boots were muddy
As I walked across town,

My mind on a journey
Of all the roads
The roads I traveled
The roads long gone
As my mind thought on,

Heart fluttering within my chest
Cold aura of air
Warmth under my skin
My boots walked on
My heart still fluttering inside,

I am reminded of places
And of the people
And of the moments
I once was present in
My mind rings, reminding me,

My quietly happy soul thinks
I miss these places
I miss these things
I miss this, everything,
Happy soul thinks and feels,

Happy soul walking across town
Dead of the night
Ears ringing amongst voices
Happy soul thinks internally
Of all she ever misses.

The Art of Breathing

Isabella D'Addario

Inhale warm air
Stiffened nose from the biting cold
After walking inside
Your fingers to toes thawing out
Exhale warm air

Recollecting the thoughts
Whims once whistling in the wind
Solitaire stacked columns
Of all your royally flushed thoughts
Thoughts are recollecte

Suck in deeply
Filling your wetted pink lungs dry
Balloon to burst
Particles slowly dissipating into the wild
Air falls flat

Hello old lungs
Stretching then filling and releasing slowly
Hello old thoughts
Recollecting then stacking and inspiring surely
Hello old self
Reappearing then staying and living fully.





The Art of Loving

Isabella D'Addario

Find a love
That makes
Your heart
Stop.

Stop the way
The stoplight
Turns red,
Calculated.

Slowly, never without
Some warning,
Some sign,
Yellow.

You feel yourself
Breaking, stopping
Falling, fell
Bliss.

The love swells
Your victim
To its
Power.

Fall in love
The way
The stoplight
Turns.

Feeling everything deliberately
Falling slowly,
And suddenly.

The Art of Dreaming

Isabella D'Addario

The once billowing waves
Burying me underneath them
Suffocating my stricken throat
Gripping around my neck
Receding and allowing air
To swell my lungs
The air of reality
More stifling than waves
Send me back under
Put me to sleep
Seize my mindless thoughts
Tuck me in please
Send me to dream
Of those billowing waves
That I ride nimbly
Never tumbling underneath them
Send me to dream
Ship leaving its dock
Exiting her safe harbor
Unafraid of those waves
Sure she'd reign victory
Make me that ship
Water take over me
Send me to dream.

A Trip on a Boat
July 1999
Lake Erie



JULIA FRANCO
Second Place, Art

A Tug on a String

Julia Franco

Second Place, Poetry

The cat sat on the string.
The string was the thread of the universe.
When the cat got up from the string, it tugged it a little bit.
And that tug — well,
It tugged just enough to start ripping.
Ripping away the string from the fabric it was apart of.
Now there's a hole.
And of course, as they do, by some unknown power, it's getting
bigger.
And bigger.
And bigger.
What happens when the universe starts ripping?
Things bleed.
Time bleeds.
The future becomes the past and the past becomes the present.
And that string, tugged, rips a little further away.
Reality splits and the imaginary becomes real and the real becomes
a dream.
Physics no longer work
And imaginary numbers are tangible and blocking traffic.
And the sound of a car horn topples the Eiffel Tower because the
light waves draw it in.
Chaos whirls and swirls and
The color green tastes like triangles.
Visible light gives you frost bite
And stars fall to earth writing binary in the sky.
Everything we seemed to know simply becomes irrelevant as
Dividing by zero now produces a small European island.
Memories of touching gamma rays erase all others and

Black holes open, spitting kitchen knives into Ancient Egypt.
Gods from every mythology blink into, and then out of, existence.
The very ground melts away into cardboard and the emotion of
Tuesday at noon.

Like Schrodinger said, everything is now alive and dead simultaneously,

Waiting for the future that has erased it.

Words are now spelled with darkness and music and alligators

And the common dog glows pink, then red, then dodecahedron.

The moon is a man and that man knows nothing about how bananas feel.

Something springs from nothing, and nothing springs into the
back seat of the Jeep

Speeding into the Third Law of Thermodynamics.

What ever is and whatever was is now irrelevant, lost to time

Like the left sock in the dryer that has evaporated into F#.

Pieces from other worlds come falling through the holes

Only to vanish again in a blaze of wood.

Everything implodes and explodes like a card game about kittens,

Colliding and flying and falling into a singularity and then apart
once more.

And when the seam is completely split

And reality has finally burned itself out like a candle and the number seven,

One question lingers.

