

# Cardinal Sins

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The fine arts and literature journal of  
Saginaw Valley State University

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*Cardinal Sins* uses Adobe InDesign. This issue features Trebuchet MS and Source Sans Pro fonts.

Cover Art by Greg Headley—color photo entitled “3 *Platanus mexicana*”

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I always struggle to write these editor's notes. It feels like an impossible task to encapsulate my experience working on this journal in just a few, short paragraphs. It never quite feels like anything I can say will be adequate to express my gratitude for having had the opportunity to work on this journal with so many kind, passionate and talented individuals for the last two years of my undergraduate career.

It goes without saying that it has been a trying, stressful, and anxiety-inducing year that all of us have had to muddle through. For many, it has been some of the most challenging months of our lives thus far, including myself.

I have never had the conventional experience as an editor here with *Cardinal Sins*. Being editor-in-chief for the past year and a half, I have never known what it is like to be doing this work without the obstacle of a worldwide pandemic standing in our way; I have never known what it is like to host a publication reception, to hold in-person meetings, to see the faces of our staff without masks on or not through the pixelated barrier of a computer screen.

Some people might say it makes it easier that I never experienced what it was like in the *Cardinal Sins* world of "before the pandemic." It is better that I don't know what I missed out on in the experiences we didn't get to have, the in-person connection that the pandemic took from us, and the wonderful contributors that I never got to meet or celebrate with a reception. While I'm not altogether sure if this makes it easier or not, I can surely say that it makes me all the prouder of all that was accomplished with this journal this semester.

In a world of lockdowns, quarantines and isolation, we received some of the best creative work that I have seen in our submissions in my time working here. We were able to make meaningful connections and conversations at our weekly Zoom meetings, despite streaming in from our own separate homes instead of altogether in one room.

In a world where it feels as if everything is pulling apart at the seams, we managed to create something beautiful. I think that is powerful, and

something worth recognizing.

In this uncertain world, I am not sure when this journal will be complete, when it will be printed, or when it will be distributed to our talented contributors. Nevertheless, I hope that they are able to feel the same spark of pride and joy when they finally hold a copy in their hands that I feel while writing this note.

Keep sinning,

Madeline Bruessow, Editor-in-Chief

## Sheep

*Caroline Helmstadt*

---

The shepherd's crook guides the way,  
Ushering the flock  
This way and that.  
The fat white ram  
Thinks he owns the field,  
Obtrusively butting his head  
Into the smaller groups grazing peacefully  
And flexes muscles when angry;  
He thinks he is the Wolf,  
Disillusioned and reckless,  
But when the shepherd shakes the grain tub  
Full of empty promises,  
He is the first to follow his master,  
Who leads him to slaughter nonetheless.  
Why—  
That is when he  
Is the biggest Sheep of them all.

# Magician

*Lucy Jayes*

---

Change was pulled out  
from inside of me by a surgeon at 4 in the morning.  
He must have been a father,  
the way he stitched me together  
after he cut me in half.  
Fingers trace raised skin,  
excavated pubic bone wall. I have shut  
down, gone inward, burrowed in  
wounds none else can even see.  
Unpredictable fathers  
Daughters trained to tip toe tightropes teeter  
between 50/50 chances  
and 100th chances  
and promises he will change  
My son knows nothing of defects  
blue eyes mirror blue eyes  
There is so much I do not want him to learn.

# Dough for Bread, Dough for Business

*Hareendran Kallinkeel*

---

Returning from his twenty-fifth job interview, exhausted by an hour-long bus journey, Sidharth slumps down into a sofa.

His father, an Indian Administrative Service officer, has forbidden him from using the car. "Such comforts," according to him, "aren't for young men with an engineering degree, who cannot find a job."

As if it's his fault. In a nation, where universities award degrees liberally without ensuring the quality of academic content, millions graduate every year. Those with some political clout, or bribes to pay, get into government jobs; others take up petty jobs in private companies that offer pittance, most remain unemployed.

An idealist, his father won't accept or pay bribes; nor will he knock at any politician's door. So, Sidharth knows he cannot hope to get a job in the foreseeable future.

Hungry, he goes to the kitchen, finds a loaf of bread. He tears off its wrapper, pulls out a slice. Its coarseness triggers an idea.

"Dad, I've thought of a business."

Father looks at him for a long moment. "What business?"

"Bread... people eat it daily; good quality can create a steady demand."

There has rarely been an occasion father agreed with him.

"Okay, only on one condition."

"Yes, dad..."

"You'll have ten minutes," Father says, with a pronounced sneer; absolute certainty that his son won't be able to meet it. "Tell me in three words, the two most important things you'll need to do for running a bread business?"

Sweat drenching his forehead, Sidharth listens to the pounding of his heart.

Father consults his watch. "Eight..."

Sidharth takes a long breath. "Raise the dough."

"So," his father says. The benevolence in his smile lights up his face for the first time in years. "Bread business it is."

# 1 *Platanus mexicana*

*Greg Headley*

---



Color photograph

# 2 *Platanus mexicana*

*Greg Headley*

---



Color photograph

# Listening to Melody Gardot

*Glenn Moss*

---

At her first breath, before vocal cords quiver  
I see us at the café in '45, ash and cut hair falling  
Lust and faith in so many dangerous embraces  
Burns our skin and keeps our tongues from touching  
The waiter is fucking the editor of a Communist newspaper  
Our coffee gets cold; we try to decide how to heat it without moving  
We decide to compare our numbers  
Connections are found in abandoned spaces

# Whose Army Approaches

*M. A. Schaffner*

---

*November 16, 2020*

A painting depicts a rebel standing  
on the parapet at Petersburg,  
fists clenched in defiance, shouting,  
mad with hiding, begging to be shot.

It's been so long without relief  
the one-way signs in supermarket aisles  
have worn to whispers. Clerks at McDonald's  
administer fries like hospice nurses.

The instinct to mask feels baked in now,  
yet fragile as distancing, like life;  
the block parties held on our streets  
like the funerals of old lovers.

The rebel soldier stands, forever lit  
by the moon or burning farmsteads.  
Condemned by his sins or fantasies  
ever to avoid the final shot.

# Shifting Winds

*Caroline Helmstadt*

---

Dry leaves scuttled across the cobblestone path, carried by the winds of discontent. The harsh, monotonous street lanterns gleamed with a dull ache—not beacons of hope but a vicarious alarm to seek shelter. Silence treaded the stones, heavy and dark.

A man garbed in a brown woolen tunic paused before a planked oak door. The battered sign that read *The Golden Crown Inn and Tavern* creaked above him in the wind. He was rather familiar with this place—gambling was his favorite pastime, and it was here that he could consort with his colleagues. He slid his stacked deck down his sleeve so it was within easy reach and pushed open the door.

It was dimly lit and noisy inside. An array of people were here; local peasants with their rough-spun garments and tattered boots were together, laughing and spilling ale over themselves as they heartily slapped each other's shoulders. A few knights in brigandine armor stood around the fireplace, drinks in hand as they warmed both their palms and their bellies. The melodic voice of the Bard rose over the clamor with upbeat gemshorn and lute accompanying:

*Hear us cry,  
Hear our cry!  
Darkness shall not swarm nigh.  
We are jolly  
And we're merry!  
But folly you may find.  
Languid of the day,  
Here we find our strength—  
Where we're warm  
Through the night.*

The crowds roared with cheer, shouting “Here, here!” before chugging their drinks together. The gambler scanned the room once more, spying a few men and women so drunk he figured it would be easy to pickpocket them before the night was over. He himself would not drink yet. Rarely did he do so. When he did it was only a little as a show of confidence; he preferred to keep a clear head for thievery.

The man settled himself at a heavy oak table with a few drunkards and commenced a game as the Bard began another song. He smiled inwardly. While he would connive the coins they had left, these bastards would be more penniless than they already were.

He spotted one of his colleagues, dressed in a similar attire as himself,

across the room at the bar counter. He was wearing a sly smirk and the man permitted one in return. They never bet against each other, he and his partners. Stacked cards would not do well against one another.

If anyone else knew of his malign intent and trickery, they gave no sign. Each was probably too ignorant or beyond the realm of reality to catch on and the bartender was paid well enough to keep her silent. It was the same act every week. The man held a chuckle. They would never realize.

The door creaked open and a breeze momentarily whisked through the tavern. It was one of those cool winds that carried hints of warmth from days now months passed and was filled with the promise of the brisk purity of winter.

There was the sound of footsteps and the man looked up. He could not resist a brief smile. The old man Brant stood before him, quivering. He pointed a shaky finger from his long, thin robe and said, “I’ve come for something of mine. Something you’ve taken.”

The man leaned back in his chair and smiled again. He had still not decided what to do with Brant. After breaking into Brant's daughter's home, the family had tried to resist so he had dispatched of them. Brant, on his way to his daughter's home that early morning, had seen the murderer leaving the house. Though his accusation would not go far—the authorities were well paid off—the man was growing tired of seeing Brant's face. He was still debating a subtle slice across the throat at night or to continue letting him live in agony of his murdered family.

