

Cardinal Sins Fall 2024



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Cardinal Sins

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Editor's Note

This is my first semester as Editor-in-Chief of Cardinal Sins, and I couldn't be more excited! After reading and editing for my first two years of college, I'm so thankful that I was able to become a part of the staff for this journal. I've wanted to work with publishing for many years, so working on this publication is a dream come true.

This issue has many wonderful works included, with a wide variety of themes. There are stories and poems to suit everyone's tastes, so I hope that everyone who read this finds a piece that resonates with them. I believe this range of works reflects the editorial committee, a diverse group of people with different interests and callings, united by the love of writing and art.

Thank you to everybody that contributed to this edition. This journal wouldn't exist without all of the writers and artists that choose to submit their creations to us, and I'm honored that we get to publish these labors of love. I hope that you all enjoyed this as much as I have, and that seeing your work in print is worth it all in the end.

I'm so excited to work on this journal for the next few years, and I hope that we can continue to publish a journal that anyone would be proud to have their works be a part of.

I hope you all enjoy!

Leah Richardson, Editor-in-Chief



Poetry

First Place Winner:

Bestiary
by: Demeter Blum

Bestiary

Demeter Blum




In each joint and ligament, I carry last year's pain
An unkind reminder that summer is long dead
And thorn and bristle have eaten away at any flowering bud
That snow banks have drifted like sand dunes
Into the marrow of my bones, a sidewinder seeping chill
And I cannot lay still for the creaking of it

My fingertips curl around the bevel of the screen
A cold light comes back at me, foggy morning sky
I type madly at words that have not come for years
I wonder which poison I drank begat them
Was it the same one my companions spat out?
My liver should forgive me, and if it does not?
Next year I shall ache for the memory of it
These fragile words the first eggshells of nests
Empty far too long, O robin come to me soon
Let the yellow light of spring wash away the damp

Den

Chloe Bollentin



A dying stranger lives in my house.
She sits in front of the television,
perched on her walker which is also a chair.
The futon's too low, her bird bones might shatter.

The stranger turns to me. How old are you?
Empty eyes faded fresco blue.

Not old enough for this antiseptic smell,
this static drifting in.


The stranger knows me, but not how long I have been.
Familiarity waxes and wanes,
not the comfortable predictability of moon cycles
but like a dark walk along a jagged cliff edge.

Nineteen years ago I slipped out of you,
blood-bathed, meconium-mottled.
Your arms a mikveh.
Do you remember?

The stranger turns away, toward the static.

Pantry Fly

Chloe Bollentin



Today I'm sixteen again downstairs
after the house has gone to sleep,
just me and the TV and a dwindling
pantry, sharp ears and quick reflexes
and careful calculations: a hands-on
apprenticeship in risk analysis and a
persistent dearth of self-control.

Things like this don't go extinct,
they just evolve. They shed fins
and sprout feet and learn to live
in new climates, survival of the fittest
maladaptive tendencies.

Fueled by a flood of flies
in the pantry, flies in my ear
buzzing you should have half as much,
buzzing when I was your age
I drank straight cream to fatten up.

Things like this don't die out,
they only breed, laying eggs in the cozy
ridges of my brain. Sleep is for the sane
stowed away in a high cupboard
out of reach, a too-soft call
muffled underneath.

Postmodern Prometheus


Demeter Blum



Today I sit behind eyes and flesh
Too hollow and dull to recognize
But one day I will pluck out these myopic lenses
And carve a space between these ribs
Gift myself the chance to see flames anew
Given the chance to play God
I think I should quite like
To one day make holy a creation in my own image
But only out of myself
The divine birth and death of me
Let me be adored, beloved, be watched
I want to know my own face in the reflection
In the puddles nestled in empty streets
Let me turn my bones askew
Break them to a more pleasing shape
Perhaps I am then bolted together out of dead men
And I will be storage for tonics and chemicals
To make the seams ease together
But I will hold fire under my tongue
And whisper it to the next god in line
Let man be born in a blaze of glory
For I will gift them the act of genesis
And no more shall I be alone.

Coveted


Sarah Daly



Rain does not drown me;
I've never been saddened
by the greyness of midday.
The rivulets cleanse me,
protect some secret, some
temptation, something easily lost.
For I am tempered by the pungency of myrrh
and the sting of salt, such routines required
to make my body acceptable.
Yet, I am not one to resent beauty
and its entrapments.
Rather, I welcome the perspective,
sheltered from the heat
of ravenous gaze.

Hush

Sarah Daly



With you, I forgot the sun's
arc, the body's demands.
Instead, I was illuminated
by nature's emerald glory.

In the field's wildness, I
unearthed tender secrets,
delighting in easy release.

With warm caress and gentle kiss,
we recalled every scar, every trophy,
every heartbreak. And we lamented
so many summers wasted--
until now.

Those days lingered, lengthened,
embraced some future age.
Now, the memories are quiet stillness,
respite within solitude's season.

A Mother's Face

Erica Grenesko



Wrinkles are a pen to crisp paper
Easily erasable with a little bit of money
But kept because of the memories each line holds

The one between my eyebrows
Holds an 806 mile car ride of my oldest son,
Quacking like a duck
Drawing my sanity thin
My daughter crying in the rear-facing car seat.
My eyebrows pulled closer with each passing hour.

My forehead is sketched with wrinkles
My youngest son
Dipping a pink DumDum sucker into a dirty puddle
Shouting "It's yummy!" with each eager lick

My hands are filled with lines
Like crinkles in paper
From playing in the sandbox
Laughing and creating

A perfect portrait smile with straight, white teeth and a happy laugh
Developing lines deep in the creases of my mouth
They are made indelible.

"24.2.2022"

Caroline Helmstadt



Tiny
myriad images-
humanity.
Missiles and Men descend.
No longer cushioned by the security of ignorance
parachutes catch the soft currents of the wind.
A downward spiral
twisting and writhing,
the ideation of fear and
the ripple of bullet through Flesh
spreads.
Sirens.
silence.

Hamilton Hall

Marc Janssen

The door closes
In the space between beds,
A dorm rooms no-man's land
Of unwashed socks
And dirty underwear,
The detritus of thoughtlessness.

Existing in a room.
A closet really,
A cave.
Pulled together by chance and
Lack of funds;
Never a companion
Nor a friend,
A fellow traveler at best;
Whose unsteady revolutions
Wash into the room
With the scent of inscrutable idiosyncrasies.

And with the school year complete,
This other, once important,
Supremely important
And without merit
Disintegrates to memory
Of slights and
And quirks
That maybe provokes a wave
As you pass on a sidewalk;
While your feet move to more important things.

The Leisure Class

Craig Kurtz

After Richard Brome's *A Jovial Crew*

We are the leisure class, old chum —
don't settle to be called a Bum;
a weed by any other name
is nomenclature to reclaim.

The madding bourgeoisie may think
we only live to beg and drink;
but while they earn their heart attacks,
forsooth, we know how to relax.

The toffs with knickers in a twist
may call us all recidivist;
but 'tho we're not so noble-born,
like them, it's labor that we scorn.

The city sparks abuse us 'tho
to money lenders they all owe;
a bill comes due, they double capes —
we don't get in those kinds of scrapes.

Our common dolls don't lay on paint
nor do they blush or ever faint;
they don't play coy behind a fan —
they spit out phlegm and shake a can.

Gents lose a fortune on Tulips
or bankrupt from Dutch Indies' ships;
but I don't place trust in a bank —
whatever I have owned, I drank.

Come wintertime, a chap may freeze,
come summertime, beware the fleas;
on Sundays, taverns open late —

I can't remember when I ate.

The watch will kick us in our sleep,
we smack our children when they weep;
it ain't for everybody, this —
one dies alone, and scrofulous.

We are the leisure class, old chum —
we idle with refined aplomb;
reformers try to reform us
which shows that they're simply jealous.

Last night was lovely, I dare say,
and in Hyde Park we slept all day;
oh botheration, here's the law —
reproaching us is so bourgeois.

Fie, here we stand in the town square,
in pillories, as townsfolk stare;
we'll prob'ly be here 'til nightfall —
the leisure class for the long haul.

The Frozen Pond

Lily West



There's a bright red frisbee
waiting almost perfectly
in the center of the icy expanse.
Standing out like a proud cardinal
at the tail end of a rough winter.
The midafternoon sun
reflected off the bright white snow
giving the scene a feeling of intensity,
almost blinding to the unexpected eye.

A young boy and girl
stare out at the disk
with the same wistful eyes
they used to look at each other.
He gave her his coat -
an old Carhartt he's had as long as she's known him -
So, his arms shake in the cold,
though for her sake he tries to hide it.
They listen to the light whistle
of a gentle breeze that tickles their rosy cheeks.

She doesn't stop him as he walks out onto the icy covering,
it seems the reasonable thing to do,
and nothing can harm him in a cool, gentle scene like this.
His boots crunch on the thin layer of snow
that sits atop the slippery blue sheen.
He almost slips but recovers quickly.

This is how the girl knows him,
always walking so close to danger,
but never in it.
To her, he's always had an air of untouchability.

The cracking of the ice under him makes the boy's heart hammer,
and he hopes she doesn't hear it,

she'd only worry about him
and that's never what he wants.
She doesn't hear the cracking,
but she sees the ice open up
to the greedy water below;
dark, swirling, hungry.
She sees his body slip out of sight,
the frisbee he had almost reached
sliding mockingly in after him.

He doesn't even have time to scream,
but time is all she is left with.



Flash Fiction

First Place Winner:

Wednesday Wolf Blues
by: Max Jagers

Wednesday Wolf Blues

Max Jagers

It started on a Wednesday.

Maybe that's a lie. I don't know. I think I felt it coming the whole time. I felt it when I was in bed at night, awake and alone. It was in the shadows — a nauseous gravity sucking at my skin like whispers barely there. It sat in my belly like a pit, a void, a ball of lead all at once. Need, need, need. Need what? I didn't know.

But I'll say it started on a Wednesday.

Wednesday morning. I felt it crawling beneath my skin. I wanted to sing in the shower, but I didn't know any songs. The shadows tugged at me. My hair was longer than it had ever been. My house smelled like wet dog. I lit a candle. It was orange and smelled like pumpkin pie and caramel and it made my eyeballs itch. I ate my bacon raw and I went to work.

It continued into Thursday.

I took a walk in the woods so I could remember what words the trees used when they sang. I could smell the Earth turning. I smelled the ozone in the air. The fumes tickled the back of my throat. I smelled the dead leaves, the wet rot beneath my feet sinking down into the dirt to feed the worms. I smelled a doe as she bounced through a distant meadow, dancing a pleasant ballet. Come, come, come, she spoke, and I wanted to chase her — I could smell the saliva building on my hot tongue; the peptides and enzymes buzzed against my teeth — but I didn't go after her. I went home to lay in bed with the shadows instead.

Over Friday and through the weekend, it only got worse.

The pains started. My bones groaned at me. My teeth argued with me. They fought to split the fatty flesh of my gums. They pushed the taste of pennies onto my tongue. I told them no. Not yet. I wasn't ready.

I sheared the hair from my legs. I chopped my nails with bolt cutters and filed my teeth with sandpaper. My body twitched, impatient. My flesh recoiled, ashamed of itself when I stood before the mirror, plucked and pressed clean.

Not yet, I said. No, no, no. Need, need, need, it begged. What did we need? I hoped the answer is more time. It was all I had to give. Monday and Tuesday, the Earth sang to me. Come, come, come. The forest called to me. The doe danced in the meadow, plies and pirouettes of hoof and tawny brown, and it wasn't fair. I pushed my head beneath the pillow to fight the gnaw in my belly.

we need? I hoped the answer is more time. It was all I had to give.