Who was this cat?

should i ever kiss the stars

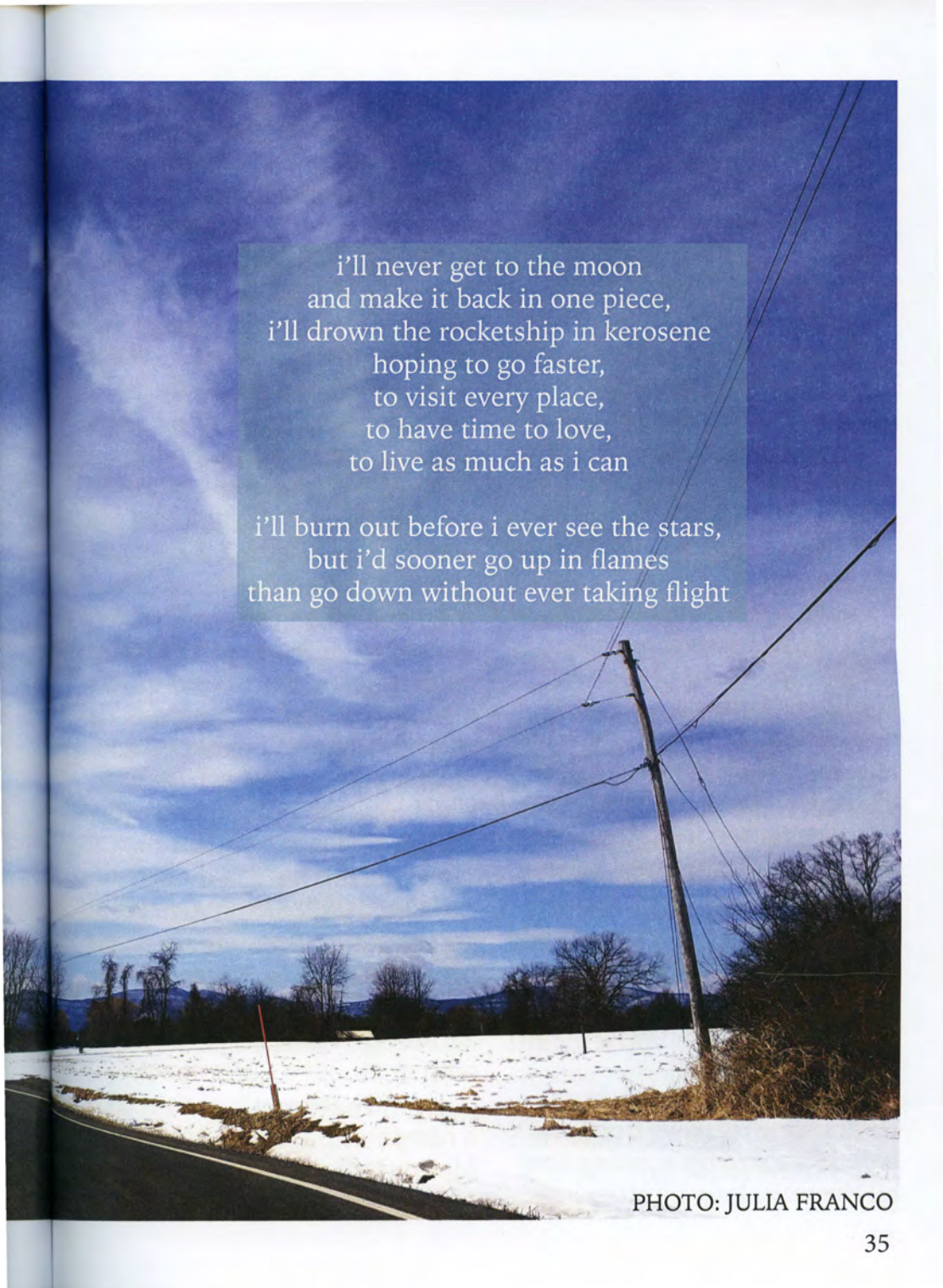
Paige DiFiore
First Place, Poetry

i'm dying for life to begin,
i see futures written in the clouds
i hope the sun will save a dance for me,
there are light years to go and lives to live
before i can get there

i want to kiss the stars,
i'm afraid they'll burn out
before i can reach them,
i have to visit every planet in case
there's someone i could love
or something better out there

i must touch every constellation
for fear of missed opportunity,
but there's never enough time,
there's never enough time





i'll never get to the moon
and make it back in one piece,
i'll drown the rocketship in kerosene
hoping to go faster,
to visit every place,
to have time to love,
to live as much as i can

i'll burn out before i ever see the stars,
but i'd sooner go up in flames
than go down without ever taking flight

PHOTO: JULIA FRANCO

Cavern Below

Matthew Hanright

Third Place, Prose

Bertrand had never seen a rat before. He'd expected the long whiskers, wiry pink tail, and even the bits of filth trapped at the corners of its mouth. The rat twisted its head and stared straight at Bertrand's eyes while its muzzle wiggled and bobbed about, sniffing. Those teeth looked pretty scary, but he had still never expected a rat to look so, well, cute!

Its ears twitched and turned toward Bertrand's mother and its head soon followed. His mother was very tall, though, of course, Bertrand was still very short so it could be hard to tell. Her dun blonde hair was tucked into a bun revealing her pinched and solemn face. Her frayed white apron was tied about her waist to protect her rippled gray blouse from stray potato and carrot particulates as she chopped for the evening meal.