“Fine then,” he replied to Brant, gesturing to a chair. “Let's see what you can wager.”

Shaking, Brant lowered himself into the chair. The man exchanged another grin with his colleague across the room. The other people at the table were drooping their heads. They would regret the night when they sobered in the morning, but they would still be back to gamble again.

Brant leaned across the table. “You should die,” he whispered. “Since I cannot have that, I want what you've taken from me.”

The man smiled. “I'm sorry; I cannot bet the lives of your daughter and her family.” A stirring of satisfaction turned in his stomach when he saw how Brant winced and his eyes clouded. “I can wager this though.”

He withdrew the pocket watch that he knew Brant was after. It was bronze with an intricate diamond-cut pattern on the lid. He had gathered that it was a family heirloom, passed from Brant to his daughter. It had probably been the most valuable item in the home, worth more than the coin and jewelry he had found in a safe. He would sell it soon, but for the time being he was enjoying tempting Brant with it.

Brant overturned his pockets on the table, producing a meager two pence. The man knew he could not lose, and he desired to drag out Brant's pain. He glanced over to the bar counter. It was time to get his drink for the night.

He rose. "I've grown thirsty, playing here so long." He made a show of sweeping up the coins he had won already into his coin purse. "Care for a drink, Brant? Though I doubt you can afford one." He slid the watch back into the pocket of his breeches and left Brant at the table. At the counter, he seated himself on one of the hard wooden stools between one of his colleagues and a young man in a black cloak that he did not know.

Talis, the burly bartender, brought him his drink, already knowing he preferred mead to ale. His colleague, Arold, smirked. "You sure are stringing that old bastard out aren't you?"

The man grinned in return and sipped his mead, savoring the sweet honey bite. "He will not know what struck him, as neither did his family."

Arold snorted. "Of all the gamblers and thieves in town, you are the best Marcus."

Marcus drained his drink. "Don't you mean, the worst?" His wicked smile grew.

As he rose to leave, the young man sitting on the other side had turned sharply to him. "It sounds like an interesting game," he said. His face was slight featured and intense, green eyes peered at him. "Your skills seem to be unmatched. You make bold wagers."

Marcus did not respond but to grunt, wondering how much money the young man had on him. Perhaps he would investigate further, after he ruined Brant for another time.

Brant was waiting for him at the table. He seemed to have stopped quivering a bit, but there was still fear and anger in his old, pale eyes. Marcus sat back down and shuffled his cards, thinking of the few up his sleeve. He reached to his pocket for the watch.

A frown became his face. Quickly he checked the other, and tried to still the panic rising in him. Brant had not moved from the table; he could not have reclaimed it. His deft fingers felt the seams of the pocket again, but to no avail, knew it to be gone.

There was again a faint stirring of wind through the tavern. Marcus looked to the door to see it close. He glanced back to Brant and, saying nothing, rose once more from the table. His heart pounded with anger, but he tried to appear collected as he made his way to the door.

As he stepped outside, a flurry of crisp leaves dashed about his feet and the sound of music from the tavern quickly cut off as the door slammed in the

wind. Dry leaves scraped and scuttled stone. He turned his head to the right to see a hooded figure and heard a snap as the watch was closed in hand and slid into a pocket. The figure turned briskly and began walking.

"Hey!" Marcus started but stopped, for there were a few other people about the street and he did not want to make a scene. Not here, not in the public eye. If there were too many witnesses, he was not sure he could pay off the authorities enough.

Trying to maintain his composure, he followed the figure. While Marcus was aware of his own boots clicking on the stone, the figure moved with silence ahead of him.

The figure made a sharp turn down an alley a block from the tavern. Marcus, several paces behind him, lengthened his stride. He did not want to lose the mysterious man.

Marcus rounded the corner to the dark, empty alley. He scanned the sides and farther down could make out a door at the end. Cursing himself for being pickpocketed, Marcus slid out his dagger from where it was strapped beneath his tunic at his belt and proceeded down the alley; no one would steal from him without paying the price.

Here, in the alley, the wind was slowed. The dead leaves littering the ground did not stir. The lights of the street lanterns did not shine here, nor did the moon peak from the obscuring clouds. Only the silence remained, heavy and palpable.

Reaching the end of the alley, Marcus paused in confusion. What he had thought had been a door was only a stone wall, crates stacked along it. The most puzzling thing was the pocket watch that lay upon one of the crates.

Marcus scanned around himself but saw nothing. He went to reach for the watch but a high, shrill shriek pierced the air, shattering the dark silence while a flurry of wings and feathers swarmed his face. He slashed out with his dagger, his heart in his throat despite himself. The blade met nothing and he found himself staring at a raven. Dark, beady eyes searched his soul, uncovering the grotesque spirit within. The ebony of the bird's feathers spread out to encompass the watch below its hooked feet.

"I believe you may have wagered too much," a soft voice emanated from the shadows. A voice that pinged vaguely familiar as Marcus turned around, recalling the taste of sweet mead on his lips.

The heart that had risen to his throat sunk down to his stomach as the realization set in. Like a shade, the silence moved before Marcus could. Green eyes emerged from the darkness, piercing his soul. Somewhere off on the other side of town, a bell tolled to tell the time, a dull alarm signifying the melancholy

# Women With Backpacks

*Quinn Nichols*

---

tones of death.

The night was now still. Silence moved beyond the alley, softly treading the cobblestone streets. Looking up, the raven extended its wings and took flight, catching the cool currents of the wind as it swept through the town.

The next morning, an old man woke in wonder. On his nightstand, ancient and brazen, was his pocket watch.

I looked in the mirror and saw a woman staring back. She's covered in blood, tear tracks staining her face. She looked like my grandmothers and their grandmothers. The blood and tear stains end in a roughly-shaped handprint that covers half of her face and over her mouth. Her hair is in two thick braids, one chopped off close to her head. She's holding the mutilated braid in her hand, but there's no salvaging it.

She's pregnant. Not about to give birth, but far enough along to be showing. I could only tell if I looked extremely close--her dress was oversized as a way to hide her belly. The woman didn't say anything, but I understood that this was a secret. No one could know, it was too dangerous.

But suddenly she wasn't pregnant. She had a backpack on and was frantically trying to shove things into it. The braid, a broken wedding ring, the oversized clothes. Other things I couldn't identify. I wanted to reach out to help, but the idea of touching any of the backpack's content terrified me more than anything I'd ever experienced.

I asked who she was and she didn't respond. I just wanted to know her name. I asked if I could help her with the backpack--she pulled it closer to herself and wrapped herself around it. It made me even more fearful of what was inside the backpack.

It terrified me, but there was a bigger pull of needing to know what was in it. I begged her to let me see, let me help. I could help her, take something out of the backpack and put it somewhere else. I could take the backpack from her. I just knew I needed to help.

She shook her head again, firmer this time. Her eyes got watery but she wouldn't let tears fall.

I asked her again to let me help--I'm good at packing things, I'm sure we could just rework it and fit everything in the backpack--but this time she lashed out. She didn't hit me, just banged her hand against the mirror, but it pushed me against the wall behind me all the same.

I was trying to help. Didn't she understand?

# He Fist Bumped Me Goodnight

*Alora Mccoy*

---

We stared at each other for a few moments before she stepped back. Maybe she didn't understand.

She put the backpack on again, holding the pieces of herself in her hands.

"There's no room for me," she said simply. "Maybe you will get to have a bigger backpack."

After all that?

After the Spanish Inquisition that was your hands on my skin!

Ravaging, pillaging, entirely swallowing whole.

The Earth split open, sulfur and soot  
and we swam among the souls you and I,  
inheritors of Damnation

And he fist-bumped me goodnight.

I know that we're casual; jeans and a nice t-shirt.

But he *fist-bumped* me goodnight!

# X-File #E11649

*henry 7. reneau jr.*

---

Nevada County Sheriff's Office—08.21.14  
1:15am—A woman from Connie Drive reported  
people peeking through her windows.

November 7, 2015: Los Angeles, CA—Millions  
witnessed a strange light in the evening sky. The  
government said it was a missile test. But was it?  
We must ask ourselves' "Are we truly alone, or  
are we being lied to?" The truth is still out there.

—X-Files series ad for 2015 6-part mini-series

We always thought that alien life would come from the stars.  
Slow motion city-sized saucers, breaching the constellation-

spattered night sky, a plummet of bio-luminescence  
from the exposed motor of eternity.

We imagined Leviathans  
shearing like lightning from sepia-hued thunderheads,

from the darkness they would fall/  
*a great cloud with fire enveloping it . . . a wheel within a wheel.*

The wonder of it all/: pulsing, multi-colored lights, & Tectonic  
bass boom, an ominous reverberation

echoing like bronzed smoke from the silver glass of awe.  
Would they come? Ghostly-pale & naked.

A veiled intent of hooded, reptilian eyes, like a malevolent stealth of  
wolves. Their lip-less language, a telepathic infinity of nuance

between each otherworldly utterance,  
& emaciated arms, outstretched towards us.