Monday and Tuesday, the Earth sang to me. Come, come, come. The forest called to me. The doe danced in the meadow, plies and pirouettes of hoof and tawny brown, and it wasn't fair. I pushed my head beneath the pillow to fight the gnaw in my belly.

But it's Wednesday again when it finally ends.

My body won't wait. It knows what I am. Why don't I?

I fight it at first, when night falls and the white moon touches me through the windowpanes. I think, NO! Not yet, not yet. When, when, when? Why not? Why me? But my fingers snap and curl, and my joints crack at all the wrong angles. Hair bursts across my body and I try not to like the way it tickles. I try to hate the way that ball of pressure inside of my stomach bursts and breaks through the surface of my body, through every widening follicle, every sprout of coarse yet silky hair. My skin stretches as I grow into it and my gums tingle to make room for my fangs and it's wave after wave of pain and pleasure — a raw, sublime sort of pleasure, carnal and frenzied. Ecstatic.

I collapse through the window and I don't feel the shattered glass. I'm invulnerable. I roll upright and stand on all fours. The ground pulses beneath the new leather pads of my toes, galvanized by the moon. That white light is so sweet, rippling across my skin and fur and fangs and claws.

The shadows are gone. I can see in the dark. The pit in my stomach isn't there, no. It collapsed in on itself like a star and — yes, yes, yes — I'm covered in its stardust! I am not empty. No! I know what I am. My body swells, full and exquisite, with something sweet and strong and raw and the Earth begs me to feel her spinning! Need, need, need. Have, have, have!

My throat opens. I know the words. I tip my head back and I sing. And on Wednesday night, my howls turn the Earth.

Superior Attitude

Bill Gottlieb



My mother had been an editor at a prestigious, nationally known magazine. Toward fellow editors she was gracious and receptive. Anyone else, on or off the job, she treated with barely disguised contempt. The attitude was on display whenever Mom assumed a parental role. In school meetings she spoke to my teachers slowly, with an exaggerated simplicity, so they could grasp her meaning. Their habitual complaints, that I didn't pay attention and seemed unwilling to learn, were dismissed. Any deficit in my performance obliged them to examine their teaching methods to determine what it was they were doing to alienate the best and brightest of their students. I imbibed the method of ignoring criticism by denying error, exalting one's own status, and blaming the critics.

The school administration harbored a resolve, deeper and more intense each year, to retaliate against me for the smart-ass superior attitude I had learned from my mother.

I rose, as years passed, from a concern to an annoyance to an enfant terrible and subject of discussion in the faculty lounge. I was punished for not coming to classes, for talking back, for smoking and making out in the student newspaper office, and for imitating the voices of fellow classmates and faculty members, ridiculing them. I acted with bravado in front of my peers, but the school sensed the frailty of my inner life and waited for the chance to expose me.

French horns have a high but mellow sound issuing from their wide brass bells that loop around to face backward. The metal valve keys are flat, more like woodwind instruments than brass. The French horns sat in front of the cornets in our high school band. I was second chair in the third cornet section.

Kate Doyle, first French horn, would turn to the side when the band wasn't playing, put a drop of oil on her valves and adjust her tuning slide. It was then that I could look directly at her. She had fine, straight brown hair and bright brown eyes. Her lips were pursed, almost pouting. Her manner was reserved. Kate put polish on her nails, but the polish was clear and the nails extended just beyond her finger tips. She would wear print dresses, with a thin belt and a sweater over her shoulders. We didn't speak.

Kate's modesty was different from what I was used to. The girls I went out with favored big nails, lipstick and eye shadow and came wrapped in an intoxicating mist of hair spray, deodorant, and real per-

fume. This, combined with short skirts above the legal limit, put me in a perpetual state of arousal. The daughters of shop owners and white-collar executives alike, they were big talkers and rule breakers. A loud-mouthed, hands-on boyfriend was just fine with them.

The longer I heard Kate's beautiful tone when she played the horn, and the more glimpses I got of her, the more I worried about what she thought of me. She must have heard me making fun of weak and vulnerable students. What could a sensitive person like Kate see in such a bully? So, I toned it down, cutting back on the snide remarks and general belligerence.

These changes had no impact on Kate's behavior toward me. I went further down that road: I was polite, practiced my instrument, and made myself part of the band, not just a disruptive kibitzer. Kate and I played our instruments only a couple of feet apart, but despite my behavior reform, that was as close as I was able to get.

In English class we read Shakespeare's sonnets, and we were each assigned to write one of our own. I can't remember if I borrowed the theme from Shakespeare, but I wrote about a girl who was cruel in love, unknowingly. When she addressed a boy who loved her, her words were pleasant and friendly, but they broke his heart because he wanted to hear the love he felt for her, returned. I made a copy for Kate. It took all the nerve I had to hand her the folded paper.

This connection with Kate had come at the end of my senior year, a time when the full retaliatory power of the school administration could be brought to bear against me. They could deny me credits and hold me back. It was the opportunity the administration had waited for. But as final tests were taken and grades given, I felt an easing of pressure, a lessening sense of impending doom. Maybe teachers noticed a change in my demeanor. The superior, self-important person my mother had taught me to be, without my noticing, had slipped away. I passed, graduated, and two months later left for college, without ever having seen Kate again.



Fiction

First Place Winner:

Good Riddance
by: L.S. Engler

Good Riddance

L. S. Engler

Mrs. Lawrence refused to die, even if it was all the rage with her friends lately. There was just still too much to do, too much on her plate. She liked to keep herself busy at all times, so she simply did not have the time for death. Who needed it? So many people had been leaping right off this mortal coil, but she, quite frankly, was not impressed. Good riddance!

Her children didn't understand, either. Nancy might, eventually; she had the right disposition, taking after her mother in more ways than just their overly large nose and a big mouth to match, but she doubted the others ever would. "Just take it easy, Mom," they said. "You can't keep going on like this."

Take it easy. Nonsense. Didn't they realize that the momentum was what kept her running? That if she were to stop, it would all close in on her at once, like a building finally collapsing and crushing her underneath it. She was like a shark: if she stopped moving, she died, and she wasn't ready for that yet. There was still so much to do. The hedges needed trimming, the garden was overrun with weeds, and she'd promised little Heather Madison a quilt for her wedding. There were bridge nights with the girls at the home, paying her respects to those who finally did stop, paying the bills, balancing her checkbook, making those cookies for Ian who was visiting from college soon. Pick up her prescriptions, call the dentist about the ache in her tooth, play vet with little Cara's floppy bunny by patching it up when her mother dropped her off before working the late shift again. Busy, busy, busy. Just as she liked it. Always going, no need to stop yet!

Despite her efforts to shake it off, however, that awful specter that had been following her around more often. Sometimes, she would catch it just in the corner of her eye, a dark presence, a lingering shadow, observing her from a distance and waiting for her with maddening patience. Every so often, she'd be going about her tasks, doing this or that, when a horrible feeling of dread would begin to spread through her, icy cold one minute, uncomfortably hot the next. Her breathing would become difficult. She'd place a thin hand on her chest as she wrangled it back into control, feeling it there, waiting, watching, but she refused to let him stop her. A moment's pause, nothing more, and she hurried forward again, back on task. She

didn't have time for this.

Eventually, though, that lingering shadow would spread, looming larger, drifting closer, a physical presence peering over her shoulder, slipping around a corner just behind her. These emboldened moves irritated her, but she never once felt fear. It seemed endlessly foolish to be afraid of something so inevitable.

She brushed the shadow off and went about her day, moving just fast enough that it wouldn't be able to keep up. "I get exhausted just watching you," said the young lifeguard with the perfect smile at the pool where she had her morning water exercises every Tuesday and Thursday. "How do you have so much energy in you?"

"Good diet," Mrs. Lawrence chirped with her head held high. "Get enough sleep, never forget to laugh, and proper motivation. You see, tonight, I've got this real hot date to look forward to, and that keeps the old ticker going pretty steady, I promise you that!"

Even with that said, love was generally another thing Mrs. Lawrence didn't have the time or patience to wait around for. Some people (these people mostly being her sons and daughter) would point out that she already had love, but Ethan Lawrence, God rest his soul, had been dead for two years now. She always figured if she had kicked it first, then Ethan would have been back on the playing field before her body was even cold, so when Vince Evert invited her out dancing, you better believe she was going to give him a resounding and enthusiastic yes.

Somehow, she'd managed to convince her daughter to go shopping with her for a new dress. Though Nancy had idolized her father, she was more open to the idea of her mother continuing to live her life than her sons were. They seemed to be under the impression that their widowed mother should be in some nunnery. She told herself that they were just being protective of her and their own sense of loss, but she knew they were also being ridiculous. Only Nancy seemed to agree that it was what Ethan would have wanted.

"Oh, your father would have loved this dress." Mrs. Lawrence found a bright, red number, wrap-around style with a full skirt to her knees that bloomed like a flower when she moved. She stood outside the dress-

ing room, modeling it for Nancy and trying out a few steps. A twirl, the Charleston, a quick little marimba.

Nancy laughed, giving her mother a smile that made her heart tug. Mrs. Lawrence's love for her daughter at that moment made her draw her into a hug.

"But the real question, Mom," she asked, "is will Vince like it?"

"He will if he knows what's good for him! If he doesn't? Then he's just an idiot not worth a lick of my time. But I'm hungry. Let me get out of this thing, and we'll go get that sushi."

As soon as Mrs. Lawrence stepped back into that small dressing room, the shadow manifested itself whenever she deigned to be alone. The bright, harsh lighting overhead seemed to flicker as the darkness gathered in the corner. She glared at its reflection in the mirror. "Not today, you bastard," she murmured. "Not anytime soon."

She dressed defiantly, buttoning her blouse with purpose and indignation while the shadow slowly spread across one side of the room. She could feel sweat on her brow; her heart was beating faster, and her lungs felt constricted. But she kept her breathing shallow, her movements small and precise, striving forward with the tenacity to not be overwhelmed. She straightened her slacks, wiggled her feet back into her shoes, shouldered her bag. Grabbing the dress on her way out, she didn't even look back to see if the shadow remained, meeting Nancy with a smile. They linked their arms, and Mrs. Lawrence chatted away so her daughter wouldn't suspect a thing.

That Vince Evert could really cut a rug. The man had a good six years on Mrs. Lawrence, but he nearly outdid her, something only her grandchildren could manage. Excitement rushed through her to think that she'd met her match, someone who could challenge her and keep her on her toes as Ethan had. She was sure her face had been flushed with happiness all evening. Her cheeks hurt from smiling and laughing so much. The night was clear and beautiful, and the dance hall wasn't too far from Mrs. Lawrence's condo, so they strolled along the lamp-lit streets, arm in arm,

babbling away easily with two whole lifetimes' worth of material at their disposal.

"Here's my stop," Mrs. Lawrence sang out as they reached the little walkway that branched out from the sidewalk to her building. Her neighbor's window was glowing with the constantly shifting light of a television show, the sounds and the laugh track faintly muted. She turned to face Vince, to thank him for such a wonderful evening, and played with the idea of inviting him in. She had both a fine bottle of wine and a cheap bottle of whiskey on hand for any occasion, and she knew that when she opened the door, she'd find the darkness waiting for her in the gloomiest corner of her living room. She was too riled up to just slip off to sleep like she usually did, so she'd just spend the time blatantly ignoring it as she flipped through TV channels or read a book or worked on that quilt or rearranged her scrap-booking supplies. Looking up at Vince Evert's warm eyes in the soft glow of the evening made her realize that there were much better diversions.

So she kissed him, slipping her arms up around his neck and leaning into it like she was sixteen again. Only this time, she wasn't worried about her parents catching them, just the shadow. Let it watch. Let it witness how she wasn't even remotely close to giving in.