The rat suddenly started dragging its paws from just behind its strange rotating ears all the way along its stretched

out face to its pinkish nub of a nose. After it finished a pass it nibbled its hands for a moment then started afresh from the back. Bertrand couldn't help but let out a little giggle from his vantage: leaning into the kitchen from the doorway to the living room. He fell to the floor and started imitating the rat with his own face and hands, giggling the whole time.

"Bertrand, what on Earth are you doing?" He stopped and looked up with a wide grin stretched across his face at his mother who had stopped with her chopping knife embedded halfway through a potato to look at Bertrand's strange new antics. A wry half-smile rose to meet her one raised eyebrow, which was the best he had gotten out of her in awhile.

"Just what *he's* doing!" he exclaimed with a stubby finger pointed to the spot the rat had been sitting just a moment before. He frowned as only empty air now met his gaze and his mother let out a quiet chuckle.

"Oh, so you went and made a new invisible friend I see! Monty, Jeffrey, Suzy, Mr. and Mrs. Jingles, Dad and I aren't

enough these days, I suppose. Not to mention all of your outside pals—”

“Uh-uh!” Bertrand broke in. “There was a rat *right there*, and it was doing *this* with its hands and I thought it was really funny so *I* was doing it too and—”

“Wait, there was a rat! *Right there!?*” His mother responded, her subtle mirth evaporated in an instance. “What did it look like? Was it big? Was it scratching at things, or foaming at the mouth?”

Bertrand shook his head as hard as he could until he was red in the face. “Nu-uh! It was cool and nice, but I dunno where it went. D’you think it’ll be back?” he asked, brow furrowed in heartfelt concern.

His mother was still looking all around the kitchen as though it could leap from a corner at any moment. “Goodness, I hope not. I’ll have to make sure we get more traps the next time Dad or I go to the store.”

Now Bertrand’s brow was furrowed in surprise and anger! “No! You can’t hurt him, what’s he ever done to

you?”

“Oh, please, Bertrand. Rats are vermin, *pests!*”

Tears welled in his eyes and mucus rushed to clog his nose as his eyebrows fell to a hurt, sorrowful stance. “He was *cool!* And he probably wanted to *play!* With *me!*” He scrambled to his feet as he finished shouting and ran out of the kitchen, across the living room, through the hall and into his room where he launched onto his bed and buried his head into his pillow, tears and mucus now flowing freely. The one thing in the whole world that actually *wanted* to play with him, and they were going to trap it and kill it and call it a pest!

~

Hours later Bertrand’s chest rose and fell in a regular rhythm to the slow pulse of the stars in the night sky. A warm, hand-made quilt was tucked in around him, the crumbs and remnants of his dinner swept from the dinner table, and fresh clothes were laid out on the chair beside his bed to wear come the morning.

Of course, he wasn’t *really* there, in the cozy bed

in the dark and quiet house. No, he was running through the forest outside, except the trees reached all the way to the clouds only letting through a dapple of light to dance atop the mossy carpet of the ground. Bertrand dashed from one tree to the next, eyes peeled for the seeker he was hiding from. Suddenly he was tossed to the ground which was soft as a goose-feather mattress as something jumped on him from behind. He burst out laughing and squirmed to wrestle with the rat who had found him fair and square. Of course, he didn't really *look* like a rat anymore, he looked like a kind dog Bertrand had seen on the street a few days ago, but Bertrand *knew* in his heart that it was actually the rat from the kitchen.

A sudden scratching to his left distracted him from playing with the rat/dog. There, a small rat was scratching at the base of one of the trees, though it sounded like someone scratching on his bedroom door. No, it was *the* rat who was no longer playfully wrestling with Bertrand, but obsessively scratching at the base of the

tree.

Bertrand opened his eyes and shifted his shoulders from beneath the handmade quilt tucked around him and rolled onto his left shoulder. He had just started to doze again when the scratching started again, but now it was *definitely* at his door, and not the base of a tree. Warm light streamed from beneath the bedroom door in a clean line, broken only by a small, stationary shadow. From which the scratching originated. Cautious, but hoping it was his rat friend from earlier, Bertrand stepped from his bed into his slippers and reached to open the door. Just as his hand reached the knob the scratching stopped, and when he opened the door the hallway was empty. But, why had his parents left the lights on?

Turning towards his parents' room, a shrill squeak tugged his head quickly the other way. In the middle of the hallway sat his rat friend, whiskers twitching at the air, nose pointed straight at Bertrand. He seemed dirtier than before though, with mud all along his belly and paws and his fur

looked soaking wet. Bertrand lowered his head and stepped forward, hoping for a closer look now that he'd been given a second chance.

In a flash the rat was running away, but it stopped at the top of the stairs and looked back at Bertrand. The boy's eyes shone and he dashed to chase his whiskered friend. A game! Just like in his dream!