Would we welcome them, or 911, *please state the nature of  
your emergency, spread panic?*

Would our war machine stumble—  
at a loss for protocol? & only a distant, fictional hope

that Muldar & Scully would soon arrive  
to FB-eye

the alien blue luminescence—  
the ultra-violet neon of forest between the trees.

Would the aliens from Elsewhere  
finally unveil the mystery of us? Explain why?

Our predatory ways  
only spoke to something furtive & feral inside, the real Enemy

actually us—our immorality, a bleakness in need of some instruction.  
Our earthward pointed surveillance satellites &

weapons platforms. Our patriotic Trump stance of xenophobia,  
that speaks to something fearful inside us all. Our longing, for fame

& fortune, heard echoing from temples  
like a perpetual ibādah of obsession. The squalor of hunger &

dispossession—the unending, hemophiliac canon of war—shaping itself

into a question mark. Despite,  
our always believing, that evil, malevolent life would come from the stars.

Note: This poem reads best while listening to the song "It's You" by Dolores  
O'Riordan.

## Passage

*Elizabeth Hill*

---

Still strong enough,  
Dad holds you up  
with a bear hug.

The cast off catheter  
lingers.  
Your age-dimpled belly  
hangs low.

You bask in his fond gaze –  
years deep.

You beam at him  
through closed eyes,  
and trust him  
to see you through.

## Sirens Lure

*Richard Dinges, Jr.*

---

Sirens attract  
eyes, a slow swivel  
toward their lonely wail.  
Drawn from woods  
and garden paths onto  
open roadsides,  
they scan for red lights  
where car wrecks pile  
on highway shoals.  
Another driver's distracted  
gaze transitions speed  
to sudden stops. No  
lovely mermaids at siren's  
call, only shattered glass  
and uniforms at the end  
of siren's lure. I stop  
at concrete's hard cold edge.

# Cleverness

*Zachary Ambrose Mohler*

---

Great minds think alike  
and when they speak in tandem,  
it's time to depart

and on a date, go Random!  
That is truly Art  
for misery's like riding a bike:

better not to start.

# Pig Hooves

*Ashtyn Layne*

---

If I arch my back enough  
it's like I have something  
to show off. But  
simultaneously  
if I arch my back too much the fat  
that evens out over my ribs when I stand  
straight now begins to make an appearance.  
The gelatin yellow proof of midnight binges  
spread out along the  
bathroom sink.  
It's grossness piling up high.

I shouldn't see this as disgusting but  
I found out from the vegan kid  
at the poetry workshop that gelatin  
is made from pig hooves,  
so really  
there are dead pigs inside of me.

Not that it's the grossest thing  
I've ever let inside of me to  
rearrange my guts but it's probably  
the hardest.  
They say spitters are quitters but  
I think they would make an exception  
for the dead pigs decomposing  
in the acidic water slide that is  
my throat.

So I take my ass pics on the bathroom sink  
even though  
it's all for show. And I'll probably send them  
to the next guy I met  
on tinder  
that I secretly hate  
because men are pigs  
and now apparently I am pigs

# The Creeper

*Kelly Talbot*

---

and sure, two wrongs  
don't make a right but  
more wood does light a quicker flame.

He opens it and doesn't answer.  
Which is rude because...  
free nudes, right?  
I deserve some sort of validation!  
Some disrespectful reflection  
of the dehumanizing way I speak  
of my own body.  
Something slightly insulting  
and yet desperately endearing.  
Instead, I go to sleep  
and imagine him typing out  
"your body is jello  
baby, and I am just  
so hungry."

The 2 a.m. chill closed in on me. I should've worn a warmer jacket. Normally, I wouldn't be out on the streets this late, but the horror movie marathon was running throughout October. Tony, Max, and I agreed to watch it together every Friday and Saturday night at Tony's house because he had the best TV. Mom was okay with that. We were each twelve years old, which was old enough to be careful and young enough to not get into too much trouble. Now I was walking home in the cold, both keyed up from drinking too much soda and exhausted due to the late hour. Anyway, it was only six blocks from Tony's house to my house. On the other side of the street, a van was parked in the coppery glow under a streetlight. When I was maybe twenty steps past it, I heard a sound as if the van's door had opened and closed. I looked over my shoulder. No one was anywhere near the van.

I kept walking. Every ten steps or so, I glanced around. I didn't see anyone. I didn't hear any more sounds, either. But I had an uneasy feeling, as if something was wrong. It was 2 a.m. If anything happened to me, no one was around to see it. For that matter, no one was around to see if I ran. I sprinted the last two blocks home, pulling out my keys as I approached the door. Once I was safely inside, I looked out the window. The street was empty.

\* \* \*

The next night, I told Max and Tony about what had happened. They asked if I got the license plate number of the van. I hadn't thought of it, but I probably couldn't have read it from that far away anyway. They wanted to know what color the van was. In that light, it could have been almost any color except for black. I couldn't be sure.

If we told our moms, they'd cancel our movie marathon. We certainly didn't want that. Besides, nothing had happened. We were all exhilarated and a little afraid, but we agreed that it was obviously just an overactive imagination after too many horror movies. Even so, it was best to not take any chances. Max and I would talk to each other on our phones on the way home, and if anything strange happened to either of us, the other one could immediately call for help. As I walked home that night, there was no van. But when I got to the same place on the street, I again felt as if I was being followed. I told Max. He said to keep my eyes open. I kept looking around, but I didn't spot anyone. I fought down the urge to run, and I made it home fine. Max and I said goodnight.

\* \* \*

The following Friday night, we decided that we had gotten a little carried away and that everything was okay. When it came time to leave, we stayed on our

phones. Better safe than sorry.

On the walk home, I again got the creepy feeling that someone was following me, and I kept checking over my shoulder. I had just turned forward when I hear a sound right behind me. I whirled around. No one was there.

Then I heard a light crackle and creak above me. I looked up. Thousands of orange and brown maple leaves formed a canopy over the street. It was just nature, and my paranoia had been ridiculous. I told Max the sound was the branches in the wind.

I continued onward, calming down and listening to the leaves rustle overhead. Then Max quietly pointed out that there was no wind tonight. He was right. I spun and looked up at the branches, and the sound stopped. The leaves were dense, making it too dark for me to see anything.

I could feel goosebumps up and down my arms. I stared upward over my shoulder as I strode down the street, glancing forward every few steps but then swiftly looking up and back. It was silent the rest of the walk home. Once I was inside, I furtively peered through the curtains for what felt like an hour but was probably only five minutes. I never saw anything strange.

\* \* \*

Before I went to Tony's the next night, I snuck into the kitchen and grabbed a sturdy knife that had a good grip and a sharp blade. I hid it in my jacket sleeve when I left so Mom wouldn't notice it.

When I left Tony's that night, a brisk breeze snapped and crunched the leaves everywhere. I wouldn't be able to tell if I was being stalked from above. I kept the knife in one hand and the phone in the other. Max cautioned me that this thing could be in front of me or to the side. Clever predators can come from any direction.

And then I saw it. I couldn't be sure what it was, but something was definitely moving overhead to my right. I quickly turned on my camera and shared it with Max, asking him if he could make it out. He told me it was just a thick branch. He was right.

Max pointed out that whatever this thing was, it probably didn't spend all of its time in the trees. It must come down sometime. So I shouldn't only be looking up. I needed to watch everywhere. I checked every direction, up and down the street, every car, every house, and back up in the trees again. The damn thing could be anywhere.

Suddenly, Max screamed, a high-pitched shriek of sheer terror. And his phone went dead.

I ran home, burst inside, and started shouting for my mom to wake up. We called 911. The police and paramedics found Max on the side of the street, bruised and

unconscious, and they took him to the hospital.

\* \* \*

The next day, Max called and told me what had happened. The night before, his older brother had appeared out of nowhere, running across the street toward him, panicked. His brother shoved him hard, and as Max was reeling away, something swooped just above the street at his brother. Then everything went black. Max must have hit his head on a car or the pavement.