"Come inside," she said, smiling up at Vince's pleasantly surprised face once they needed to pull apart for air. She moved her hands to his forearms, giving them a soft, encouraging rub before they found his hands and squeezed. "A little nightcap. I can show you the place, or, hey, all that dancing got me in the mood for some *Top Hat* or *Swing Time*. What do ya say?"

But the look that crossed over Vince Evert's face was one that Mrs. Lawrence had gotten used to over the past few months. Desire and regret, all rolled up into one pitiful little grimace. "Oh, Adelaide," he sighed, eyebrows and shoulders sinking with the same coordination as his excellent dancing. "I'd love to, I really would, but maybe we should take things a little slower, ease into it. I think we're both a bit out of practice, don't you?"

One might have expected Mrs. Lawrence's heart to plummet in, her brain whirling with speculations on what she'd done wrong, but something much different occurred. Instead, she felt anger, fierce and hot and maddening, running through her like a bolt of lightning. Take things slow-

er? There wasn't enough time for that! He, of all people, should know that. She was too busy to wait for some wishy-wash romance, especially when she knew that Vince Evert had been quite the playboy back in the day. Maybe time and love and marriage and death had changed him, dampened his storied libido, but Mrs. Lawrence wasn't sure she could handle that right now.

She realized, perhaps too late, that she had been squeezing all of her anger into Vince's thin, frail hands. He held his discomfort on his face, though he clearly didn't want to say anything about it. With a sigh, she drained her anger and released his hands.

"That's just fine, then," she said, patting his hand in apology. "Let's do this again sometime soon, though, Vince. Real soon."

"It'd have to be," he chuckled. "We might not have much chance later."

From him, the attempted joke didn't feel very funny. She grimaced but still managed to laugh to appease him. As she forced that brief bit of happiness, she realized that her reason for wanting him to come in had less to do with physical desire. She just didn't want to be alone with that damned shadow.

"Good night, Vince," she said, smiling softly as she kissed his cheek and thanked him for the wonderful evening. Once inside, she set down her purse and walked around her house, systematically turning on every light in every room.

"Not yet, you bastard," she murmured with every flick of a switch, each shadow burning away with the illumination. "Not tonight."

* *

Light and tenacity seemed to keep the thing at bay, though Mrs. Lawrence half wondered if it was all in her head. She was willing to keep it up anyway, even if it was just one more thing to add to her never-shrinking to-do list. Keeping the lights on was a nightmare for her electricity bill, but it was a small price to pay. It also made it harder to sleep, giving her a few more hours to get more things done, working diligently until she practical-

ly fell over into a deep, heavy slumber.

Until the night the lights went out, she'd been sitting in her favorite chair, sewing up some finishing touches on the costumes she'd volunteered to make for the church recital. Some cheesy TV program with too much canned laughter played in front of her as she occasionally nibbled out of a half-eaten box of bonbons that Vince Evert had sent to her. It had been raining all day, that lingering, gloomy sort of rain that just trudged on and on and made people lethargic and cranky. The thunder and lightning had been mild and sparse, so Mrs. Lawrence didn't think too much about it until, without even so much as a flicker or a buzz of electricity in warning, the power failed.

She narrowed her eyes at the darkness that suddenly surrounded her, knowing full well that the pitiful excuse for a storm outside wasn't powerful enough for an outage. She set the costume in her lap, pricking the needle into the pincushion next to the bonbons. "Such a flair for the dramatic," she grumbled. "Don't waste my time, you hear? Let's just get it over with."

As soon as she said it, Mrs. Lawrence regretted it. She could talk an awful lot of game, but as the shadow crept closer, she felt dread in her stomach. The darkness seeped into every corner, along every edge, and that awful tingling sensation seeped into her body, starting in her chest, cold and immobilizing, making it difficult to breathe as it, too, spread.

"Please," she said, a word not often in her vocabulary. "There's still so much left to do."

Mrs. Lawrence had played out this scene dozens of times in her head, where she would bolt to her feet, determined to stand her ground. She threw punches. She wrestled it to the ground and pinned it into submission. But these flights of fancy had been wholly unrealistic. Was it even tangible? With it spreading around and crushing her lungs, did it really even matter?

Her physical strength may be nonexistent, but her mind still felt like a steel trap. Perhaps she could outsmart it, but hadn't she been trying that already? The steel trap was beginning to rust; she couldn't get it to spring.

"Just a little bit more," she said again. "Please. Just a little longer. Just enough for my granddaughter to—"

"You have been given more time than most, Adelaide Lawrence," it said, with a voice as deep and expansive as the void. She had never heard it speak before, and it made her tremble, shaking her to her core. It was not a voice intended to be heard by human ears. "No more games. No more delays. You will be coming with me tonight."

"But there's still so much to do!" Blinking back her tears, barely able to gasp out the words thanks to a fiery pain blossoming in her chest, Mrs. Lawrence thought of another list. She thought of the unfinished costume in her lap. She thought of shopping with Nancy, making amends with the boys. Who would make Cara's wedding quilt when she was all grown up? Who would be Wendy Malone's bridge partner? She hadn't even sealed the deal with Vince Evert yet! Her sadness and despair were then chased away with a huff of indignation. "Surely, you can't expect me to just leave that all behind!"

"Oh," it said, cloaking the entire room now with its unfathomably dark presence, contrasting Mrs. Lawrence at the center in her bright white nightgown. "But I can. And I will. But don't worry, Adelaide. Don't distress. There will be plenty for you to do in Eternity."

Mrs. Lawrence clenched her fists at her side, a new resolution in her to stay firmly where she was. She would stand her ground. She would battle this fiend with the most powerful weapon she had: sheer stubbornness. She opened her mouth to shout out her defiant intentions and berate this demon back to the stinking pit it came from.

And the dark shadow of death leaped inside, all the darkness spread around the world now filling in every part of her. It felt strange, rushing in like that, nothing at all like she expected. It was almost comforting, in a way, except for the bitterness that she still held tightly for all those things left undone. All she could do now was try to fight the darkness with her fluttering heart, her struggling lungs, and that enduring stubbornness. She knew they would all eventually fail her, but she'd be damned if she wasn't going to go down without a fight.

And maybe, just maybe, when the dust settled and all was said

and done, and victory had finally escaped her grasp, she could admit, at least to herself, that it would be kind of nice, to not have so many things to have to do any more.

The Pig

Arianna Perez



The day Tammy disappeared was a rare exception to our routine. The October sun was swollen with summer's second coming, and I was home sick from school. Any other afternoon I would have walked Tammy up the deserted country road, accompanying her safely to her backwater house before making peanut butter honey sandwiches together. However, I had awoken that Friday morning with an uncharacteristic head cold, and I took my mother's indifference to my activities as an opportunity to have a "me day" I would later regret.

Tammy's parents reported her missing that evening. On the second day of Tammy's absence, I searched everywhere for signs of concern in our town. It was not an especially small town, but everyone at school knew Tammy—albeit for the wrong reasons. Tammy delighted in being a problematic middle schooler. I remember two weeks before she vanished, Tammy flounced up to me at my locker after school, gripping tight at the collar of her ratty army jacket. The jacket had an identifiable "Tammy" smell, which preceded her wherever she went.

"You'll never guess what I did today."

I told her she was probably right. Tammy smacked her gum and surveyed the hallway bustle as I shoveled books into my backpack.

"I sucked Trevor's dick behind the school during third period."

She said it in a loud stage whisper. I knew by the not-so-secretive nature of the confession that she was lying.

"Tammy, you did not, that's disgusting."

"Did too. And it was huge."

She held her hands apart in a ridiculous estimation of how big Trevor's thirteen-year-old penis was. Tammy only wanted the attention, and it absolutely worked. By the next morning, the other girls in her classes were shying away from her, as if blowjobs were a contractible illness. Boys

made obscene shapes with their mouths when she passed them in the hall. Trevor, a trashy boy who smoked cigarettes in the boy's bathroom during lunch, played along with the rumor. It was cool to have your dick sucked, but the reverse didn't apply. Thus, Tammy's reputation as a dirty, nasty girl continued to define her, especially after she disappeared.

I was expecting search parties, and pictures on the sides of milk cartons, like in the crime thrillers. I was ready to join with the community in a march into the woods and search for my only friend. Instead, two cops came to my door, and my mother offered them orange juice while they asked me stupid questions about Trevor.

"Did Tammy say anything about running away? Do you think Trevor was influencing her in some way? It's important that you don't lie to us. Your friend is not safe on her own, and Trevor has a history of leaving home."

"She wouldn't run away," I repeated. I could tell they wouldn't stop asking until I incriminated Tammy. Tammy had talked about running away before, though she'd promised me she'd take me with her if she did.

The older cop, who was pleasantly plump—not the type to conduct search parties in the woods—let out a heavy sigh and folded his hands. His breath smelled like egg salad.

"I know you don't want your friend to get in trouble, dear. But you aren't protecting her by lying to us."

Around and around and around it went. Eventually, the younger cop grew restless and gave me his card to call if I "thought of anything." I liked him less, and I threw away the card the moment he whipped his rusty police cruiser back onto the street.

The "Tammy ran away" theory dominated the entire community's attitude toward her disappearance. When women sympathized with Tammy's mother, there was an edge of judgment to their comments to one another.

"She should really have cracked down on that girl."

"It's no wonder she ran away, she doesn't appreciate what she has."

"Her mother had to know that girl wouldn't amount to any good. I certainly wouldn't let my daughter behave like that."

Not much slack for a middle schooler, I guess. Or her grungy mother.

I couldn't blame them. Tammy didn't exactly make a good impression. Her hair was always dirty, she cussed a lot, and she liked the wrong kind of attention. The kind of attention the grosser boys gave her. I didn't see the appeal—boys never interested me—and thought Tammy's dad must not pay her the right kind of attention.

Tammy's dad was one of the few people that scared me. I saw him almost every day. My mother didn't like Tammy, so every day after school we hiked up the dusty country road to hang out at Tammy's house.

Tammy's house was ugly, though I would never say that in front of her parents. The white vinyl siding was blackened with dirt and coated in a greasy film. The roof was rotting in most places. Several years' worth of dead leaves clogged the gutters, also rotting. The screen door buckled and didn't quite fit into the frame. Every day, Tammy clunked into the house before me, and the screen door banged shut after me. The dark and dank of the interior took a few minutes to acclimate to. The identifiable "Tammy" smell was overwhelming here. It smelled like a fridge that hadn't been cleaned in a while, mixed with pine-scented air freshener that failed to cover the awful trash odor underneath.

Tammy's room was in the cold, mildewy basement. The stairs waited at the end of the single hallway, which could only be accessed through the dim living room. The grimy windows were framed by stained, once-white curtains. I avoided the damp leather couches altogether. The only television of the house buzzed on the back wall, and Tammy's dad sat guard in front of it at all hours, like a prison warden. I have never seen him outside of that cracked leather armchair. He slept in it nightly.

His piss-yellow tinted fingernails scratched the finish of the arms of the chair. The scraggly hair left on his head formed an unflattering ring around the globe of it, which was always oily with sweat. His potbelly protruded from the laughably archetypal wife beater he always wore. I knew

it was always the same one, as the rings of yellow around his armpits and streaks of soot across his belly never changed.

Everything about him reminded me of a hog, especially his eyes—too intelligent for the lowlife creature he acted as. Privately, I referred to him as “The Pig,” because of the disturbing resemblance. His watery black eyes only ever left the television to trail after Tammy and me as we scurried toward the stairs, down to safety.

Tammy’s mother appeared more human to me. She worked long shifts at the lone town gas station, and dutifully heated up microwave Lean Cuisine dinners for her husband at his demand. The Lean Cuisine obviously did her figure no good, but I thought she carried her weight in more friendly places than her husband. Tammy’s mom was loud, and appeared to resent Tammy in every interaction, but would relent at the sight of me, because after all these years I was still a “guest” that Tammy needed to tend to. After serving Tammy’s dad his trans-fat pudding, she would disappear into the stinking master bedroom at the end of the hall, where she was silent for the rest of the evening.