The rat scampered down the stairs always keeping *just* ahead of Bertrand. It gracefully rounded the corner without slowing down and *leaped* to the foot of the staircase. Bertrand was too scared to jump all the way from the landing, but he hopped to the ground from the second step anyway. He stopped after just a few steps and his mouth fell open. The door at the end of the hall stood fully open revealing a dark room with a soft glow far below where the floor should be. His rat friend sat at the edge of the frame as though beckoning Bertrand forward.

"Now, Berty, don't go down there, do you understand?" he remembered his father intoning once, when

Bertrand had asked about the locked door at the end of the ground floor hall. "It's dirty, dank, dark, and downright dangerous in there. *I* don't even go down there unless *absolutely* necessary. And besides, there's probably rats and all sorts of vermin, too."

The Basement.

True, he wasn't supposed to go down there, but the door had always been locked before, so it standing there unlocked and wide open was different, right? And besides, he did *desperately* want a *real* friend to play with. Still, his father was sad enough these days anyway, maybe he shouldn't do something to make him angry...

Bertrand looked back up the staircase as though he could see his parents' room from here and receive some sort of guidance through the door. Another squeak drew his attention back to the open door with his rat friend at the precipice.

Well, maybe just a *quick* game of tag, or something. And then right back to bed. They could always play more in the morning, right?

His slippers padded

the sound of his feet moving his body down the hall to his waiting friend. His knees were shaking and his mouth dry. He was far more nervous than he felt he should be.

At the door Bertrand set a hand against the frame and craned his neck to peak down at the basement proper. The walls and floor were dirt, but the light was steady and didn't leave any *too* creepy shadows. Besides, the rat was now sitting on a step halfway down, and he couldn't hurt his friend's feelings by following him all this way just to back out *now*.

Damp, musty wind rushed up the stairs to tousle Bertrand's hair as he stepped past the door frame. He clutched the railing until his knuckles turned white and set a foot on the first step. Nothing happened. Huh. Well, maybe this wouldn't be *so* bad. His other foot swiftly descended beside the other.

The door slammed shut behind with such force he was almost knocked off his step. Right arm windmilling Bertrand pulled on the railing with all of

his might to regain his balance. He looked at the door. It was covered in scratches and gouges, green paint peeling everywhere, rusty knob almost falling out. Were those *bite* marks at the edges?

Tentative fingers reached for the drooping knob as the door started shaking violently. The door *thumped* towards him, and then the moaning started. At first it sounded like someone in pain, and Bertrand worried that it sort of sounded like his father. Then it got angry. The knob started twisting and someone yelled from the other side. The door *thumped* forward again, then again and again.

Tears rolled down Bertrand's cheeks, but his feet refused to move. A metal thunk broke his trance as the door-knob finally gave up and fell out. He watched in horror as the knob rolled down the steps, steadily picking up speed. His feet finally moved as he rushed down the steps to catch it. Bertrand barely noticed as the railing fell from underneath his hand. He blinked and looked, but where it should have been was nothing but a dark void.

He looked around and saw that everything had changed. The walls had fallen away leaving a too narrow staircase descending from the ceiling of a massive cavern.

He looked back the way he had come, but the door had vanished into shadow. He looked down the stairs to find a warm light emanating from an old candle lantern. The knob had continued its race to the ground, so Bertrand started again, though with a little less speed than before, all too aware of the lack of railing.

About halfway down he finally noticed a growing low rumble from the ground beneath him. Not wanting to look away from where he was placing his feet his eyes darted up for just a moment. Was that... a *waterfall*? He paused and looked again. Off to the right a stream of water about two feet wide fell from shadowed heights down to the start of a small stream. Why was all of this under their *house*!?

The knob was starting to really get away from him so Bertrand started running down the stairs again. Besides, he was proba-

bly close enough to the ground that a fall wouldn't hurt *too* bad, right?

When he finally reached the bottom he stumbled and fell to his knees as his feet kept moving expecting another step down. He scrambled forward on all fours as quickly as he could, but already knew that it was too late. Before his eyes the knob rolled over the bank of the little stream into the rushing waters and sunk, quicker than it should have?

He reached to snatch the knob back, but his arm was pulled back against his will, as though *something had grabbed his sleeve and pulled it back!*

Bertrand's head whipped around and his eyes grew to the size of saucers. He was *face-to-face* with a massive white wolf! His legs moved to get back up as he twisted and tried to shove off the ground with his hands only to flail through the air and fall back down. He was just about to fall all the way into the stream as the wolf lunged forward and grabbed the front of his shirt with its muzzle to yank him back onto shore.

Even still, one of his

fingers grazed the surface of the water and it burned! Bertrand collapsed on the shore, curling up and cradling his blistered finger. He stiffened as he felt the wolf brush his back, but instead of attacking it curled up around him.

He whimpered as a canine face appeared, looming over his own. The back of his throat burned and his entire body was shaking uncontrollably. The wolf just leaned in and started licking the tears from Bertrand's cheeks.