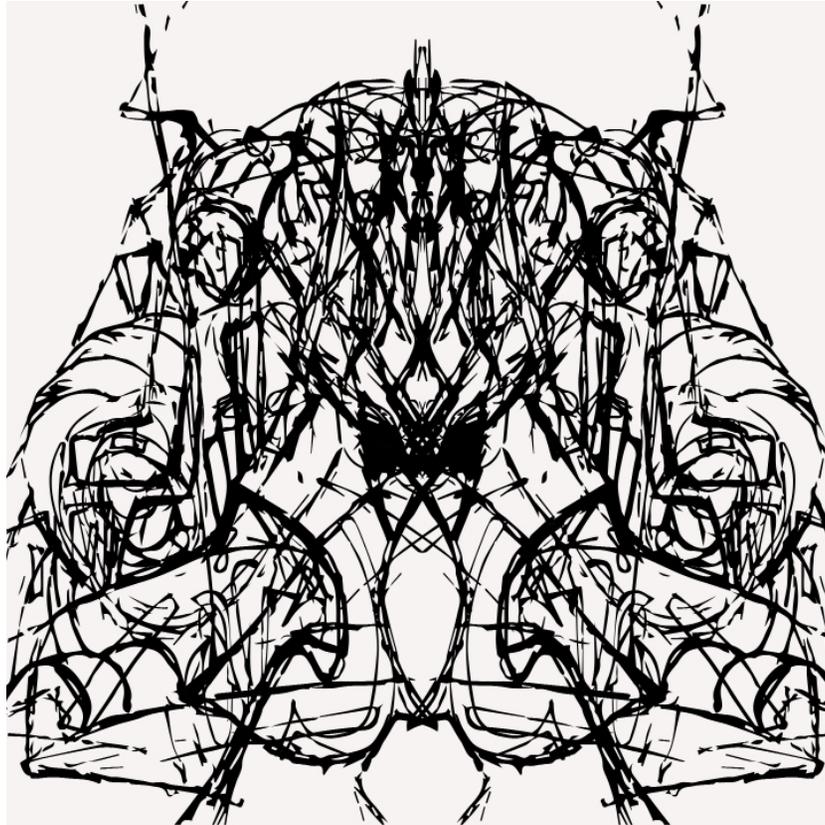
Max told the police and his mother everything, with the exception of the thing in the trees and seeing anything specific attacking his brother. He also told them about the van I had seen. The police came by later and asked me about the van. Our moms all agreed that we wouldn't be allowed out after dark again until they caught whoever had taken Max's brother.

They didn't need to worry about that. I never stepped outside after dark again.

# Alchemist

*Carlos Lorenzana*

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Color artwork

*17 Cardinal Sins*

# Village on a Hillside 2

*Edward Supranowicz*

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Color artwork

*Cardinal Sins*

# Descendant to the Throne

*Hareendran Kallinkeel*

---

The king's palace has the most beautiful gardens. It also has the ugliest of dungeons; the darkest and dirtiest, stinky.

Free spirits flutter in the sprawling lawns flooded with sunlight, occasionally resting on the lush green plants. Red and maroon flowers dance to their feathery touch, bathed in the fragrance of roses. In the dungeons, steeped in murkiness, cursed souls hover beneath the filthy cellars' ceilings, suffocating in the odor of their own rotten bodies buried underground eons ago.

Far from the dungeons and gardens, Nathan scales the inner wall of the tall rampart that protects his father's estate, which looks rather like a floating city. Nestling in the lap of Arabian Sea, the property houses everything in its enormous belly, right from an ice cream parlor where the grandchildren enjoy their favorite flavors, to a grill where Nathan's generation relishes the taste of tender lamb chops dipped in garlic sauce and strewn with crushed peppercorn.

And, his father being an ardent connoisseur of the world's finest scotches, the city also accommodates a sophisticated bar where the bartender mixes the most savory highballs.

The rough granite wall scrapes against Nathan's naked belly as he clambers like a lizard on lumbering paws. He winces in pain, drags his body up. Wrapping his scaled talons around the iron spikes jutting from the top of the wall, he peers into the other side.

Clusters of foam, like armies of white ants, ride the crests of waves lashing against the huge bulwark. Each bursting bubble takes the form of his crushed dream, an undying yearning to ascend the king's throne, a just claim to his father's crown as the eldest son.

The property flourishes within several layers of protection that shield it from any outside influence, allow it to thrive in an uncontaminated environment. First, the endowment of nature, in the form of those huge waves, that prevents an intruder from daring to sail across the angry waters. Then, a defensive wall nurtured by the abundance of crisp green bills that no one can hope to penetrate. The third and the strongest, those dark-skinned humans that make the inner core robust by the chores they perform, hard labor and household works.

Finally, the king's strength derives also from two generations of descendants, all beautiful and adorable, except for the firstborn to whom the crown is denied.

"Yet, somehow, Father," Nathan whispers into the darkness around him. "I'll claim my rights, gain ascension to the throne, and have the satisfaction of proving you wrong."

The waves continue their tireless efforts to stay in a static embrace with the land, but the sea pulls the tides back, a vigilant bird tucking its chicks under the safety of its wings.

In the distance, Nathan notices a gleam in the water; electric flashes rendered like some shape-shifting spirit, jagged blue lines defining its contours. It moves with the current, scales up the outer wall. A series of tiny illumination dances around the iron spikes that Nathan holds.

"I'm here," a voice says, "I'll begin at the surface, and then eat into the core."

#

"Throw that ugly duckling into the sea," Vasu said. "I don't want ever to lay my eyes on it again."

"He's my pearl." Devu caressed her newborn, gingerly moved her body closer to him, to encase him in her warmth. "Not one anyone picks from deep waters, but one that God has dropped into my lap from heaven."

"Why don't you understand? Having him around will only make our lives miserable," Vasu spoke in a low voice. "A onetime pain of loss will be much easier to deal with."

Devu looked at her husband. Who said she didn't understand? The stream of thoughts that flowed through her at the first sight of her firstborn had included everything conceivable to a mother who just gave birth to a black, ugly child that looked rather like an alien than a human: the ridicule he'd have to confront, the problems he'd encounter at school, discrimination he'd face in the society. There'd never be a girl to love him, someone he could marry; he'd never have children of his own.

"I don't want the burden of guilt burn through my conscience for an entire lifetime." She snuggled closer to her son. "And, no matter what, he's our responsibility."

Vasu gritted his teeth, soundless. The strategist in him awakened. "See, Devu." He sat on the bed near her, making sure his body didn't touch that repulsive thing. "We'd only be granting him *moksha* from a cursed life."

"You can't shroud the truth with a veil of philosophy," she said. "It is murder, plain and simple; euphemisms can't dilute the gravity of a sin. And, I won't allow it."

Vasu realized that he could never coax her with practical logic. "Then, we'll send him to some distant place. I'll pay for everything, so we'll have the satisfaction of caring for him."

"I am his mother, and I won't ever deprive him of his rights to parents' care." Devu ran her fingers along her baby's soft, dusky cheek. "He brings me joy

you'll never understand. Don't try to steal my happiness."

Vasu's horoscope proclaimed his wife as his lucky charm. He had no reason to discount that claim. His empire had prospered in a tremendous way after their marriage. Who's he to forsake luck? "Okay, but he'd never inherit my kingdom, nor will he see the light of the day. I don't want the entire community to know I birthed a..."

"He's a gift from God." Devu inhaled a deep breath and smiled at her child. "What use your estates or daylight will be to him, unless he receives your love."

#

Vasu wriggles in the bed; like a serpent in the throes of death, writhing in a pool of acid. "I can't bear this pain," he tells the doctor, "give me more of that damn morphine."

"Relax... I've given you an ample dose." The doctor moves to a dustbin to drop the syringe. "Even when administered via IV, it will need some time to attain the peak analgesic effect. So, don't worry, you'll be all right in a few minutes."

"Why don't you tell me what's really wrong with me?"

The doctor returns to a chair near the bed. "Medical science often doesn't have all the answers. You seem to have lost a certain element, a malignancy in you, which has rendered you vulnerable to the infection."

"A malignancy? What..."

"I'm not sure. We don't yet know what it exactly is. But, it would've given you some kind of a defensive shield. It was present in everybody else in your estate, except you."

Now, relieved a little from the pain, Vasu raises his body and leans against the headboard. "Do you know, doctor, you're mooted the most foolish idea I've ever listened to? I mean, I eat a very nutritious diet, I work out, and you tell me those repulsive beings that live off the measly means I provide are healthier than me?"

"As ironic as it sounds, that's the fact."

"See, doctor, I'm not prepared to die at 65." Vasu raises his upper torso a bit more onto the headboard, and fixes the doctor with a stern gaze. "20-30 years more might be like it. And, I am sure, you'll see to it."

"As you know, we've already exhausted every resource. Tried transfusion with every single person's blood that matches your group; and I remind you again, yours is the rarest of the rare."

"No, doctor, you haven't," Vasu says. "There's one left, the firstborn."

"Are you okay?" The doctor rises and touches Vasu's forehead with his right hand. "It looks like the morphine..."

"You don't know."

"We've already tried transfusion with your firstborn. Unfortunately, it failed."

"Exactly, doctor, but you never knew who the firstborn was."

#

"Mother, it's true." Nathan's talons clasp the iron bars like vices. "It told me it would begin at the surface and then eat into the core. Then, I didn't understand; but, now I know."

"What do you mean?" Mother's fingers wrap around Nathan's talons. She looks into his eyes, her lashes wet with a smear of tears.

"I think it meant a disease will first infect the workers and others and, finally, Father. I can see that the others have recovered, but he hasn't."

"The doctors tried everything. But..."

"If only Father allowed you frequent visits... it's over a month since I'd first encountered that thing. I could've warned you if we met more often."

"What thing?"