Once, while I waited for my daily Lean Cuisine to finish heating, I excused myself to go to the bathroom so I could peek into that bedroom. I had a strange habit of picking through people’s living spaces while they were occupied elsewhere. I nudged the peeling door open and crept into the darkness beyond. Blackout curtains smothered the sunlight before it could permeate the musty room, but I could make out a dingy twin mattress in the middle of the floor. As my eyes adjusted, the lumpy shapes of thin, tattered blankets formed on the makeshift bed. Soiled undergarments spilled out from the dresser drawers. A single, peeling Led Zeppelin poster clung to one of the slimy walls. The room reeked of booze and a vaginal odor.

Pity swelled in my heart, and I backed out of the room without a sound, sealing the door behind me. I did not miss the shiny deadbolt fastened to the inside of the door. I flushed the rusty toilet, and stole past Tammy’s dad back into the kitchen before I could feel his eyes burn into my backside.

I felt bad for Tammy’s mom after her only daughter disappeared, all alone in that greasy house with the Hog. She was afraid of him, I could see it in the way she studied the floor when serving him dinner or passing him on

the way to the back hallway.

I think my mother began to feel bad, too. On the third day of Tammy’s absence, my mother scraped up the leftovers from our Sunday roast, called Tammy’s mother to announce my coming, and sent me to Tammy’s house with them. I was supposed to be home before dark. The heat had not yet relented, making the very dust of the earth burn with discomfort. Tammy’s country road was barren. As my legs weakened into jelly (I still felt quite sick), her rotten house loomed into view, crouched like a tiger in the shade of the creaking trees. Tammy’s mom beckoned me with trembling hands from the warped front porch and led me inside. The screen door banged shut behind me.

“Give me that.”

Tammy’s mom swept the Tupperware from my hands and dumped it into the trash. My breath caught in my chest. She looked frazzled. Her graying hair shone with unwashed oil, her usual makeup was absent, and her demeanor was tense with fraying nerves.

“I actually was hoping you’d help me out with something.” Tammy’s mom began. Her voice sounded like her throat was closing around it. “There’s a lockbox in Tammy’s room. I know she keeps her lil’ diary in there, and I know you know the code. I was gonna give it to the cops, so I need you to go down and get it for me. So they can find my daughter.”

The words came out without emotion. Under the urgency, I got the sense that she was searching for the right words that would propel me into action. My premonitions gathered in a panicked knot at the back of my neck that tugged at me to leave, run, and never return. Before I could refuse, Tammy’s mom seized me by the wrist and hauled me, stumbling, to the top of the basement stairs. There was no arguing with the force of a desperate mother. I forced myself to believe this was just the energy of a wretched woman who couldn’t bear to be apart from her daughter any longer. She hovered behind me as I descended further and further from the light of day.

When I flicked on the buzzing lights, the shadows of two figures brightened into view on Tammy’s bed. One was Tammy’s dad. His piggy belly was bare under the cold fluorescents, exposing his dark, curly body

hair, thick and unpleasant as it gathered at his hulking pelvis. His porky hand rested in Tammy's tangled hair. Plumes of blood clouded her empty eyes where blood vessels had burst in the whites. Pinpricks of purple freckled her graying cheekbones. When her father combed his fingers through her hair, his fingers caught on the tangles and jerked her head harshly to the side.

The Pig's black eyes bored into me with primal hunger.

Tammy's mother closed the door behind me, like a trap, and slid in the deadbolt with a resounding click.

I never did hear the search parties that commenced before nightfall.

Ball Kid

Subramani Mani



When I was a little girl, my dad brought home lots of tennis balls. I liked the feel of these balls—light, soft and fuzzy. And it was bouncy too. I could grasp it in my hand, balance it on my palm, throw it up vertically and catch it when it came down, or bounce it off the floor or a wall. My dad showed me how to bounce the ball off the floor, then gently slap it using the palm of the hand and keep going while counting aloud. He could continue doing it for a very long time, counting to one hundred, two hundred, even five hundred and beyond, like a superman, or a robot. Initially, I could only manage four or five bounces in a row, but with practice I improved. I was proud to count to fifty.

Tennis balls are soft on little hands and easy for kids to play with unlike basketballs, volleyballs, and even soccer balls. I liked playing catch and throw with my mom, my dad, or kids from the neighborhood. I would also simply chase after a ball and retrieve it just like puppies do.

When I grew up a little more my dad got me a tennis racket. I then tried hitting the ball with the racket but could never control it well—not the direction, not the speed, and not the flight. Somehow, the physics of the ball motion changed with the swing of the racket. The ball would just scatter all over the place—the ball when hit with the racket developed a mind of its own.

I started watching tennis matches on TV with my dad around the time Federer started playing. My dad used to talk about Agassi and Sampras. He was a huge fan of Agassi and would reminisce about the Sampras-Agassi rivalry off and on. When Roger Federer came along, dad shifted his allegiance and started rooting for Roger. A couple of years later another precocious teenager came onboard. You guessed right; that was indeed Rafa Nadal. Soon the tennis world started seeing many Roger-Rafa spectacles.

All these matches played during grand slam events or other ATP/WTA tournaments that we frequently watched seemed quite theatrical. The main characters were the players—two for singles and two pairs in doubles. The supporting cast included the chair umpire who was the chief adjudicator of the game and the line judges who called the shots in or out.

The spectators cheered loudly in support of their favorite player or team, and as the match progressed, loud cheers could be heard for each and every point being played out. The players would get animated displaying a spectrum of emotions based on their perception of how well the game was progressing.

I had my favorite players too, and I would also take sides some of the time, and start rooting for a player. But mostly I was drawn to the ball kids. They had the best courtside view of the game; they never took sides, at least not overtly; all they had to do was pick up the errant ball sprayed on the court after the point got over. The kids stayed still standing in the corners or kneeled down on the side of the court. The ones standing would keep the balls and hand them to the serving player on demand. They all seemed to be having lots of fun and looked happy, contented, and cheery kids. I thought I could do all of that, very well. I wanted to be a ball kid.

There was a nice tennis court in our subdivision. My mom, dad and I would go there some weekends to play. My dad would feed me balls and make me hit a few forehands and backhands and also some volleys. This would continue till a full basket of balls was exhausted. I would then go, pick all of them up and fill up the basket. Mom and dad would start playing and I would settle down to the familiar role of the ball kid. Whenever the ball went out of play, I would quickly retrieve it and throw it to Dad or Mom who was close by. I never understood why, but I enjoyed this role more than hitting the ball with the racket. Using the racket to smack the ball somehow felt unnatural to me.

Some days my dad played with colleagues from his workplace. And I always went with him and volunteered to be the ball kid. Dad's friends loved me for being a nice and dependable ball retriever. They would sometimes ask my dad— "How come she enjoys picking up the balls more than playing?" And dad would say— "I don't know, she seems to relish playing the role of the ball kid." And one day I overheard him telling his new friend— "She would be thrilled to be a ball kid in a major tourney like the US Open." And that immediately became my dream.

A challenger tennis tournament had been scheduled to be played in our town. The challengers were a notch below ATP tournaments with substantially less prize money. This one would be played in the Brown university indoor tennis complex. Dad told me he would take me to watch

the game. "Nice of you," I said and added— "Can I be a ball kid? It would be really great." Dad told me he would find out.

Through all of this, Dad was teaching in the computer science department. He was excited about robots; he developed and designed them. Eventually, the projects he worked on started to change. He would tell mom— "The army is paying my department millions and millions of dollars to develop prototypes of killer robots. I am conflicted; I don't want to get involved in this killing machine project. My department chair says it is only temporary. But I don't feel comfortable working on it; my heart is not there." I heard my mom say— "It's time for you to move on then. Why don't you find a job you would like better?"

My dad left the university and joined the Eagle Eye company. The company was trying to develop a tennis ball tracker while the ball was in play and make line calls in an automated way. My dad got excited about it and he was put in charge of the Eagle Eye ball tracker project. In his excitement he tried enlightening me— "A lot of the conflict in tennis originated in line call disputes. With the fast pace of the modern game, it was not easy to make close line calls correctly even with many line judges. A point here and another point there at critical moments of the game could determine the outcome of a match."

I bought into his enthusiasm but I cared a lot less about the game itself. My gaze was mostly on the ball kids. The ball kids generally came in two flavors—the racket flavor and the ball flavor. The racket kids loved playing tennis and considered the ball kid phase as a springboard to a potential playing career, even a professional one. They wanted to advance in tennis. The ball kids on the other hand just wanted to be ball kids, plain and simple. Their whole court lives revolved around chasing and picking up the balls going out of play. They also enjoyed the eye level view of the flight of the balls being hit back and forth and the ones that flew away. My feet were firmly planted in the second group.

My parents encouraged me to take up tennis seriously. But I was content to be on the court watching others play, and picking up and throwing balls. I had no interest in keeping scores. Handling the ball, feeling it, touching it, bouncing it, and throwing it calmed me, relaxed me, and put me at ease. I couldn't see myself playing competitively when I grew up. Wherever I go I always carry a tennis ball in my pocket. Whenever I get a

chance and more so when I am stressed, I take it out and start bouncing it on the floor. Its rhythmicity and harmonics have a calming effect on my nerves and psyche like music or meditation.

My dad started putting in longer and longer hours at Eagle Eye as weeks rolled by. He didn't mind as he enjoyed the work, the challenge, and the opportunity. Eagle Eye soon had an efficient and effective electronic setup for line calls, and they planned to demo it and introduce it as a backup system at the challenger tournament coming to town.

I continued bouncing the ball at home, outdoors and on tennis court surfaces while dreaming of becoming a ball kid in major tournaments featuring top-ranked players. I was soon selected as a ball kid for a challenger tournament being played in our town. I went with my dad who was supervising the installation of the Eagle Eye system for line calls intended as a fallback master line judge. When players challenged the calls of human line judges, the Eagle Eye was used to resolve the dispute. It would show the replay of the relevant segment of the point play on a giant TV screen for all to see. The players, the chair umpire, the audience, and the tournament organizers were impressed with the performance of the Eagle Eye system.

Life as a ball kid at the challengers was lots of fun. The atmosphere was great with spectators cheering the players. I made some new ball kid buddies. It was also a very good opportunity to see many top and upcoming young players at close range and even interact with some of them. The players were always nice and warm to me and other ball kids. Some of them would playfully engage us and when the game was over, even gave away wristbands, head bands, caps or sometimes even a jersey as keepsakes.

The following year I was selected for the Cincinnati ATP tournament. And, my dad was there with the Eagle Eye team. The crowds were much larger and all the top players including Federer, Nadal, Djokovic, and other high-ranked players were there. It was so much more fun than watching the matches on TV. Even while watching the game on TV, you sensed that tennis was a high-paced and fast game. But watching Cincinnati as a ball kid at eye level from the courtside felt like watching missiles go by. Sometimes you heard a "swoosh" and the ball would fly very close by. It was a totally different experience from observing the matches on TV.

Eagle Eye made quick inroads and over the next couple of years it

had replaced the line judges at most ATP/WTA tournaments including the major slams. The court now looked less crowded in all these events with just the players, the chair umpire, and the ball kids. I am sure the line judges who lost their jobs and earnings could not have been happy about it. I couldn't even ask them; they had suddenly vanished from the courtside.

After Cincinnati, I was picked to be a ball kid at the US Open. It probably helped that my dad was with Eagle Eye. I became a regular fixture at most ATP events in the US. It all seemed like a ballet performance, a ball kid role, like the swan lake. I even went to Wimbledon once to perform my ball kid role. But unknown to me dark clouds were gathering at the courtside.