Slowly, the tears stopped flowing, his nose cleared up, and his hiccupy breath evened out. Before Bertrand even knew what was happening, he fell asleep.

When he woke up the walls of the cavern had gotten white and fuzzy. He shifted off of a rock digging into his side and the walls shifted around him. An enormous wolf face appeared over his and yawned.

He scrambled away as his memories returned of what had happened before he fell asleep. The wolf jumped to its feet, instantly alert, and started

looking around for the source of Bertrand's concerns.

Eyes clouding with tears, Bertrand almost fell to the ground again, but there was the wolf leaning against him, keeping him propped up. He tried to wipe his eyes with the back of his left hand while his right gripped a fistful of the wolf's fur. The wolf started slowly walking and Bertrand followed, still rubbing tears from his eyes.

With a final sniffle and fit of blinks Bertrand cleared his eyes enough to look where the wolf was leading him. A long tunnel opened before them, and though it was dark he could see a faint glow at the far end.

He clutched to the wolf's back with both hands as the light faded before them, and whimpered when he could no longer see his feet. The light ahead was steady, though, and every so often the wolf's gleaming eyes would lock with his own, assuring Bertrand that everything was alright and he was safe.

Something was squirming beneath the growing light from ahead, though. A goliath shadow tossed back and forth,

letting out a high pitched whimper every time it moved. If Bertrand didn't know better, he'd have said it sounded like quiet sobbing.

The figure bolted upright in an instant and Bertrand pulled the wolf to a stop. An enormous, gaunt rat sat before them, tears streaming down its muzzle. It thrashed in a filthy, yellowed scrap of cloth that looked like it had once been an apron. Despite the fact that he could see the rat's ribs through its fur bits of moldy potato and carrot were strewn about it, as though it had recently gorged itself.

The rat flopped over on its side and resumed whimpering. The wolf pulled Bertrand on, inching ever closer to the monstrous rodent. The rat rolled over so that its mournful face lay at his feet. It opened its eyes and Bertrand almost burst out crying right alongside it. Despite his fears, he knelt down beside the rat and gave his best effort at hugging its head.

It nestled closer to him and its whimpers quieted until they slowly faded altogether. The wolf watched as the rat's

emaciated form started to fill. With every breath the gaps between its ribs lessened, and its useless muscles knit back together stronger than ever. A final pulse emanated from the gentle kiss Bertrand planted on top of its head.

Easing itself from Bertrand's grip, the rat sat up and considered the small, strange creature before it. As Bertrand sat up it snuffled his face, eliciting a small giggle. It turned, ruffled through its ragged nest, grabbed something between its jaws and quickly started back down the tunnel. The wolf gently urged Bertrand forward with its head, so he grabbed onto its back once again and did so.

When they reemerged into the main cavern the rat was sitting on its haunches before the acidic stream. Bertrand squatted by its side and the wolf sat beside him. The rat leaned over and set before him the thing it had carried there in its mouth. A simple wooden net rested between his form and the bank of the stream.

Bertrand picked up the net and looked to the rat for further guidance. It reached

into the stream with its stubby paws and started feeling around. At first he was scared; his burnt finger still ached from just brushing the surface. But the rat seemed fine, and when it pulled a soggy bit of paper from the waters its paws were untouched.

Reassured, Bertrand dipped his new net beneath the filthy waters and started drawing it along, searching for the lost door knob. A pile of soggy papers, soaked clothes, and bits of trash quickly grew behind them. Some papers had angry red messages of "Final Notice," others were dissolving old ads for the store his father had once owned but which he now said was "kaput," Bertrand even found a pair of glasses in his net which looked suspiciously like his father's.

As they worked, clearing the stream of its litter and detritus the waters steadily cleared. A splash of water sprayed across all three of them as a beautiful fish turned back for deeper water. Bertrand cried out, but the water no longer burned. In fact, it felt kind of nice. At last a final sweep of the net

brought a shiny brass knob with it. Warm light reflected from its gleaming surface revealing Bertrand's dirty face and tangled hair. It looked far too nice and new to be the same rotted rusty knob which had originally fallen from the door, but it did have the same shape.

The rat and wolf quietly slipped from his sides. He turned to look and saw them sitting on opposite sides of the foot of the towering staircase. Bertrand clutched the knob to his chest and started up the stairs. The wolf followed along his side, but the rat stayed sitting on the ground. After the first dozen or so stairs he stopped and waved good-bye to the rat. It waved a scrawny paw back.

He had to stop a few times to catch his breath, this staircase was really tall! But, he made steady progress and the knob remained firmly in his hand. When he finally reached the point where the stairs entered the ceiling forming dirt walls he noticed he no longer saw the wolf's bobbing form to his left. He looked back, but didn't see it anywhere. Not

on the steps, not back on the ground with the rat, nowhere!