"It appeared somewhat like me, ugly and outlandish. Its head looked like that of a hawk, its arms resembled wings." A shiver runs through Nathan's body, and he feels Mother's fingers clasp his talons in a tighter grip. "Back in Hell, it told, they call him Pargan and that I had to do penance."

"But, you didn't commit any..."

"The penance I had to do was for the sins of my father, Pargan had said."

"You're the one deprived of all your rights. Why'd you do penance, it's denial of justice."

"Don't they say, Mother, a person's sins affect his generations? I don't want my siblings and their children to suffer for the sin Father has committed."

"You have to let the others do what's necessary to absolve themselves of their share of the sin."

"It may be my destiny, Mother." Nathan takes a long look into her eyes, the sadness reflecting in them. "Someone has to bear the brunt. And, I'm selfish. I've told you many times that I'll gain ascension to the throne, no matter what. I'll undo the injustice and prove that I am a better human being than my father thought. The penance is now over and done with."

"Over..."

"Yes, I've already done what's needed to be done."

"But, you were sheltered in this dungeon; you were allowed to go out of here only during nights."

"Pargan had some magic. He sneaked my soul out every day while my body continued to remain here, performing all normal tasks." Nathan inhales another long breath. "First, he took me to the..."

#

The ground beneath the dungeons looked like a maze, each alleyway divided into several others, the paths leading to a multitude of cellars. Walking through the dark alleys, Nathan smelt the rancid odor of rot that hung in the air. In the distance, he heard wailing sounds as if millions of souls, trapped the murky labyrinths, were lamenting their fate.

“They’ve been cursed,” Pargan said, “to suffer eternally in this darkness, never receiving *moksha*. It’s their lot to languish in the purgatory state, not to gain expiatory purification.”

“But, what grave sin did they commit? So far I know, these are the souls of those men and women that toiled for my father, his forefathers.” Nathan stared into Pargan’s eyes that remained a bleak glow in the darkness. “They are the ones who really built his empire.”

“The laws of the afterlife, young man, do not work on the logic of the mortal world,” he said. “Acquiescence to exploitation, to discrimination, in itself is a deadly sin. It’s the desertion of one’s *karma*, not to react to injustice.”

“But a graver sin, it’s the one committed by my forefathers, and they go unpunished.”

“Your father discarded you because you’re born dark and ugly. What did you do about it?”

Nathan remained silent.

“It’s your sin that you didn’t react to the injustice,” Pargan continued to speak in a grim voice. “And, you have to do the penance for the sins of your previous generations. Didn’t you know the dictum of your world that a person’s generations would receive the wages of his sins?”

“Why’d I suffer for...”

“You’ll do the penance for your father, for your acquiescence to injustice, and for the sin of exploitation by your former generations, of those poor souls that still languish in here.” Pargan gazed at Nathan. “It’s your path to your karma, ultimate *moksha*.”

“But, I didn’t commit any...”

“Do you think you have a choice other than honoring these languishing souls, who suffer because of your people?” Pargan snickered. “It doesn’t matter your father neglected you, you don’t have your rights, and you languish in a cell. All that matters is what you’re prepared to do, your karma...”

The cries of the souls grew shrilly, their lament a cacophony in Nathan’s ears. He pressed his palms against the sides of his head, to ward off the noise. “What do I...”

“It’s a purgatory process,” Pargan said, taking a deep breath. “You’ll suf-

fer through the tests of hell. Lord *Vishnu*, sitting in his abode *Vaikuntha*, had thus advised *Garuda*, the Lord of Birds, his carrier eagle: the sinners would be dragged through *Kumbhipaka* and the other hells, to suffer unbearable torments.”

“I don’t understand,” Nathan said. “What’s *Kumbhipaka*?”

“Yes, I know. Tutors your father hired, at your mother’s insistence... Well, I think they taught you about Dante’s *Inferno*, the *Purgatorio*. You’ll have to experience all the nine circles. You can say, *kumbhipaka* is an alternate version of those nine circles.”

“Didn’t I ever tell you?” Nathan asked. “That I’m prepared to go through any hell to gain ascension to the throne, to prove my mother right?”

#

“How do you feel now?” the doctor asks.

Vasu leans back on the easy chair. “Never felt better. Tell me, doctor, what’s the magic that cured me?”

“I’m not sure. Maybe, your body purged something bad when it accepted your firstborn’s blood.” The doctor cast his eyes to the back-cover of a book that Vasu has picked up. “Or, it’s possible that the malignancy you’d transferred to your son returned when you received his blood. It should satisfy you that he’s divested of ugliness.”

“To everyone his due,” Vasu says, opening the book. “You know, this is the best poetry collection I’ve ever read.”

“Often, you know, beauty peeks out of what we perceive as dark and ugly,” the doctor says, with a bright smile. His eyes fall on the dusky, scrawny face of the female poet on the book’s back-cover, her smile lit up by a hint of gleaming white teeth.

#

Nathan walks the red carpet leading to the dais that housed the king’s throne, flanked by a couple of soldiers on either side. He feels the glaze of the chandeliers blazing overhead accentuate his sense of pride.

Earlier, while taking a bath after donating blood to his father, his skin has peeled off his body, his talons dropped like melting wax and blended with the foamy bubbles in the tub. When he has looked in the mirror, a young man with striking features of a Greek god stared back at him, his dark-brown skin gleaming in the brightness of neon lights.

Now, as he strides toward the throne, he observes his mother, standing on his left, with a pair of maidens on her side.

“Well, this might be a miracle of God for many,” Devu says, “a magic of science for the others...”

Nathan pauses, wraps her hand in his slender fingers. “Even with the talons, I know, mother; my hands would’ve felt the same to you.” He feels her clasp grow firm. “Maybe, it’s God’s will that my ugliness gets cast off, for Father’s sake.”

Devu’s face lights up as she hugs her son. “What else can pearls do, other than shine?”

## Thanks for the Push

*E. Martin Pedersen*

---

Thanks to the stranger  
for the push on the swings  
grown-ups really shouldn’t sit on the swings  
but once in a while can’t hurt  
I was unthinking myself there at rest  
you rushed up behind me unannounced  
and gave me a strong but gentle push with a giggle  
and, boy, did I swing  
a bit uneven at first  
your hands felt right on my pockets  
and you steadied me  
and the rush  
the heady safe falling  
the mild danger  
in your hands  
and the flight  
the arc  
you took my breath away  
you made me feel like I might leave this earth  
you gave me the desire to pump harder and harder to go higher and higher  
once I got started I didn’t want to stop  
eyes closed for maximum headspin  
once I was flying on my own  
you disappeared  
I never turned to see your face  
but I know your smell  
as you drew me back  
your head touched the side of mine  
and I trusted you  
let myself go  
for the trust I’m grateful  
for the thrill  
I sit a while still now,  
mildly hoping for more  
but mainly satisfied  
with what I had  
a moment

# The Silver Bullet Fix

*Marco Etheridge*

---

Carmen Tocsin reaches out, hesitates, her trembling hand trapped between the gravity of appalling need and the reticence of shame. Just one, that's all, just enough to calm down or I'll be awake forever. I can't take another sleepless night. Need wins out and her fingers close around the plastic case. One episode, no more than that. I promise.

Her fingernails claw open the clamshell and pop out a shimmering disc. The player sticks out a flat tongue and waits. Carmen fits disc to depression, thumbs a button, and the machine swallows the thing.

She drops to a lumpy futon couch, tucks her feet under her thighs. A generous pour of red wine is waiting on the recycled crate coffee table. The flatscreen glows to life and a menu appears onscreen. She raises the remote and stabs at it with her thumb, as if firing a weapon. The cursor spasms over the pixelated options. Yeah, episode twelve, that will work, as if there's a difference.

Images appear in silver monochrome. Trumpets erupt in a sharp burst, a triplet, then racing triplets. The announcer's voice breaks through the fanfare and the rest of the orchestra gallops in behind the horns. Two shots, a hero's rallying cry, then the black-and-white universe speeds up. Five gunshots, improbably fast; the rearing horse, the masked rider. The painful buzz in Carmen's head begins to ease.

The bad guys make their entrance, framed in 4:3 ratio and poised to commit some outrageous crime. Blocks of black screen on either side of the melodrama focus Carmen's attention on the action. She allows herself a small smile. Go ahead and do your worst, you bastards, because justice is coming.

Bold as the brass horns of the overture, the black hats snatch up their loot and ride off. They think they've gotten away clean, but Carmen knows better. Tonto will hear of the crime. He will listen, nodding his chiseled bronze profile. His handsome face will be thoughtful yet impassive. Once he has heard the news, Tonto will swing into Scout's saddle and ride off to find the masked man.

She takes a long sip of wine while her eyes follow the beautiful man in fringed buckskins. Tonto will arrive at their campsite, a secret place hidden amongst giant boulders. The Lone Ranger will be there, waiting for news. Bad men in town, Kemosabe.

This is the screenplay of her life, day in, day out. Bad men in town, bad men in the city, greedy bastards trying to steal from the poor. Not just trying but succeeding. They plunder and rob under the cloak of the law, polished lizards in tailored suits.