Dad came home late from work one day which was not unusual. When he sat for dinner, he looked worried. I thought he was just tired from work. Later, I overheard my mom and dad talking in hushed tones—I caught only two keywords, puppy and robot. I had no clue what they were discussing. I sensed a hint of panic in my mom's tone.

Next morning, as I sometimes do on weekends, I started playing with tennis balls in our backyard. I tossed the balls up one by one and caught them. Then I kept bouncing them off the ground for some time. I also tried to juggle two balls and then three. I am slowly getting better at juggling.

Suddenly I saw a puppy coming towards me. It had long ears and walked with a funny mechanical gait. For some strange reason the artificial puppy felt ugly and repulsive. On an instinct I threw a ball away from the mechanical puppy or mech-puppy. It darted ahead and retrieved the ball with its ugly mouth and sporting a "jumpy" gait.

My dad was observing all this from a distance. I noticed that he was holding a gadget in his palm which resembled a drone remote controller. Suddenly, the mech-puppy turned back and dropped the ball in his lowered and cupped hands.

In a flash I realized what was happening. I felt uneasy and weak in my legs. In the process of sitting down I blurted out—"Dad, you can't replace me on the tennis court with your ugly mech-puppy," Did my dad understand that he was about to make all ball kids extinct? I was suddenly reminded of the tale of King Midas my grandma told me a while ago.

I had started collecting coins—mostly quarters, dimes and nickels, a few pennies too. One day my mom gave me a silver dollar. From the conversations of my mom, dad, grandma, and other grownups who visited our house frequently, I developed a vague sense of the power of money in people’s lives. I added the ritual of counting all my coins, soon after waking up, and then again, immediately before going to bed. My grandma was not amused by my coin play; if she was much annoyed, she didn’t make it particularly explicit.

One night I had just finished counting my coins before hopping on to my bed. My grandma came in, pulled a chair close to the bed and started telling the story of King Midas. “Daily before going to bed the King would count his silver coins, gold coins, silver bars, and finally, gold bars. He will repeat it the first thing after waking up. This went on for many days. One day an angel appeared in his dream and asked him to pick any one wish he wanted fulfilled. ‘I will be the happiest man in the world if everything I touch turns into gold.’ The angel asked him— ‘Are you sure about that’ and he said— ‘yes, of course.’ The next morning everything the King touched started turning into gold. He touched all the furniture in the palace and they all turned golden. He then stepped out into his garden and started touching the plants and trees one by one. Magically, as the angel had told him, all the plants and trees in his garden turned golden to his touch. His joy knew no bounds. Excited, he called out to his daughter. She came running into the garden and was mesmerized and started dancing with joy in the golden garden. The King walked towards her and took her in his arms. Soon the King’s daughter was transformed into a golden statue. Shocked, he started wailing in grief. Realizing his mistake, and remorseful, he shouted out to the angel— ‘Take back all my riches; just give me back my daughter, and turn her into one in flesh and blood as before. I don’t want any gold hereafter.’ He then heard the angel’s voice— ‘Touch everything you turned into gold; they will all revert back to their original forms.’ He first embraced his daughter tightly and felt a stir. As if waking up from a deep slumber she returned to her original form and shape. Frantically, the King then touched everything he had turned into gold one by one, and they all went back to their previous states.”

I gave a shout out in the direction of my dad again— “Don’t you remember Roger playing with me at the US Open on Arthur Ashe for a few minutes. You were so happy and proud that day. Do you think Roger or

anyone else will engage with your ugly mech-puppy like that?”

That day Roger was up two sets to love in the Arthur Ashe stadium. The physiotherapist had been called by his opponent for what seemed like a hamstring muscle pull. While waiting for his opponent to come back to court, Roger suddenly turned to me and asked— “Do you want to hit a couple of balls? Seems like eons now, but I started as a ball kid in Basel.” I was thrilled. He slowly started feeding the ball to me with his racket. I tried hitting it back to him but without much success. I couldn’t keep a slow rally going. I then put the racket away and started feeding the ball by hand to him. He would hit it back, and I would catch the ball and throw it back to him. This went on for a few minutes, and slowly, the crowd also got pulled into it. Finally, his opponent showed up on the court after therapy and the match resumed. Roger won that fourth-round match in straight sets and easily sailed into the quarters. When the match was over, Roger gave his racket to me as a keepsake. I still have it with me. It is proudly displayed in my room.

Turning away from my dad I pulled out my tennis ball and started bouncing it to calm my nerves—one, two, three, infinity.

The Finder

Frederick Frankenberg



Frazier Lewgle was a searcher and finder of things.

Frazier's rimless eyeglasses obscured the view of onlookers to his penetrating stare. He wore a rainbow tie and a fedora with a rose in the brim. His slender body and boyishness were like that of a teenager although he was twenty-eight. He carried a roller of sticky paper to keep the suits he wore perfect. He spoke with a soft Menlo accent that soothed everyone with its casual matter-of-fact intonation and deep inflection. He kept his lips coated in clear lip balm.

A large fluorescent overhead lamp illuminated the inside regardless of the time of day. Everything within his power had to be done to ensure he could be the number one finder. His competitor, Mr. Jeebs held about 76 percent of the market, effectively being a monopoly. There were other minor finders who held a small sliver of the market, but Frazier had a slightly bigger chunk than all of them individually. Frazier needed to seize control of the Town's needs, desires, and wishes within a few months before investors lost faith in him and sold his stock short, putting him into bankruptcy.

Work made people who they were and proved their value. A person who could succeed in a system of competition was someone who could be admired.

Our Town Daily interviewed Mr. Jeebs for a masturbatory article to expound on his success as a finder. The interviewer asked him a tough question, "why must people be felt up to be given finds?"

He replied, "It's to gauge people, feel their thoughts. Like a doctor palpating his patients, people stopping at red lights, and judges wearing rounded collars on their necks to symbolize scrolls of paper that the law was printed on, finders feel their subjects to be close to them. The touching motivates finders to do their jobs."

Mr. Jeebs told the truth. At first, Frazier thought he might not like

the touching, but did not opt to oppose it at first to avoid being considered a radical, but once Frazier rubbed the stubble of his first subject, he discovered a feeling of casual intimacy far greater than a real relationship. Subjects accepted his touch as a part of doing business and, in accepting his touch, they accepted him and his position and importance. Even subjects that did not like it and frowned gave him satisfaction since his touch was forced as an exercise of power that instilled Frazier with more pleasure than dealing with those that liked it. Every subject big or small had a hand clasped to their face, fostering an equality between the disgustingly shriveled man and the intimidating beautiful boy or girl. Even children had to be felt in the face.

Then the interviewer asked the leading finder about the competition, specifically Frazier. The newspaper reported Mr. Jeebs laughed and said "totally ridiculous. Because I have more knowledge of my beloved subjects, I can personalize my finds more accurately to their needs. Frazier Lewgle can't find air to breathe. The other finders are not worth mentioning."

It was downright blasphemy. Something had to change because the more Mr. Jeebs gained market share, the more ability he had to gain more from his knowledge of his subjects' in. It could be the tide moving his body out to sea.

Sure, Frazier supported the arts and enterprise. The mural or scribble that decorated the wall beside the entrance trees promoted charities and memorialized famous people. The people of Town had to see beauty in the essential services he provided. Today, he memorialized the death of a champion of privacy with a large abstract portrait of the advocate's face. Frazier's mantra, "Don't Be Evil," was inscribed under the painting.

Frazier sat in his ultra-modern office. Customers came in every several minutes or so. But they never paid for his services, so they were users or subjects of his interest. He had to call his lawyer, Pugsley, in the boiler room to work the fine details of this legal situation out. Everyone consented to a two-thousand-page agreement for his help by the simple act of using his services, and no one ever read it.

A woman with a dress and a bonnet came in and sat at the desk. She had bright red lipstick on that she had to have bought from the Town

general store.

“I want some fresh red roses,” she said.

Frazier reached over the table. He touched her face. “This is the second time you’re asking for them, Janet,” he said.

He removed his hand. The information he gained about the Townspeople was his payment.

“You could tell me why you are looking for a new florist,” he said

“I thought,”—she said the florist’s name—“was rude and his roses were old and stale,” she said.

“Today is the twentieth anniversary of the Botanical Gardens. They have a showcase on ancient trees like redwoods. I can give you coupons for tickets at a reduced price. Have you gone there yet?”

“No, sir. That’s not what I’m looking for. That garden is yesterday’s news. I want to buy flowers—not just look at them.”

“Excellent. I have found a place two towns over. I’ll write down all the details.”

The business day went on and more subjects came. A student looked for information about the incoming Council Chairman; an old man searched for ripe apples; an elderly woman wanted the prescription warnings on patented painkillers; a corpulent man desired a current-year car, and so on. Frazier told them everything they wanted to know. Every free minute, the finder would go through the public records he took out of the library and add more information to his own trade secrets. Anything to get ahead of the competition.

The florist came in through the metal door. He was a portly man with an awkward gait and a white apron. Frazier sat down and smiled.

“I need to know why I’ve lost so many customers,” the florist said.

“Pay me, and I’ll tell you all the information I have,” Frazier said.

The customer gave the finder a five-crown note. Frazier stood up. He could call him a client and not a subject. The finder took off his glasses and revealed everything he knew about the habits of the florist’s customers without saying names and described the problems facing the shop.

“I want to be the first business you tell subjects of—even if they are searching for topsoil or seeds,” the florist said. He passed Frazier a few more crisp banknotes.

“Pay me more, and I’ll put a sign for your flower business up behind me,” the finder said.

The local businessman gave Frazier more money and, as a result; a sign bearing the store’s new name, “The Young New Flower Shop,” adorned the finder’s white wall. Other owners of enterprises took notice and a potpourri of business logos and advertisements hung next to the florist’s placard. Frazier spent joyous nights counting and tallying up the money he made from this added stream of revenue.

#

Everyone found what they were looking for. Sometimes people stood in line to learn things from him. Businesses gave him vast payments for his knowledge and recommendation. But it was still not enough to catch up with Mr. Jeebs. One morning, before he opened, subjects formed a line outside the shop. He stood beside the door, able to hear what was said outside.

“I wish he wasn’t so creepy, touching my face and all. He always asks a lot of questions and tells you things based on what he knows about you,” a man’s voice said.

“He’s still better than all the others combined. The other finders do the same thing, but worse. Mr. Jeebs tried to touch my inner thighs. But Frazier finds everything—I’m going to keep going to him,” a woman’s voice said.

This information was valuable. Business was continuing but not so well, and the Town’s economy went downhill after property values crashed from the deregulation of the housing market, and there was a fire on the

other side of the neighborhood. The growing population of the homeless gathered around metal cans burning newspapers last winter. The Sanitation Department had inadequate funding and garbage trucks often missed their runs, leaving refuse lying around on the corners at times. Buses operated off schedule and on less frequent routes. Construction workers on strike left scaffolding up against Town Hall for a year, and the building still had cracks in the masonry.

A man dressed in plain clothes and messy hair walked in. He had a nervous tic and moved his left hand up and down as he walked to the chair.

“Yes my subject,” Frazier said. The finder felt the subject’s oily face and chapped lips.

“I ne-need to know how to get a mint-in-box assault rifle or any fast-firing gun with extended clips and door-side tickets to the concert tonight—whatever that is,” the maladjusted subject said. He spoke with a stutter and could not pronounce the S or R sounds.

“I can tell you who is selling seats to the Young Masters piano concert. Do you mean drum magazines?”

“Something to quickly kill the most, uh, deer in the fastest possible time.”

“Hold on, let me check with the lawyer.”

Frazier went in the back and opened an emerald door. Pugsley sat at a desk with a stack of papers inside the elegant neon white room behind a simple utilitarian desk next to the heating equipment. A shelf of books on the Town’s legal code was behind the lawyer. The finder put his hand out and motioned for his employee to remain seated.