But, then, why did he feel like it was still with him?

Bertrand drew in a deep breath and started up the last few steps. The door looked a lot better than he remembered, too. It was still scratched up, but the paint was no longer peeling and there were no signs of the bite marks he'd thought he'd seen. The knob slipped easily back into its slot.

He glanced back a final time, and the cavern was *gone!* The steps ended not far below him on a smooth, cobbled floor and wooden shelves crammed with boxes lined the walls of a small, somewhat dank room.

"Bertrand!" he heard from the otherside. His mother sounded frantic, her voice hoarse.

"Bertrand!" came again, closer to the door. His father's voice was scratchy and worried, too. He twisted the knob and the door swung wide open. His father dashed from the kitchen into the hallway where his face lit up with relief as he dashed to his son who he immediately scooped into a tight hug.

"Mary! He's in here!"

His father's cheeks were scratchy with stubble as they rubbed against Bertrand's own. His mother dashed down the stairs and hugged him, too.

"How'd you even get *in* there?" his father whispered as they cradles him. Soft morning light drifted in through the living room windows.

"Nevermind," his mother responded. "He's safe, and here with us."

Complacency

Alyssa Casamento

Your worst self
Is what happens
When you believe
You've reached your best self

Curiosity didn't kill the cat
Complacency did
Because without growth
What do we have?

An intellectual stand still
Landlocked in ignorance

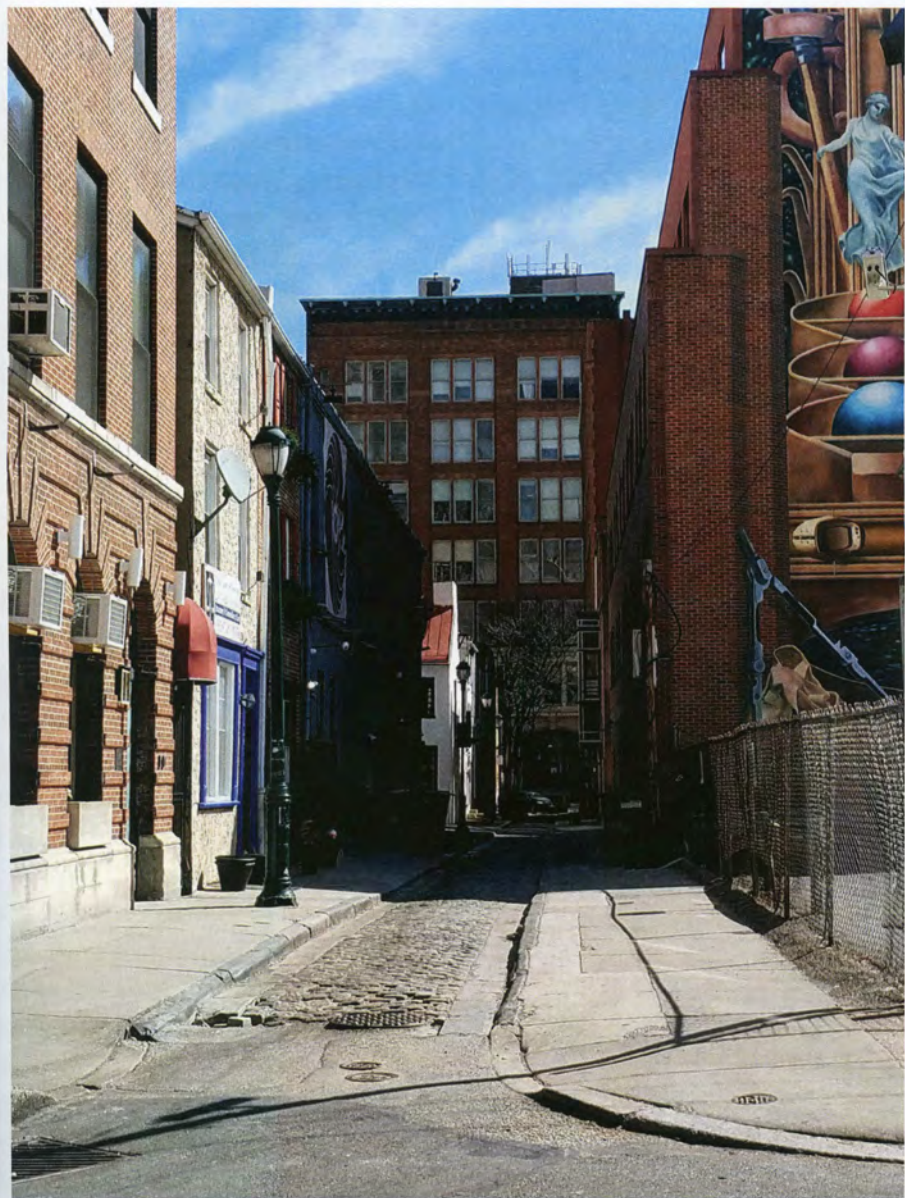
You owe your mind
A constant expansion
To places it's never been
And didn't know existed

Freed from an invisible binding
You didn't know you wrapped
So tightly

There's a whole lot out there
Just to stay
Where the water's warm

Your worst self
Is what happens
When you believe
You can no longer

Improve



JULIA FRANCO

I Brought You Flowers

Elizabeth Gannon

First Place, Prose

There was a knock at the door. Iggy dropped the paint roller she had been wrestling with into its tray and smoothed back her hair. She frowned at the phone buzzing on the counter, shutting it off as she passed. She opened the door and found herself face-to-face with a huge bouquet of flowers. It shifted slightly and a pair of brown eyes appeared between some hydrangeas.