Carmen fights back whenever and wherever she can. Instead of

six-shooters, they do battle with torts and precedence. She has her law degree and they have theirs. Counsel will approach the bench. Showdown at the bar, standing in front of the judge. The slick-haired bandits, Carmen in her off-the-rack suit, and not a silver bullet in sight.

It doesn't have to be like this. She could hang up her spurs, quit this endless pro bono crap, go to work for the money. It's not against the law. Her mother would applaud her decision to switch sides. But when Tonto turns his impassive brown eyes on hers, what then? She will be unable to bear the shame of that silent accusation. Better to keep up the losing fight than suffer his disapproval.

That's my place, stuck between my mother's hopes or the sad, wonderful eyes of Jay Silverheels. I could make the jump if I wanted to. I'm smart, savvy, and I've got a law degree from Berkeley. Thirty years old and I look damn good in heels and a power suit. Plenty of private firms would hire me tomorrow.

I could still do pro bono work when the rich partners needed to polish their public image, but it would be an occasional lark, not my daily grind. Like screwing that cute valet parking guy, but only now and then, only when I felt like it. Which, of course, I've never done. Maybe if he looked more like Tonto. But then it wouldn't be just the one time. I'd never let Tonto out of my bed.

She takes another sip of wine and stares at the screen. Two good horsemen ride off to dispense a simple justice, the masked man on his silver Arabian, and her handsome Tonto on his painted pinto. She settles back and savors the rightness of their shared quest.

I don't have to watch this every night, not really. I do it because I want to, because it makes me feel good. Where's the harm in that? I'm not hurting anyone. It's not like I'm shooting heroin or smoking crack. The good guys win, the bad guys lose, everything wrapped up nice and tidy with a pretty bow on top. Why can't it happen like that in real life? I just need one clear-cut win now and then, enough to keep me going. Is that too much to ask? And no more pledge drives, not ever again.

The fucking pledge drive, what a horror show! Ten endless evenings pressing a phone to her ear, trying to convince other people to do some good. A few dollars a month, no more than the cost of their daily skinny vanilla latte. Each time she recites the script, she wants to scream. Is it any wonder she needs a good fix?

Her phone shift over, she flees the volunteer center, grabs some takeout as she rushes home. Her hands are so shaky she can barely fit the disc into the player. One episode is not enough, not on a pledge drive night. She watches two, three, more, the William Tell Overture repeating itself in her empty apartment.

The bad guys are vanquished, the kid asks the sheriff who that masked man was, and she punches in the next installment and pours another glass of wine.

Roll credits, the silver horse rears up, the white man calls out his battle cry, and your beautiful Tonto rides off unnoticed. And his final credits rolled out ten years before you were born, girlfriend, so why this never-ending crush on a dead sidekick?

Carmen punches the pause button.

It's not a crush. I love Tonto. He does the messy human work, the things the masked man cannot do. The Lone Ranger is an empty shell. His heart was taken when his fellow rangers were ambushed, his brother dead. It's his Indian sidekick who goes to town, gathers the news, gets beaten up by the bad guys. And I love Tonto because he is the only brown face in a sea of white.

*What are you?* The question Carmen dreaded most when she was a little girl. She was different, a brown girl from a family with money. When she started prep school, the white kids were too polite to ask. The few black kids privileged enough to be students didn't care. But there were forms to be filled out, and boxes to check. There was no correct box for what she was, nothing but other. That's who Tonto is for Carmen: he is her other.

That was then and this is now, and in this now I'm a strong woman, not some skinny schoolgirl worrying about the right choice on a stupid form. And there are more choices now. They've added mixed to the options. That's me: mixed.

She spits out a snarl of frustration and hurls the remote at a pile of pillows. The plastic wand bounces off a cushion and rolls up against her thigh, a playful kitten daring her to try again.

Sure, you're the strong woman, so strong you sit here night after night, watching reruns of old, tired clichés. This shit is more than stale; it's dusty. A cold, wooden white man dispenses justice, shooting the bad guys in the arm, just enough to teach them the error of their ways. The masked man is cast as the strong lead, but you know better, don't you?

The only strength the Lone Ranger has is the infallible moral compass of a cold revenger. Good wins out over evil in thirty minutes, less time for important announcements from our sponsors. But without Tonto, the masked man would be facedown dead in the Texas sage.

And that is why I love Tonto. He is the man with the real strength, the power to be the buffer between good and evil. That's what I want, what I need, someone to help me stand upright in the face of the bad guys, to stand up when all I want to do is surrender.

That's why I watch this over and over. Maybe I can't meet my Tonto in

real life, but I control the remote. I can go back in time. I'm the one wearing the mask, not Clayton Moore.

My buckskin warrior is brave. He knows it is risky to go to town, but one of us must. Someone has to lurk about in the shadows, listen to the whispers, learn what the villains are planning to do. I want to go, but he won't let me.

No, it will not work, my Carmen. You are strong and brave, but they will see you for who you are. No mask can hide your beautiful brown face. I will go. I can disappear where you cannot. They do not take any notice of me. Just another lazy redskin leaning against a wall, they say. Pay him no mind. I will bring back news and then we will know how to fight them.

My beloved rides away on Scout. I miss him before the dust of his passage can settle to the hot earth. My mask will hide my tears, but this is not the time to weep. I must be strong and await his return. Then we will ride out together.

Tonto is stealthy in the shadows, able to appear and disappear, but this time luck is not with him. He edges too close and the villains see him. They do not know his true identity, but they suspect. He is a Red Man sticking his nose into their business and he needs to be taught a lesson. They catch my Tonto and beat him, bruising and bloodying him with their fists and boots.

The bad men are laughing when they leave him in the dust. But he has learned what we need to know, even at the price of a beating. Tonto crawls to his faithful horse. He pulls himself up by one stirrup, wincing at the pain. Using the last of his strength, he hoists himself into the saddle and slumps over Scout's neck. The patient animal knows the trail to our camp and bears my love back to me.

Scout plods into our lonely campsite, reins trailing, Tonto sprawled like a dead man over the horse's neck. I choke back a cry, fight down my urge to run forward. Even Scout can be spooked. I fight down my fear and walk to the animal, speaking soothing words.

I touch his face, feel the fire under his skin, then he is murmuring my name and I know that he is alive. Anger replaces my fear, but I choke that down as well. This is not the time.

Leading Scout to our meager shelter, I wrap my strong arms around my Tonto, ease him from the saddle. He staggers when his feet find the hard ground, but I hold him upright. He points to his bedroll beside the fire and I lower him to it.

I hold a canteen to his battered lips, my hand at the nape of his neck to raise his head. He drinks, nods to me, smiles. I lower his head to the bedroll, and he drifts away. It is a terrible hour, my love laying still as death on the bedroll, me

## Ascots

*Matt Gillick*

---

holding his hand and waiting. Then his eyelids flutter, he speaks my name, and my life begins to move again.

Three days pass, the sun marking time across the rough faces of the boulders that make up our fortress. I strip the buckskins from my lover's beaten body, tend his wounds, kiss his bruises, taste the salt tang on his purpled flesh. I tend the horses, gather firewood, make soup, all the while hovering around a circle whose center is Tonto.

At night I twine my body around his to keep him warm. We are two as one under the stars. I give my strength to him and he drinks it in. A second night falls over us. We are awash in the glow of starlight. He is speaking to me, holding me, returning my touch, and I know that he will soon be well.

Dawn of the third day and I wake to the smell of coffee. I hear the soft step of his moccasins and the morning song of birds. I rise from the blankets and he is there, sitting on his heels before the fire, one hand reaching for the coffee-pot. His face turns to me and he is smiling.

The sun has not yet poured over the boulders and the air is chill. We two sit close beside the fire drinking from tin mugs of coffee hot to the hand. Tonto drapes a blanket across our shoulders. He tells what he overheard, what the villains are planning. There is still time to stop them. We huddle together, scratch out maps in the dirt beneath our feet, illustrate our plan to counter the bad guys.

When we are sure, when there is nothing more to say, we ride out. Our horses canter side by side, their manes streaming back to tickle our hands. We ride to meet what may come, both of us strong, and each made stronger by the other. My Tonto smiles at me and I return his smile, nod my head, face into the wind. I pull my hat low on my forehead, my mask tight across my face.

Carmen stares across the empty room. The TV screen is dark and empty. She feels something pressing against her thigh and looks down. The remote is wedged between her thigh and the futon, hard and boxy like a six-shooter. Her hand falls to it and she draws, quick and smooth.

She aims her trusty pistol into the shadows of her small room. She swings left and right, picking off the bad guys one by one. Her silver bullets fly and the villains fall, clutching wounded arms, their own pistols useless against her.

The gunsmoke clears and Carmen sees her Tonto riding off into the distance. He raises himself in the saddle, throws a wave and a sad smile over his buckskin shoulder. Carmen falls back against the lumpy futon, watches him ride away, laughing and weeping in the same moment.