“It is legal for me to assist subjects with finding unlawful things, correct? This is worthwhile information,” Frazier said.

“Yes. You just give them knowledge. Your purposes are educational.” Pugsley said.

The finder came back and put his hand back on the subject’s face.

“Check out the Juvilant Gun Show in the next county before the state line,” Frazier said.

The maladjusted subject grinned and his nervous tic went away. His face loosened up and excited as he strode out of Frazier’s enterprise.

The next morning, Frazier shuffled through the newspaper to absorb all the day’s information. The stammering subject he saw had shot up the rock concert, leaving nineteen injured and ninety-eight dead before getting gunned down by police. No surprises there, but this kind of information was valuable for its ability to predict events. No doubt the authorities would ask, and they did. The finder said nothing.

A middle-aged man named came in three days later wearing a red-and-black checkered flannel. The subject had a mustache, dirty lips, and receding wavy hair and held a lit cigarette. Smoke began to cover the ceiling. The finder rubbed the stubble on his face.

“I want porn,” the subject said.

“There is a movie playing at the Libinada Theatre. The Prurient Purveyor of Purviews. I can get you seats in the back center row,” Frazier said.

“That’s not what I’m after.”

“There’s an escort agency, Adult Services Inc. I can get your third date free.”

The subject pinched the imported cigarette. He took a long drag, and the ember fizzed and sparkled. The cancerous smoke wafted around his head. “I want to see eight-year-old boys, without pubic hair.”

“One moment.” Frazier went back and told Pugsley of the situation.

“Same thing as before. You are not responsible for what he does with what you tell him,” Pugsley said.

The finder calculated the risks in deep thought and came back into the room. “There is a syndicate that could get you what you want,” Frazier said.

Others came and asked for things of the same nature. A man from out of Town in a leather jacket with slick black hair came into the business and waved a gold law-enforcement badge at Frazier.

“You are under arrest for distributing child porn,” the policeman said. “I also have a court order for you to release your records. We have reason to suspect you have found other illegal things, too.”

“I resent this,” Frazier said.

“Just give me names and details of who looked for child porn.” The reproachful police officer took a pen and notebook out of his jacket.

Frazier went back to Pugsley, who came to the rescue: “My client makes his money from his users. The information he collects is his property. By not entering into an agreement with him, you are stealing his possessions,” the lawyer said. “The people at fault for distribution are the criminals.”

“We’ll see what the judges say,” the policeman said.

The finder put his hands behind his back and the police officer closed loose handcuffs around his wrists. The lawman brought the finder to the holding cell. Frazier spent five minutes in the girded cement box until Pugsley and a guard came to the cell to unlock the barred jail door.

“The court date’s tomorrow. The bail was a modest sum. I spoke to the Town attorney, and they won’t drop the charges. We’ll have to argue for the right to find child pornography, also,” Pugsley said.

#

The seven Town Justices sat in their benches in the front of the narrow court wearing their gray wigs and adjudication robes. Pugsley and a calm Frazier occupied the table on the right. On their left was the Town prosecutor, who wore a cheap no-name shirt and tie. A swath of concerned citizens watched the proceedings from the back, some of them sitting down and others standing. A statue of a slender woman with a blindfold on held a balance that tilted on the side of gold coins stacked against an empty dish in the corner. Frazier dressed in his most expensive suit and wore his diamond-jeweled timepiece around his wrist. Pugsley got up to deliver the closing statement.

“My client is a gifted person of great talents. He runs a utility that helps the Town prosper and go about fulfilling their wishes and needs. He is a job creator that provides my own employment. Responsibility falls on the person who uses his services to meet their own sinister ends and not the provider. The government has been acting out of control to persecute my client for doing his job—”

“But! He is involved with the distribution of child pornography and assisting other sorts of wicked criminal enterprise,” the prosecutor said.

“Order in the court,” the chief justice said.

“I attest that Mr. Lewgle has found illegal things for subjects, and I admit that it is morally objectionable. However, it is not in violation of the law. As per Town code, educational information in the finding business is not a crime. If you want to enforce the law, then go after the criminals. I declare that the court order is in violation of article 2659 section 60 subsection x that says... I don’t have it in front of m—” Pugsley said.

“It says ‘the government shall apply private property laws to accumulated and patented knowledge defined in Appendix A,’” Frazier said. The finder folded his hands over the bare desk.

“Precisely,” Pugsley said. “The personal details of subjects are protected by the law and anything else is a violation of my client’s rights.”

“Appendix A defines it as trade secrets and scientific findings,” the prosecutor said.

“It states, in subsection x, ‘miscellaneous knowledge for the pursuit of the profits of an enterprise’ and XI further defines it as ‘information accumulated by the provider of a service,’ all listed under ‘trade secrets,’” Frazier said.

Pugsley put his stack of papers down on the podium in front of him. He waved his hands around as if casting a magic spell. “Furthermore, is not freedom of speech one of the sacred rights of this land? Is not the purchase of a product or a donation to a political candidate speech? Mr. Lewgle’s investors speak through him with their shares in his enterprise.

We suggest the court conclude that all my client does in pursuit of profit within the parameters of his charter is speech.

“Justices of the Court, when you reach your verdict—whatever you may think of this situation—remember without stare decisis we are in anarchy,” Pugsley said.

“This will bring back a new feudalism!” the prosecutor said.

The seven pairs of lips went into the back to make a just decision. After five short minutes, the chief justice came out of the room with the other justices following him.

“We have agreed, seven to zero, that Mr. Frazier Lewgle be allowed to conduct his business without further government intrusion.” the chief justice said.

It was a triumph of the legal code in recognition of the finder’s service to the upstanding Town. The gamble would deliver a sudden gain to Frazier’s liquid assets as if the proceeds rained down and drenched him in every direction from an eruption of the glorious return-on-equity windfall volcano. Who can say that fortune did not favor the audacious? Frazier stood stiff and rubbed his palms together with anticipation of a tremendous increase in his market share. He could feel the cash in his reach. A generous open-lipped opportunity came, put up a feigned protest, and fell into his patient hands.

“... Outrageous perversion of justice,” the prosecutor said.

“I know, but there’s nothing we can do,” the chief justice said. “The laws are hard to change.”

The prosecutor said something Frazier could not hear and then, “John Cautorcy.”

And, as predicted, more people came to Lewgle Finding. Frazier would have liked to ask people what their motivation was, but it would have been accusatory, likely unwanted, and prying. His subjects did not care about the morality of the illegal information; they cared that Frazier

stood up for their privacy, whatever the cost. Frazier gained a slight majority of market share over Mr. Jeebs.

#

The neighborhood became a warzone. The block surrounding Frazier’s business had been mortared, burning down the surrounding general store, candy shop, restaurants, and newstands. The finder’s enterprise was the only thing left standing. Gunshots and artillery fired off into the night. People looked for things like canned food, cyanide, and more guns. The invaders were winning, and Frazier knew. He foresaw the new government would need his help.

Frazier got out of his bomb shelter, and the neighborhood went eerily silent. Five soldiers in black camo with red armbands and Exigence machine guns came in after the door was kicked down. They could have just knocked. John Cautorcy, with his shoulders back and a grin, strode in wearing a bright black button-down shirt and red tie with a golden pistol in his hand. His dashing beret hung over the front of his head like he was a true cavalry captain.

“Come out!” Frazier said.

Pugsley came out from the emerald door with his hands in the air. The man with the gun struck Lewgle’s lawyer over the top of the head with the weapon. Pugsley fell to the ground.

“Get down!” Cautorcy said.

“Please! Don’t shoot!” Pugsley said.

Pugsley held his hands in the air and knelt on the floor. Cautorcy brought back the slide on his gun, aimed it at Pugsley’s head, and pulled the trigger. Brains and blood splattered across the floor in a streak. A tragedy, but a convenience nonetheless; Frazier would not have any need for his lawyer’s services anymore because there would be no law.

“You have my attention,” Frazier said.

“Good, now tell me who has been looking for ways to support the Council,” Cautorcy said.

“You need to find those who searched for books and pamphlets propagandizing the antiquated plutocracy, looked for known loyalists or assembly members, worked a job in businesses supporting the outdated regime, or paid taxes and or made donations to your enemy,” Frazier said.

“Yes. If you do that,” Cautorcy said. “I will make you the official finder and outlaw your competition.”

Frazier took off his glasses and caressed Cautorcy’s face with his other hand. The boss’s skin was rough but clean shaven. Cautorcy’s mouth muscles were tender and firm from ordering his subordinates around, and his nice lips had a rosy color to them.

#

Duke Lewgle’s business operated out of a palatial estate. The enclosure had blood red tile floors with an ornate hand-carved desk and maple office furniture with gold filigree. Water flowed from the mouth of a nude statue of Zeus with an owl perched on his shoulder in the front of the moving doors. The finder wore a crimson and rainbow cape with silver lace and an emerald ducal coronet. He held a platinum scepter. A research library, as large as any university, was in the back of the office.

A young, bald man with a strong body and meaty lips as if a Renaissance artist sculpted him came in through the gilded entrance wearing a tight blue shirt. The duke recognized him as Gates, the karate instructor in the dojo deep inside Town. The commoner had two black belts, one in taekwondo and the other in karate and won a few tournaments throughout the pangea. The finder got out of his chair and welcomed him with an open palm touching the rough exterior of his face and moist healthy lips. Gates had a contoured mouth that opened at the center to reveal clean pearly teeth. Gates’s good calm manners and flattering nature had helped the subject survive the killing fields and mass graves in the park.

“Yes, your excellency. My fiancée and I are getting married. I am here to look for a place for the ceremony,” Gates said.

Duke Lewgle put down his scepter on the mantle and felt the man’s bald head. The skin on his scalp was shiny and smooth without stubble. The finder could tell he used ointment.

“There’s a deal on lotion from the general store,” Duke Lewgle said.

“No sir, I’m only here to find a banquet or meeting hall open on June 9th,” Gates said.

Duke Lewgle unbuttoned the top of Gates’s shirt and ran his fingers through the subject’s thick auburn chest hair. The subject’s pectorals were well-defined and pronounced. The duke reached around to the man’s buttocks. The finder gave him a good squeeze on the rear, and his backside felt firm.

“You’ve been working out more frequently,” Duke Lewgle said.

“I have—y-yes,” Gates said.

Duke Lewgle unbuckled the common man’s brass belt and reached into his pants. It was good to be the only finder in Town.

Post-Modern Memento Mori

Dan Heck

My hands numbed from indecision. I couldn't decide between a pint of Ben & Jerry's *Urban Bourbon* or *Americone Dream*. Both sounded good, but neither was perfect. I would count to twenty-five and decide by the end.

23, 24, 25—

“Sue?”

A familiar voice and a soft tap on my shoulder. My ex, Vicki, smiled under a sea of burning auburn hair. But her hazel green eyes smiled more. That, and the fact that she didn't use my full name, threw me off. She saved Susan for when she was angry or disappointed. A couple years ago all I heard was Susan.

“Wow. You're here. How are you here?” I said.

Vicki giggled. I forgot how much I missed it.

That's not true. I never forgot.

“Well, I got in my car, drove here, parked in the lot, then I walked in and saw your reflection in the freezer door.”

“You drove all the way up to Virginia Beach from Morehead City? Don't they have Targets down there?”

Vicki giggled again. This time it might've been forced.

Crap, gotta come off cooler than that.

Two years ago, she got a nursing job at the Morehead City hospital. She pushed me to follow and settle down with her to start a family. I pushed back to stay and do nothing. I've waited for this day to redeem myself for two years. I had to be casual enough to not scare her off for good again.

“No, I moved back recently. I live around the corner actually,” Vicki said.