"Hey, babe."

Iggy squealed. "Beck!" She wrapped her arms around him, which was quite difficult considering that there was a flower arrangement between them. A strange smell filled her nose, but she ignored it. *The Hermans are probably trying to figure out mac and cheese again*, she thought.

"Can I come in?" Beck grunted. "These flowers are heavy!"

Iggy let go and went back into the house. Her house. God, that felt good. She leaned against the counter and watched her boyfriend set the bouquet

down. She smiled. "What's the big occasion?"

He brushed his hands off on his sweater and smiled back. "Nothing. I just thought you'd like something to brighten up the place. What're you up to?"

"That's so sweet! I'm painting the living room." She put her hand up to her chin and looked at it thoughtfully. "It was supposed to be lavender mist, but I think I ended up with electric magenta." She smirked. "My brother did LSD in college, and that's probably one of the colors he saw."

Beck put his arm around her and contemplated her paint job. "I like it. It's like you: bright and loud and beautiful. The perfect living room for you."

Iggy gave him a kiss. "Thanks, babe. But really, it's the perfect living room for *us*. When are you going to move in?"

He sighed. "Soon, babe, soon. I've just got a few more things to deal with at my place and then I'm all yours." She giggled. "All mine, huh?" She ran her fingers across his chest and leaned in.

Buzz buzz!

Beck pulled away from her and looked at his phone. His forehead creased with worry as he read the screen. "I gotta go."

"Why, what's wrong?"

Iggy had never seen her boyfriend this way before. It was almost as if he had stepped outside himself and left a strange, new Beck behind. It frightened her. "Babe?"

He snapped out of it. His face relaxed and he half-smiled, half-grimaced. "Bugs. The realtor thinks that I might have termites. I have to go check it out, see if it's a big problem."

He kissed her goodbye and rushed out the door, leaving her with her house, her crazy living room, and her flowers.

She exhaled. Termites. It was a perfectly good reason for him to get upset. If it was really the issue that the realtor said it was, the sale might fall through. He had to go so that he could get it fixed, and he could move in, and they could begin their new life together. In this house, in this living room, with these... flowers.

Iggy buried her face in the bouquet and took a big

whiff. They were some of the most exquisite, vibrant flowers she had ever seen, shimmering shades of pink, white and yellow. There was a daffodil, and hydrangeas, and carnations and several others that she couldn't even name. She had never been good with plants, that was her friend Terese's thing. *I'm too hotheaded, too impatient.*

She inhaled again and stopped short. There was that weird smell again. It was familiar, somehow, but she couldn't quite place it. She sorted through the flowers. Was there a bad one in there? In the middle of the bouquet was a clump of little pink blossoms, slightly shriveled and graying. She sniffed them and immediately wanted to puke. Her stomach churned and there was a bad taste at the back of her throat. "What are these?" She choked. Had the florist put in some rotten, poisonous flower by mistake?

Iggy's phone buzzed again and she groaned. She hated that thing. Every few minutes it buzzed, its green light blinking for attention. It was worse than a baby. Usually it

was an update message about an app she never used. The screen lit up. She had several unread texts from Terese. Iggy had never been good about answering texts, mainly because she kept getting distracted. She reached for the phone, but then she remembered. *Wait, didn't Terese give me a book about flowers last month?* She shut off the phone and ran to get it.

Terese was obsessed with plants. She kept several flower gardens that were meticulously tended, no small feat for someone living in a place with an average of four hours of sunlight a day. Iggy remembered one poor man who had made the mistake of carving his name into a tree in front of Terese. She had screamed at him until she was hoarse and reported him to the park ranger. "Trees and flowers are our friends," she said by way of explanation. "They feel and hurt just like we do. I should know." Horticulture had never grown on Iggy, but it wasn't for lack of trying on Terese's part.

Iggy read the inscription Therese had written on the book's inside cover. *Every flower has something to say. I know you*

don't understand, so I will translate for you. There are many interpretations, but these are mine and mine alone. Be sure to always listen to what they are trying to tell you.

Iggy had always chalked these words to Terese's standard hippie-dippiness, but for some reason, they now seemed...urgent.