Their lives—  
shag carpets,  
flying living rooms  
patrolled by  
strangled ascots,  
injected smiles.  
Their lives—  
hotel rooms,  
pillaged  
mini bars,  
calling their  
St. Paul boyfriends  
while they  
turn over  
to face  
Row 2, Seat A,  
in a Scottsdale Marriott.  
Tan lines  
on ring fingers,  
they know  
every trick.  
Their lives—  
rolling Samsonite,  
sleepy  
hallway lamps,  
front-desk clerks:  
quiet nods between them.

## 4 *Platanus mexicana*

*Greg Headley*

---



Color photograph

## 5 *Platanus mexicana*

*Greg Headley*

---



Color photograph

# Failure to Launch

*Jackson Dammann*

---

*Ten.*

Broken water filter of my thoughts.  
Quicksilver venom devours me up to my throat,  
makes me angry  
makes me hurt makes me  
tell it like it is.

*Nine.*

Corpse-foundation skyscrapers  
broadcast private media feeds  
and the Next Big Thing is never  
this final forever war.

Democracy dies—

*Eight.*

Flashing muzzle schools  
(dead children left behind)  
movie theater tombs  
but we're sleeping.

*Seven.*

Fragile Ice-men  
lock parents' souls away  
then clamor that they're saving  
our country, the world.

*Six.*

They prescribe us addiction prescribe us  
no money no house no life  
and still,  
nothing from the crowd.

Democracy dies in—

*Five.*

I dreamed that everyone got together,  
got high got mad and  
burned down the White House.  
It was the best dream I ever had.

*Four.*

We haven't been paying attention so  
now we're here  
now insulin that really costs  
\$4 a vial costs death  
and blood is transmuted to oil  
and 'self-made' men make in a day  
what honesty makes in a year.

*Three.*

Ignore irony,  
ignore 'distant' suffering,  
ignore the men behind the curtain.

Democracy dies in silence.

*Two.*

What will it take to light this garbage fire  
if wailing mothers aren't your Molotov rag oil  
and internment camps aren't your gasoline?

*One.*

Are you still here? Have they already  
turned on the endless infomercial in your cerebrum?  
Cry if you hear me.  
Scream if you'll thrust your life  
triumphantly above the gathering clouds.

# Keubiko

*Lucy Jayes*

---

There are a few dates in history that bring up a communal sharing of stories. 9/11 is my generation's strongest example: the remembering and retelling of our first experience with tragedy, if we are lucky. I've seen the same effect take place in discussion of the Challenger's fiery explosion and the frizzy-haired school teacher aboard. I've even seen it with the assassination of John F. Kennedy. Whether it's the death of one person, seven people or nearly three thousand people, there are some events that are capable of freezing time, of making the moments following imprint more heavily on the brain. A break from the quotidian small talk among peers and colleagues. A reminder that others sometimes experience the weight of this world the same way I am.

In 2001, I was 9 years old. Our principal's voice came over the speaker, stopping class across school to say: "Someone did something very bad in New York City, and a lot of people died."

I was a scrawny, long-legged, empathy machine back then. I was a baby giraffe who couldn't stop crying. I got on my knees each night in the dark of my bedroom and pressed my elbows into my twin bed and furiously prayed that gangs would end, that world peace would come. I hid my crossed fingers when I knelt in church, half-praying and desperately wishing that the holy spirit would envelop me into the great, blue, cloud that I imagined it to be. I longed for it to transport me somewhere warm, safe and insular, where I could float without feeling, without knowledge of anything outside of it, a cocoon like my mother's womb.

I left school early that day. I had a dentist appointment. I felt guilty because 11 was my lucky number. Adults spoke in hushed whispers on tanklike Nokia cellphones everywhere I turned. I rubbed my sweaty palms on my plaid skirt and couldn't stop wondering what the bad men had done.

9/11 evolved me from a cry baby into an elementary student maudlin from the tragedy. Each day, I raced home after school so that I could ride my bicycle around the neighborhood singing "Let There Be Peace On Earth" out loud to my neighbor's closed doors. I used glow in the dark stars and blue paint to turn my bedroom into a giant American flag; I thought it was large enough to encompass and protect me from every evil that was crushing my tiny, breakable heart.

2021 was a year we welcomed by many with open arms. It signified a change, an end to the novel coronavirus. I looked forward to New Year's Eve because I am 7 months pregnant and had promised myself a half a glass of cham-

pagne. I couldn't even take two sips without heartburn.

I didn't expect things to change.

I scrolled through posts on Instagram about how we survived a global pandemic, a revolution. Yet, the numbers were still rising. The officers that killed George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and Jacob Blake still walked free. 6 days in, the Capitol was taken over by a group of memeable Trump-supporters who had travelled to Washington to demand the results of the election they had been told they were owed.

I was at work during this. A waitress in a local diner serving up "home-cooking," signs on the wall stating "No wifi. Pretend it's 1985." We aren't allowed to wear tie-dye, show tattoos or discuss politics here, but the restaurant was nearly empty. My manager Nick had come in for the nightshift and asked the bartender to turn the TV to the news.

"Turn it back to sports when customers come in," he says, "I just want to see what's going on."

Police officers were beaten with American flags. Rioters chanted "Hang Mike Pence!" A Black police officer used himself as bait to distract the angry mob from breaking into the Senate room. Five people died, one being a police chief. Who knows how close we were to an assassination. Yet, we are expected to carry on as normal.

Kuebiko is the Shinto kami, meaning the God or Deity of agriculture and knowledge. In Japanese mythology, he is represented as a scarecrow who has comprehensive awareness but cannot walk. He is like me — bursting at the seams with knowledge of the mental and physical harms of war, the speedy destruction of the planet and the deep wounds caused by differences in melanin content and religion — yet we are both powerless against these forces. Only he has a good reason to be. He is a scarecrow, after all. I suffer from a less literal paralysis: the exhaustion of getting off of the train and walking to work past outstretched hand after outstretched hand, cardboard sign after cardboard sign, young, idealistic boy or girl with a clipboard asking for donations to provide clean water to children in a third world country.

What can I do? I write, obviously. But as I get older, I feel more and more selfish, calling myself a writer when I feel like a special kind of coward, avoiding protests and instead hiding behind lined paper. This is an entire nation that is suffering from kuebiko. A nation where black people have to watch the news and see that their church, their safe space of worship is seized under open fire, and then they have to go to work that day, while the killer is taken peacefully in handcuffs and offered a Happy Meal and pay taxes for the salaries of those who

# Starlight

*Holly Day*

---

work in a government building that still flies the confederate flag. Humanity is always going to be clouded by rupture, violence, hurt and falling short, but yet, I believe in it. One moment I am disgusted by the depraved violence that one man can bring upon a community and then the next I am moved to tears by the mercy and compassion of the victims' families as they forgive him to his unmoving, emotionless face. These acts of savagery and brutality against these acts of strength and kindness are what cause me to surrender to the miraculous scope of what humans are capable of. I am truly, truly bursting at the seams, exhausted yet energized by people every single day. It seems the best I can do to keep afloat is continue to collect the miracles that occur every day and carry them close to my heart, to learn as much as I can and to do whatever small things I can do to lessen the suffering of others. If I cannot be revolutionary and profound, at least I can be kind. It is the one thing that costs us nothing. It is the one thing that could change the world.

There are children that only exist in dreams, as some fantasy concocted during late night conversations, huddled together in bed your eyes bright and shining as more detail is added: hair color desirable traits, negative ones that can't be helped things we will do with these children when they emerge, fully-formed from the cocoon of fancy. There's a lump in my stomach that dismisses itself in a few weeks, we'll try again again, again.

The children built on dreams soon fade to ones fueled by determination because now we have to have one, we've tried for so long the universe owes us a god-damned child, there are too many people involved in our lovemaking, too much advice that makes it all so grim, so angry, so mechanical, so proletariat. The crib set up in the corner of the living room gradually fills with jackets and hats, winter boots shoved under it for safekeeping it becomes so much a part of our apartment that we forget what it's there for.

We put the children we've imagined away with the coats, the boots pretend we never thought of having one, that we're just fine there are other dreams to chase. We talk about vacations we can take just the two of us, the ease of being able to travel without worrying about childcare or safety or other grown-up things. Now we don't have to grow up, we say. We can do anything we want with this time.

But we never take the crib down, I don't know why, I do. I pretend I can't do it by myself, you pretend you're too tired after work, we'll do it next week. It becomes a place to dump laundry that needs to be folded a place to hide my paperwork and laptop when people drop by unexpectedly a place to store extra pillows and blankets for guests staying overnight a spot for the cat to curl up at night, alone, tiny and purring herself to sleep.

# My Name

*Sarah Harvey*

---

My name was Our Daughter,  
Our Baby, Our Firstborn.  
My name was Cutie, Sweetie, Dear.

My name became Your Daughter, spat like it was bitter on the tongue  
but sometimes became Sweetpea, Sweetheart  
and I learned swiftly that I was but a rusted knife, a Weapon.