“Cool,” I said, kinda monotone while nodding.

“I'm going to be late for work, but I needed to come grab something to heat up on break. But it's good to see you. Truly.”

“Same.”

“Let's grab coffee. When are you free?” Vicki asked.

Sweet!

I pulled my phone out and pretended to look at my schedule even though I never use my calendar app.

“I'm off Tuesday. So, in two days? Is that right? Sorry, EMT shifts have me ragged, you know?”

Vicki's mouth dropped.

A year after she left, I decided to look into being an EMT. I even moved out of my mom's townhouse into a studio apartment. I didn't want Vicki thinking she won the breakup if I ever ran into her again.

“You're working? Wow. Sexy long, blonde hair and a job. Nice.”

“Yeah, I guess,” I said.

She noticed my hair. I totally won.

She shifted her weight, the code for, I gotta be going but don't want to be rude.

“But we can catch up and I can tell you all about the job, and my new hair after my disastrous perm,” I said, then made an *EEK* face.

Vicki giggled. It was genuine.

“I look forward to catching up,” Vicki said.

That also felt genuine.

After she left, it hit me that I didn't know if Vicki was trying to rekindle our relationship or trying to become friends. And if it was to start the relationship back up, would she expect me to settle down and start a family? I wasn't sure if I was interested in a family, still.

As I tried to wave goodbye, something cold dripped onto my right index finger. I still held the two ice creams. I didn't decide which I wanted, and both melted, so I put the *Urban Bourbon* and *Americone Dream* back.

I'm sure I'll know if I want a family or to stay single by the end of my next shift, I thought to myself as I held my hands together to warm them.

* * *

“Please. I don't wanna die,” the middle-aged man said.

“You're not going to die,” I said, “we're going to get you to the hospital. Let me have a look at your hand.”

This was the first call the next day. My partner and I were in a cramped kitchen kneeling next to a middle-aged man with a bloated face, and bloated belly. He sat cross-legged on the floor bleeding from his right hand. It was clutched to his chest, mangled and raw. There were deep lacerations all around the lower palm and backside of his hand. What remained of his hand anyway. The middle finger was down to a nub, his ring finger mostly gone, the thumb was missing completely, and the pointer hung on by a couple of thin layers of skin. His pinky was crimson coated with blood. I couldn't tell the damage yet. I planned to look at the pinky better after Richard and I stopped the bleeding.

“I don't wanna die.”

The man's voice shallowed while sweat secreted from the pores

on his faded face. It was hard to hear him over the wind smashing rain against his apartment building, causing an orchestra of storms in the tiny one-bedroom studio.

“Sir, do me a favor, lay all the way back,” I said.

We helped the man from going into shock by laying him down and elevating his feet. I lifted the hand above his heart to slow the bleeding, applied pressure to the missing fingers with gauze, and tightly wrapped the gauze with bandages to slow the bleeding long enough to sew up the hand at the hospital. If his heart rate lowered and held, he would live. I just needed to keep him calm. His eyes were black holes staring at his bandaged hand. All pupils. He probably tried to process life without his right hand. How he’d cook for himself. How he’d play squash or tennis, or whatever it was he did for fun.

“You’re going to live. We’ve slowed the bleeding down and now we’ll take a quick trip to the hospital,” I said.

“We need to get you on this stretcher now,” Richard said.

“Hello, fire department. Is everyone OK in here?” a firefighter called out.

“We’re in here, guys. We could use your help,” Richard said.

The man’s lips moved. I leaned close enough for his breath to tickle my inner ear.

“My fingers. They’re in the sink. Please. I need my fingers,” the man said.

Blood led from the ground to a lone folding chair at a small, round, wooden table. On top was a blood-soaked phone. The trail continued to a tiny sink with a fluorescent light above it, not turned on. The sink smelled like a cacophony of copper-blood and bacon grease. I turned the sink light on and looked down. Inside the drain was red meat mashed with bone and something shiny. I reached in and pulled out a silver ring with diamonds on it—possibly a class ring. That was all that was left of the man’s fingers. The disposal ate the rest.

The fire department came in and helped Richard move the man.

“No. I need my fingers. You can’t leave my fingers.”

I rushed to his side.

“I got them. Just breathe. We’re going to take you to the hospital and get this fixed.”

I hated that I lied to him, but it’s better that he hates me than die of shock. He could still have a wonderful life. If he tried, he could.

Once outside, I looked around at the apartments in Indian Lakes. This was one of the places I checked out when I was apartment hunting. Even in my desperation they were depressing. I certainly couldn’t live here if Vicki was back in the picture. She deserves better.

The rain slowed.

On the way to hospital Richard told me the man was getting something out of his disposal and as he flipped on the sink light, a thunderclap scared him, and he flipped the wrong switch. If he had just waited ten minutes, he’d still have ten fingers.

* * *

She must think I’m ready to be serious. Why else would Vicki want coffee with me? I could settle down. For her.

Possibly.

I blew steam from my coffee, pretending to cool it. Scenery flashed by while I pondered my future, and not listening to Richard. It wasn’t like me to ignore him, but I couldn’t stop thinking about what could be. Richard waved his right hand in front of my face, and I came to.

“Sup?” I said.

Richard turned the talk radio all the way off.

Had he been talking about something serious?

I felt like a jerk. I looked over at him after I put the thermos lid on my coffee. Richard looked me over briefly then went back to watching the road.

“This job can get to us. I mean, that was some gnarly stuff. Wanna talk about it?”

“Oh no, I’m fine. Really,” I said.

He sighed and shook his head.

“Sue, you don’t have to front with me. When I was a corpsman in Iraq, I saw shit that would’ve turned younger me white. It never got easy in the four years I did it. You’ve been driving with me, for what, a couple of months? I get it if you’re disturbed.”

“Thanks, I appreciate it, but I’m fine. He’ll live and I feel good about that, because we did that. He’s alive because of us. I get this high after we leave a call, you know?” I said.

“Yeah, it is a high. Just be ready for the lows,” Richard said.

“It’s crazy.”

“The lows?” Richard said.

“No, this job’s crazy. I became an EMT to do something with my life. To get out of my mom’s place. To show Vicki one day that I can be adult and serious. I didn’t plan on falling in love with it.”

“Love can sneak up on you,” Richard said.

“Yeah. I was thinking about Vicki by the way, not the job. We have a date tomorrow.”

“Oh, wow, Vicki. Well, never mind then. But, uh...won’t Tim mind you going on a date?”

“He dumped me like a week ago. He wanted something serious,” I said.

“Sorry to hear that. But, cool!” Richard said.

Tim was perfectly fine until he brought up wanting kids. I liked him alright, but I was never in love with him like I was with Vicki. She was the kind of woman you wanted to be around forever. I knew she was the one for me since this one time we were driving around, and I randomly yelled “I’m sorry, Ms. Jackson” and without missing a beat she said “Oh! I am for real!” while swaying her curvy thighs. I laughed until I cried. I needed to feel that way again. Vicki knew how to make me—

“Come on! You really gonna cut off an ambulance? The drivers here are such dicks.” After the red anger left Richard’s face it switched to pale, matching his white hair. “Wait, aren’t you taking Brad’s shift tomorrow?”

Shit, I totally forgot.

“Maybe?” I said.

“I mean, if you want the day off to be with her, I’ll take it for you,” Richard said.

“No, no. You wanted a day to go to Busch Gardens with your wife and son. You deserve it. Just let me think about it.”

As I looked out the window, I finally drank my coffee and burned the roof of my mouth. My thermos was a little too good at keeping my coffee hot. My tongue rubbed the raw roof of my mouth while I looked at the affluent neighborhoods we passed.

Normal families used to be able to live here. Vicki and I would have to save up for two decades to live in a house like this now.

* * *

Richard and I were at an enormous, two-story house in the Bayville area. We drove 20 minutes to check it out, but no one answered. I figured we were given the wrong address, it was a prank, or something worse. I hoped for a prank. Luckily, the rain stopped. The clouds parted and the sun illuminated what was once dark, so I didn’t mind waiting outside. Vicki had talked about becoming a doctor one day. If that happened, then maybe one day we could live in a rich place like this.

A family would be nice in a place like this.

“Ring one more time than I’m kicking it in,” Richard said.

“Don’t, it may be nothing.” I rang the doorbell again and this time a shadow moved inside the house. “Excuse me, did somebody here call 911? Is anyone hurt?” I said.

“Go away. I don’t need anyone. It was a mistake,” an elderly man’s voice said through the door.

There was caution in his voice, maybe some shame as well. I could tell he didn’t mean what he was saying. Something embarrassed him.

Richard leaned over to me, “10 to 1 he has something stuck in his

butt.”

I won’t take that bet. I thought for sure he had something stuck in his butt. Drivers see it at least once a month. Just because it can go in doesn’t mean it can come out. It was Vicky who first warned me about the plethora of things I’d find in people. As a nurse in the ER, she saw it every week.

“Sir, there’s nothing to be ashamed of. We’ve seen it all, we don’t care,” I said.

After several long seconds, the door unlocked and cracked open. A gray-haired, balding man stuck his head out. The man reminded me of my high school principal with his kind eyes. He gave us a once over then opened the door. I stepped in; Richard followed. The hallway smelled of lilac and honey, there was soft jazz playing in another room, possibly Kenny G, and from the kitchen I could smell some sort of spiced cake, maybe carrot. A picture of a young woman graduating high school hung on the eggshell-colored walls of the foyer. In the next picture the woman was graduating college. Then she was older and in white standing with a man wearing every inch of a tux. It looked like a lovely home, no signs of an emergency, except that the old man didn’t have on pants. Something was either stuck or he was a flasher.

The man started to lift his shirt up, but Richard had an arm on him fast.

“What are you doing, sir?” Richard said. His words were slow and serious, warning the old man not to try anything.

“My problem.... it’s,” the old man said while pointing to his crotch.

I put my gloves on and got down on one knee. I lifted the shirt for him, so he wouldn’t feel embarrassed.

“The instructions say to call after four hours if it’s still like this,” the old man said.

* * *

Richard drove us to another call. I drained blood from the old man’s penis so it would go down and stop the discomfort. We recommended he go see his doctor right away and that he be cautious of his heart while on Viagra. The man said he’d have his wife drive him after she regained her energy.

A hearty laugh boomed from Richard as he hit the steering wheel. There went my hope that he would hold it together. I shot him my, grow up look.

“I’m sorry, Sue. I am. But that shit was funny. That old dong just about hit you in the face,” Richard said.

“Focus, Rich,” I said.

“Hey, don’t get testy with me,” Richard said.

Oh God, here we go.

“I get it, you were in a hard situation. You never know when someone might...explode!” Richard said.

“Grow up...*Dick*.”

“Ey!”

I thought of Vicki’s infectious smile. Her adorable giggle. I wondered if she would pass that laugh on to a daughter.

We could be good mothers.

* * *

23, 24, 25.

Pinch the nose. Tilt the head back. Two big breaths. Watch the chest rise.

I started the chest compressions again; 1, 2, 3... She didn’t look older than two. Her body was cold, wet, and white, except for her blue lips and smudges of brown mud behind her ears and neck. I was going to do CPR, and she was going to cough up the water stuck in her lungs and throat. I hoped. She would breathe in life and be good as new. This would just be a story she told of how she *almost* died. She would grow up and dance at her prom with a nice boy who bought her a pretty pink corsage. She would fall in love one day and allow herself to be completely vulnerable.

I hoped.

“Just have a seat, please. We’re doing all we can. Let us handle this.”

Richard tried to calm the increasingly hysterical mother.

“I just went—the kitchen—to get pies. Had forgotten—pies. I could smell—burning. I didn’t want—fire. Left the bathroom, just a minute though!” the mother rattled.