She flipped through the pages. The first one she landed on was snapdragon. She smiled to herself as she looked at the picture that matched one of the yellow blossoms in her bouquet. That's what they were called.

Curious, she glanced at the meaning that Therese had penciled in. *Yellow snapdragon, deception.*

Iggy frowned. That was pretty dark for such a cheerful flower. She shook her head. Weird. It wasn't Beck's fault; he didn't know the meanings of flowers, especially the crazy ones that Therese had cooked up. She searched the book for a picture of the little white flowers in the vase. Anemones, that's what they were called. Like the sea creature.

White anemones, hopelessness.

Iggy laughed nervously. It had to be a coincidence, a creepy coincidence, right? *Daffodils, daffodils*, she thought, rifling the book's pages frantically. *There can't be anything scary about daffodils.*

Daffodils, the book said.

Joy.

Iggy breathed a sigh of relief. *See, Iggy, nothing to be afraid of—*

Another notation caught her eye. *Single daffodil, Misfortune.*

Slowly, her stomach filling with dread, she looked up at the bouquet. Among all of the flowers, there was only one daffodil.

"No! No no no..."

White hydrangeas, Heartlessness.

Pink carnations, Fear.

Her fingers trembled as she flipped to the page after carnations. A cluster of little pink flowers wound delicately around a tree branch. Those awful smelling flowers! Iggy was almost too afraid to look.

Peach blossoms, I am your captive.

Iggy shook. "Oh God oh God oh God." She glanced

fearfully at the bouquet on her counter. The flowers that had been so beautiful moments ago now seemed grotesque. What kind of freaky florist did Beck get these flowers from?

She stood up. She had to throw them away. Even if Beck had given them to her, she was not going to be able to sleep with them in the house.

Iggy grabbed the flowers by the stems and lifted them out of the vase, using her free hand to open the compost bin that Therese had convinced her to create. She cursed. The stems had one of those stupid burlap bags rubber banded around the bottom. She worked the bag off and dropped it on the floor. The room filled with a horrible smell. A brown liquid dripped out of the tips of the stems. Iggy gagged. *Disgusting, rotten flowers.*

She dumped the flowers into the bin. *I don't care if it isn't garbage day*, Iggy thought, *this thing is going outside.* She gripped the sides of the can and froze. One flower hadn't made it into the trash can. It was lying on the floor, still clinging to the burlap sack. It was that stupid peach blossom.

Iggy pinched the twig between two fingers. Despite its wilt, rot and disturbing meaning, it was still a lovely plant. She ran her fingers over the delicate petals and her fingernails snagged. Something was wound around the woody stem. She pulled out a lock of chocolate brown hair soaked in the nasty stem liquid. Her stomach dropped. Hair? She looked closer, and saw that the liquid wasn't really brown at all, but red.

Buzz! Buzz!

The phone screen glowed again with unread messages. Terese's profile picture beamed out, honeysuckle and lilac blossoms sticking out of her dark brown hair. The home screen listed a few of her latest texts.

10:54 pm: Could you come get me?
11:07 pm: Im at the park pls get me
11:10 pm: o gd hlp hes follwng n
11:13 pm pls anser

As the phone continued to buzz and tears rolled down her cheeks, Iggy finally realized exactly what the peach blossoms smelled like.

Fear.





BRENDEN DAVIS
First Place, Art

UNCERTAINTY

Matthew Hanright

Second Place, Prose

The clock ticked.

A second passed.

Next to me is Tommy, my brother, second in the row.
He's on the rowing team, they came in second at the last race.

I was in a race once in school, third in the row, and my friend

Jimmy won second.

We often race to Jimmy's house which is second on the row
of our street, which the school lays at the end of, with the flag
waving out front.

I wave to Mr. Moriarty, the second youngest in his family from
the proud Irish race, whose three younger brother lie in a row
in the cemetery after falling in the war, and who is the first in
his family to graduate from high school.

I see war on the television, foreign schools leveled to dust in a
wave of bombs and people racing away from the fighting, now
slipping into its second decade, people say the countries are in a
bit of a row.



Grandmother tells me not to watch the news, she doesn't like the war, she would rather I weed the corn out back, the second row is looking particularly forlorn even waving in the breeze, and she says gardening is a useful skill they don't teach in school, but to take your time because it isn't a race.

Grandfather loves to tell corny jokes, about his time in the war, or his first wife, grandmother is his second, especially after we've rowed his boat across the waves of the lake where the flag of the school can still be seen over the trees, where he says we're finally free of technology, as all members of the human race should be.

Of course, none of us are free from the ticking seconds of the clock, though we might race from the sight or war with ourselves over the thought, or drown our thoughts in the television, or school ourselves because there must be a cure or a stop, it still comes as a wave, and no amount of weeding the corn rows can stop that.

The clock ticks.

A second passed.



PHOTO: JULIA FRANCO

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Dedicated
to the gods who created these worlds,
to the adventurers who journey therein,
thank you.