Sometimes I don't have a name  
I am just someone to scream at for tiny mistakes,  
paid a wage they consider far too much.

For others still I am Bitch,  
for I dare to take up space.  
Sometimes still I am Loser, Weirdo.

To my favorite people, I am  
Friend, a word so sweet in my ear  
so soft I might weep.

To one, I am Love  
Darling, Honey, Bunny, Partner.  
A hand to hold, a set of steps in sync through life.

And I?  
Myself I call  
Me.

# Acknowledgments

---

There are countless incredible individuals that I owe my gratitude for their work towards this journal, and I will probably forget to acknowledge a good many of them. If I have forgotten to mention you here, please know that it is not a representation of my lack of appreciation, but of my poor memory.

I would like to thank everyone who made *Cardinal Sins* possible during this difficult semester.

Thank you to J.J. Boehm and the PJPC team; everyone at the Graphics Center; SVSU's English and Arts department and the RPW department for encouraging students to join our team; the SVSU IT department for their numerous efforts in helping me with my nemesis of the past several months, the office computer; President Donald Bachand; and all of the SVSU students who have shown interest in our publication over the past few years.

Thank you to our amazing advisor, Kim Lacey, for her never-faltering kindness, hard work, and dedication to this journal. We could not have done this without you.

Thank you to our incredible contributors. I will never fail to be amazed by your talent.

And of course, thank you to our staff and committees for their hard work during these trying times. Your passion and commitment to this journal is never overlooked.

To everyone I forgot to mention, thank you.

I hope that you all enjoy the finished product that we have created for the Fall 2021 semester.

Kind regards,

Madeline Bruessow, Editor-in-Chief

# Biographies

Madeline Bruessow is a reporter, editor, and award-winning poet. She is currently working towards her B.A. in English Literature with a minor in Rhetoric and Professional Writing. She probably spends too much time writing and her poems appear in *Still Life*. When not working on her next piece, you can usually find her daydreaming or haunting a local coffee shop.

Jackson Dammann is a twenty-six-year-old fiction and poetry writer from Chappaqua, New York. He holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Manhattanville College and has previously had poems featured in *Rise Up Review* and *Sincerely Magazine*. He currently works remotely for a Minnesota-based advertising agency.

Holly Day contributed the poem, “Starlight.”

Richard Dinges, Jr. lives and works by a pond among trees and grassland, along with his wife, two dogs, three cats, and three chickens. *Caveat Lector*, *North of Oxford*, *Poem*, *Avalon*, and *Willow Review* most recently accepted his poems for their publications.

Megan Draper is a native Michigander studying Creative Writing and Spanish at SVSU. When she’s not writing or reading, she enjoys watching superhero movies and petting cats. She’s an active part of the writing community and can be found at [www.authormeganriann.com](http://www.authormeganriann.com).

Marco Etheridge is a writer, an occasional playwright, and a part-time poet. He lives in Austria. His work appears in journals across Canada, Australia, the UK, and the USA. Recent credits include *TIMBER Journal*, *Concho River Review*, *Glassworks Magazine*, and *Apricity Magazine*. Author website: <https://www.marcoetheridgefiction.com/>

Kee Ferguson is a creative with a penchant for mischief and chaos. Self-proclaimed Angry Bean with the memory of a goldfish and curator of ideas big and small. They thank their cats for helping them get where they are today, namely, out of bed and in front of the computer.

Matt Gillick is from Northern Virginia. He received an MFA from Emerson College in 2021. He is also a founding editor at a new magazine: *Cult*. His previously published work can be found on [Mattgillick.com](http://Mattgillick.com).

Sarah Harvey is a 21-year-old Literature major. When she’s not fighting writer’s block and drinking copious amounts of tea, she’s probably watching cooking videos or making yet another D&D character.

Greg Headley is an artist and writer in Austin, Texas. His work is published in the *MacGuffin*, *Grub Street*, *Glass Mountain*, the *Burningword Journal*, and others.

Caroline Helmstadt is a senior at Saginaw Valley State University where she is pursuing a degree in Secondary Education for English and Social Studies. Caroline enjoys doing outdoor activities, thinking, writing, or jamming to alternative rock.

Elizabeth Hill contributed the poem, “Passage.”

Lucy Jayes is an essayist and poet residing in the horse capital of the world. She is pursuing her M.F.A. in Creative Writing at the University of Kentucky. Her poetry has appeared in *Deep Overstock*, *Bombfire*, and *The Big Windows Review*. Find her on Twitter and Instagram @lucyajayes.

Living in the land known as *God’s Own Country*, Hareendran Kallinkeel seeks the meadows on the country sides of the US, UK, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand, and often finds the lush grass there, to whet his appetite. He reads for *Cosmic Roots & Eldritch Shores* apart from working as a Staff Reviewer for *Haunted MTL*.

For the past several years, Kim Lacey has been SERIOUSLY, STOP KICKING YOUR SISTER. I AM NOT GOING TO TELL YOU AGAIN. Sorry, what was I saying?

Ashtyn Layne contributed the poem, “Pig Hooves.”

Keeping nature’s existence close in mind, Carlos Lorenzana aspires to create abstract art which reflects the interdependence amongst all surrounding. Everything cannot exist on its own. The art explores a theme relating to Buddhist Principal, “form is void”- meaning that forms are inseparable from their content.

Alora Mccoy contributed the poem, “He Fist Bumped Me Goodnight.”

Zachary Ambrose Mohler contributed the poem, “Cleverness.”

# Submission Guidelines

All general submissions must:

- be submitted through (<http://cardinalsins.submittable.com/submit>)
- include multiple submissions for a single category in one document
- not contain any contact information within the attached document

Text submissions should:

- be in 12-pt. Times New Roman font, single spaced, with 1” margins
- include the title at the top of each page
- be attached in .rtf, .docx or .doc format
  
- Poetry should be no longer than 70 lines
- Flash fiction should be no longer than 1,000 words
- Fiction should be no longer than 3,750 words

Artwork/Photography submissions should:

- be 300 dpi or greater and have high contrast and sharp definition
- be attached in email in either .gif or .jpeg format
  
- Note: photos that have been manipulated with a computer program should be submitted as artwork, not photography

Maximum number of entries

- Submit up to 3 poems, 3 flash fiction pieces, 2 pieces of fiction, and 2 pieces of creative nonfiction
- Submit up to 5 artwork and photography pieces in each category
- You may submit to as many categories as you would like

Prizes and Judging

Prizes will be awarded to SVSU students, faculty or alumni in each of the 7 categories we publish: poetry, fiction, flash fiction, black & white photography, color photography, black & white artwork, and color artwork.

Quinn Nichols is a SVSU graduate who is heavily involved in the Saginaw community, most notably by forming a technical fellowship at Pit & Balcony Community Theatre. In the fall, Quinn will be pursuing a Master’s degree in Library Science with the intent to become a school or public librarian.

E. Martin Pedersen, originally from San Francisco, has lived for over forty years in eastern Sicily, where he taught English at the local university. His poetry appeared most recently in *Ginosko*, *Metaworker*, *Triggerfish*, *Unlikely Stories Mark V*, and *Grey Sparrow Review* among others. Martin is an alumnus of the Community of Writers.

Henry 7. Reneau, jr. does not Twitter, Tik Tok, Facebook, Snapchat, or Instagram. It is not that he is scared of change, or stuck fast in the past; instead, he has learned from experience that the crack pipe kills. His work is published in *Superstition Review*, *TriQuarterly*, *Poets Reading the News*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Zone 3* and *Rigorous*. His work has also been nominated multiple times for the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net.

M. A. Schaffner lives with spouse and pugs in a house built cheaply 110 years ago in Arlington, Virginia. Previous poems have appeared in the anthology *Written in Arlington* and the journals *ArLiJo*, *Poetry Wales*, *Poetry Ireland*, *The Tulane Review*, and *Boston Poetry*.

Edward Michael Supranowicz is the grandson of Irish and Russian/Ukrainian immigrants. He grew up on a small farm in Appalachia. He has a grad background in painting and printmaking. Some of his artwork has recently or will soon appear in *Fish Food*, *Streetlight*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, *The Door Is a Jar*, *The Phoenix*, and other journals. Edward is also a published poet.

Kelly Talbot has been an editor for Wiley, Macmillan, Oxford, Pearson Education, and other major publishers. His writing has appeared in dozens of magazines and anthologies. He divides his time between Indianapolis, Indiana, and Timisoara, Romania.

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The SVSU-affiliated winner in each category will receive \$100 and recognition within the publication. All submissions will be entered into their respective category's contest unless otherwise requested.

Judging is done through blind, anonymous voting by the editorial staff. Members of the editorial staff are permitted to submit entries for publication but cannot receive prize money for winning a category.

By submitting to *Cardinal Sins* you affirm that the work attached is solely your own. You agree to abide by *Cardinal Sins's* requirements governing submissions. If your work is accepted for publication, *Cardinal Sins* has the right to publish and distribute your work, in print, on the *Cardinal Sins* website, and, on occasion, in an audio format.

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