Richard sat her down in the small kitchen. I finished the chest compressions, 23, 24, 25. I breathed in two long breaths; giving her what I could of me to bring her back. All I wanted in this moment was for her to open her eyes. I began the chest compressions again.

1, 2, 3...

“I...I didn’t know what to do. I brought her in here. I didn’t know...”

After 15 minutes of trying CPR, Richard stopped me. The girl was dead. Had been dead. A young thing of two in the living room of her quaint, one-story house that smelled of burnt apple pies. A young thing covered in a purple bathrobe that had raccoon ears on the hood and had *My Little Pony* underwear haphazardly put on her by a distraught mother who thought it best to make her decent than do anything to save her life. I stepped outside and let Richard deal with the mother and medical examiner. It was just me on the porch next to a new pair of children’s red rain boots—worn once.

While I watched the mud dry on the boots, the father came home. A 30-something high school chemistry teacher. He wore a cheap brown suit and held a stack of papers. No one bothered to call him. The father screamed and blamed his wife when he found his princess dead. The mother was persistent with open arms, desperate to be held. Desperate for someone, for something, to remove her guilt. Neither happened.

Once Richard was done, we took off to our next call. We sat in silence.

“Listen, you should take the day off tomorrow. Spend it with Vicki. I’ll work the extra shift, don’t worry about it. My wife will be cool about it and I’m good to work after what happened. I’ll go home, have a drink, play Minecraft with my son, then lay in bed with her and watch House Hunters until we fall asleep. In the morning, I’ll cook French toast for my son before he goes to school. That’s my system,” Richard said.

“Your system for what?”

“For not letting it all get to me. For remembering life is precious. For some, death can be overwhelming, for me, it’s a reminder that it’s finite. So, I make sure to spend time with those I love and make them smile. It’s how I have a normal life. Something I picked up in the military. The people who couldn’t or wouldn’t leave it behind died eventually. I didn’t want that to happen to me, so I came up with a system to embrace death and love life. Now death’s a beautiful reminder of what’s important. You need the same outlook.”

The streetlights blinked on to fight against the returning darkness.
Vicki should have that family she always wanted.

* * *

The next day I worked the extra shift and missed my date with Vicki. I never responded to any of her texts. I never called her. When I get into my queen-size bed at night and feel the empty space, I don’t let regret over Vicki sink in. Instead, I think of those red boots. Never worn again. They say you never forget your first dead kid, and I never will. That cold two-year-old is my constant reminder of the patient eagerness of death. I think about those boots and count to twenty-five.

23, 24, 25.

By the time I’m done counting, about 50 people around the world die. That’s 50 people leaving loved ones behind. Life is suffering. Suffering over those gone. Suffering for a better life. But it won’t come, because it all slips away in the end. It’s why I’ll never settle down. I’ll never be the parent who comes home to a dead kid or the parent pleading for my spouse to see it wasn’t my fault and hug me. I’d rather die alone than add suffering to the world.



Artwork

First Place Winner:

a day with you
by: Austyn Thornton

a day with you
Austyn Thornton



watercolor

Page of Cups

Megan Draper



digital art

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fall mountain watercolor scenery

Austyn Thornton



watercolor

Cardinal Sins

serenity
Austyn Thornton



watercolor

37 Cardinal Sins



Color Photography

First Place Winner:

Formosa Mist of the Immortals
by: David Nichols

Cardinal Sins

Formosa Mist of the Immortals

David Nichols



digital color photography

Earth meets Sky

David Nichols



color photography



Black and White Photography

Cover:

Winter Cavalry
by: Sandra Hosking

Winter Cavalry

Sandra Hosking



digital black and white photography

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Bridge

Sandra Hosking



digital black and white photography

Cardinal Sins

Acknowledgments



So much goes into producing this journal. I'd like to express gratitude on behalf of *Cardinal Sins* to the following people, though this list is incomplete in scope and depth.

Thank you to J.J. Boehm and the PJPC team; Taylor Hart for designing our logo; everyone at the Graphics Center for printing our journal; SVSU's English, Art, and RPW departments for encouraging students to join us and submit; and all of the SVSU students who have shown interest in our publication over the past couple of years.

Thank you to Dr. Kim Lacey, our faculty advisor who is always supporting us throughout the *Cardinal Sins* process. I'm so happy that I can work with you on this publication, and I always appreciate everything you do for us.

Thank you to all of our wonderful contributors. I feel so honored to be able to help you along the path to publication, and I hope that all of your hard work was worth it when you hold a journal with your creations in it.

Thank you to my staff who keeps publishing fun and manageable. The team this year was almost entirely new people, and I'm so glad that you decided to join us. Our meetings were so wonderful, and I know that you're going to do great things as we continue to work together on these journals.

Finally, thank you for reading the Fall 2024 issue of *Cardinal Sins*, including the Acknowledgements no less. I hope you enjoy, and I salute your support of the arts.

All the best,

Leah Richardson, Editor-in-Chief

Biographies



Winners

Demeter Blum is a Saginaw-based writer and artist. She's a long time reader, first time submitter at *Cardinal Sins*. She's currently attending Delta College for her AFA. She would like to thank her friends, her husband Robert, and her cats. A special thanks to the fine folks at *Cardinal Sins*!

L. S. Engler writes from outside of Chicago, though she grew up weaving words in the woods of Michigan. Her work has appeared in disparate literary venues, including Bards and Sages Quarterly, the Tishman Review, and the Saturday Evening Post. She enjoys nearly all things nerdy, probably a bit too much.

Sandra Hosking is a photographer and writer based in the Pacific Northwest. Her work has appeared in West Texas Review, 3 Elements Review, Wild Roof Journal, Red Flag Poetry, Edify Fiction, Red Ogre Review, and more. She holds M.F.A degrees in Theatre and Creative Writing.

Max Jagers is an award-winning, Chicago based writer who loves all things weird and creepy. Their work reflects their experiences with queerness and neurodivergence, usually through the lenses of fantasy, horror, and werewolves...lots of werewolves.

Deep down, in a personal, hidden space that David Nichols does not feel comfortable talking about at parties, he is quite willing to wear white after Labor Day.

Austyn Thornton is a soon-to-be SVSU alumni and future art educator. She enjoys traveling, creating art, and spending time with her loved ones. Her artwork is mainly inspired by her love for the Great Lakes, West Coast, and the nature around her.

Contributors

Chloe Bollentin is an American writer living in Scotland. She likes haggis but thinks the Fahrenheit temperature scale is unfairly maligned.

Sarah Daly is an American writer whose fiction, poetry, and drama have appeared in forty-two literary journals including Bullshit Lit, Boats Against the Current, The Big Windows review, and Flight of the Dragonfly. Art, science, and nature are deep sources of inspiration for her.

Megan Draper interned at Macmillan and now works full-time at Penguin Random House. She studied creative writing, Spanish, and professional and technical writing at SVSU where she was the Editor-in-Chief of *Cardinal Sins*. Having artwork in this issue feels like visiting home.

Frederick Frankenberg (he/him) lives, reads/writes, and listens to music/ plays the guitar in the Hudson Valley. He thinks his novel tentatively called “The Finder” will be just as good as the short story. Twitter handle: @FredIsAWriter.

Bill Gottlieb is a former New York City bus driver and rank and file union organizer. Current contribution surfaced at the stop on Allen Street between Houston and Stanton, southbound to South Ferry. He lives in Flatbush, Brooklyn.

Erica Grenesko is a senior at Saginaw Valley State University studying Literature and Creative Writing. In her free time, she likes to live her best life as a crazy cat lady to her three cats, Mina, Tiz, and Sushi.

Dan Heck (he/him) is a writer and lecturer at ODU. He’s pretty sure he’s doing one of those two things well. He hopes to move people with his words and thinks one day he’ll stop telling sad stories. Not today though. Today he wants your tears.

Caroline Helmstadt is a writer and photographer from Saginaw, Michigan. Her work most often revolves around nature-whether that be the physical elements of the world around us or the internal spirit. She enjoys spending time with her husband, Julien, who is her steadfast support.

What is there left to say about Marc Janssen? Maybe, his verse is scattered around the world in places like Pinyon, Orbis, Pure Slush, Cirque Journal, and Poetry Salzburg also in his book November Reconsidered. Janssen coordinates the Salem Poetry Project and keeps getting nominated for Oregon Poet Laureate.

Craig Kurtz led the postpunk Philosophic Collage into cult status in 1981. He has since placed hundreds of ‘light verse’ lyrics in publications as varied as Rattle, Stand and Quadrant. His novel *Surviving the Dream* is available through the antichrist of retail.

Subramani trained as a physician in India and moved to the US to pursue a PhD in Artificial Intelligence. He believes that honest storytelling can change us, and our world for the better. His stories/articles have been published/forthcoming in Marathon Literary Review, Same Faces Collective, and Fairlight shorts, among others.

Arianna Perez loves the space where the grisly and the gorgeous overlap in writing. When she’s not possessed by the spirit of fictions, Ari spends her nights writing snail-mail letters to friends she could easily just text and baking an obscene amount of bread. And, of course, accidentally hitting herself with nun-chucks.

Lily West is a Creative Writing and English Literature student at Saginaw Valley State University. She mostly enjoys writing romance fiction but occasionally writes poetry. When she’s not in class or writing she’s usually reading romance, getting coffee with friends, or daydreaming about her next writing project.

Staff

Leah Richardson is mildly concerned about the amount of money she’s spent at Starbucks this year. Halfway through her third year at SVSU, she still doesn’t know whether she should tackle unfinished assignments or unfinished TV shows. When not at school, she can be found obsessing over cats and good books. Maybe a cute teacup as well.

Hello! I am Olivia, a student of English Education at Saginaw Valley. I like oranges and collecting notebooks so one day I can write my magnum opus and tell no one.

Kim Lacey is still wondering, like twenty years later, if she remembered to drop off the refill to table 62.

Nathan Bonus is a Creative Writing major and a Theatre minor in his last year at SVSU. He has been in college for way too long, but he's still not ready to be done.

Alexandra Fiting is a first-year English major. She loves classic literature, anything about the occult, music, and cats.

Emma Grone is a freshman at Saginaw Valley State University and an Early Childhood Education major, who is also debating taking on an English minor. This is her first year of editing for *Cardinal Sins* and definitely not her last.

Marissa Speckman is a Pre-Med Neuroscience major and Creative Writing minor at Saginaw Valley State University. She serves as a reader/editor for *Cardinal Sins*. Passionate about the intersections between science and art, Marissa believes that without the complexities of the brain, we wouldn't have the capacity to express our deepest emotions through works like Shakespeare or to create art that captures the essence of what it means to be human.

Lily West is a Creative Writing major and English minor who is obsessed with weddings, rom coms, and all things love stories. This is her third time being an editor for the *Cardinal Sins*.

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 the piece
- 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
- have high contrast and sharp definition
- be attached in email in .jpeg or .png format
- be saved as their title

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

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Prizes and Judging

Prizes may be awarded to SVSU students, faculty or alumni in each of the 8 categories we publish: poetry, fiction, flash fiction, creative non-fiction, black & white photography, color photography, black & white artwork, and color artwork. Outside SVSU artists and writers are free to submit and are eligible for publication; however, they will not receive monetary compensation for a general submission category prize.

Staff reserves the right not to award a winner in a particular category if no submissions are judged worthy of the award.

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 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.

You retain all subsequent rights to your work.

Thank you for submitting to *Cardinal Sins*.

These guidelines are subject to change; please visit our Submittable page for the most current guidelines and for deadline dates.

A Note on Content & Taste

Though *Cardinal Sins* has no set theme, note we do not tend to publish works that feature explicitly sexual content, overtly triggering content used for shock value, glorified abuse, and/or similar content. Those topics may have their places, but they likely won't work for our university-funded publication. Please be conscious of this as you submit.