

ECLIPSE



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ENG 273

Creative Writing Capstone
Monroe Community College
Spring 2024, Digital Edition

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Calliope

By Gil Lopez

Margie noticed the Ferris wheel lights flicker in the dusky pink sky and let out a sigh of relief. Calliope was finishing up on her last ride and Darnell was already waiting for them in the parking lot.

Now the hard part, thought Margie, watching her daughter stumble away from teacup ride, half-giddy, half-nauseous. *Getting Calliope to the exit.*

“Did you see me, mama?” asked Calliope, her voice hoarse from screaming all day.

“Yes, I did! You were very brave!” replied Margie, exerting what little enthusiasm she had left. “Did you have fun today?”

“Yeah! Thanks for taking me!” Margie smiled down at Calliope and tussled her curly light brown hair. “I wish daddy was with us, though. He likes to ride the rides with me.”

“Well, I’m glad you still had fun,” replied Margie, her tone no longer cheery. “But your dad is waiting for us outside. Are you ready to go home?”

“Oh,” her daughter sighed. “Okay.”

Margie saw her shoulders drop as the bounce in her curls fell flat. She could tell Calliope wanted to stay a bit longer, but Margie was tired, and she was done with being at Six Flags.

Margie loved her daughter very much and wanted to spend as much time with her as she possibly could, but theme parks and playgrounds were more Darnell’s territory. He was the one who took Calliope to amusement parks and playgrounds, to the mall to see Santa, and to the movies to watch Disney cartoons.

One time while she was working from home, she found Darnell and Calliope cuddled up in the living room watching a Barbie cartoon. Both their eyes were fixed on the TV as Darnell explained the plot to her.

Margie never understood how Darnell didn’t go crazy staying at home with Calliope while she went into the office, but her husband had the natural parental talent she both admired and envied. He loved doing all that kid stuff she personally couldn’t stand, but when he woke up with food poisoning the task was left to her.

“What are you so afraid of, Margie?” Darnell asked her earlier that morning, his head buried in the toilet. “It’s just a few hours.”

“I think you know what I’m afraid of,” Margie replied, standing over him and rubbing his back. “I’m afraid Calliope isn’t going to have fun with me.”

“Why would you think that?”

“Because I know she’s going to want me to ride the rides with her or – god forbid – get in the wave pool!”

“Relax, Margie,” he replied, gagging. “Calliope isn’t hard to please. Just talk to her. Show interest in her interests and share yours with her. You don’t have to swim or get on a kiddie ride, but just try to have fun, and she’ll have fun too.”

Margie found his ‘be nice’ advice condescending at the time, but when she noticed herself acting distant and uninterested toward Calliope on their way to the park, she realized he had a point. She was behaving the same way her father had when he had to do something with her that he didn’t want to do, and she had no desire to inherit that trait from him.

“Look, mama, games!” exclaimed Calliope, then ran towards the old arcade, spinning around in circles to take in the colorful lights and loud, pinging noises.

“Calliope, get back here!” she ordered to no avail.

Patience, Margaret, she reminded herself. *You need to have patience.* Margie took a deep breath to taper her annoyance and the guilt that came with it before she followed Calliope into the arcade.

“Can we please play one game before we go, mama?”

“We don’t have time, Cal. And these are all really old games, like Dig-Dug and Ms. Pac-Man.”

Calliope looked up at her mother, her little eyebrows raised high and a glint of curiosity in her green eyes.

“Who’s Ms. Pac-Man?!”

Margie flashed a smile as she took Calliope’s hand and guided her towards the exit while giving her a crash course on Ms. Pac Man and her endless conflict with ghosts.

She told her daughter about the see-through purple Gameboy Color her mother bought her for Christmas when she was about Calliope’s age, and about how much she loved the music that would play before rounds and the chomping noise Ms. Pac-Man made when she ate pellets.

What she didn’t share with Calliope was that her parents fought a lot. And whenever they’d fight, she’d plug her Walkman headphones into her Gameboy and let the spongy cushioning and 8-bit music drown out the shouting.

“Do you still have the Gameboy?” Calliope asked her.

“No. Not anymore.”

Margie hadn’t thought about that old toy in so long, she’d almost forgotten her father broke it in frustration because he couldn’t beat her high score in Ms. Pac Man. Her mother was furious with him when she found out, and demanded he replace it immediately. He never replaced it though. He didn’t console her while she cried. He didn’t even apologize. He just blamed the game for cheating and the Gameboy for being a piece of junk. Her mother often cited that moment as the one that broke their marriage for good.

She didn’t share that part with Calliope either. Instead, she cleared her throat and forced a smile at her wide-eyed daughter.

“Do you want to buy a new one?!”

“I don’t think they make them anymore, Cal,” she sighed before an idea came to her. “But we should try to find one at that old video game store next weekend? Would you like that?”

“Yeah!”

A few years ago, Calliope asked about her grandfather. Without a second thought Margie told the girl he was dead. In truth, she had no idea where he was, or how he was doing. And quite frankly, she didn’t care. Darnell was upset with her for lying to Calliope, but in her defense, he’d never met the man. And as far as Margie knew, the man could be dead. He might as well be.

Her dark thoughts were interrupted by feedback static from the loudspeakers near the exit followed by a discordant and familiar tune that made her left eye twitch.

Circus music...

Margie hated circus music also. She hated those airy flutes and the rapid, upbeat pace of brass and drums. She hated that it reminded her of clowns and freak shows. But what she hated most was that wind organ, whistling ominously out of tune in the fog of flutes and drums. The cacophony made the hairs on her arm stand up, unlocking an unwelcome memory she’d stored away long ago.

The weekend of her eleventh birthday, her father took her to the pier. He’d become angrier and more distant with her since the divorce, and even more so that day. The only time he spoke was to remind her that he had to cancel a date for her, or that the reason they didn’t play any games or go on any rides was because ‘alimony and child support were breaking him.’ All he had enough money for was the carousel.

Then, as soon as the ride operator seated her atop that lonely horse, she saw her father leave the Hippodrome with a woman half his age. He returned to claim her an hour later, smelling of perfume and salt-water.

On the way home, he asked Margie to keep his new girlfriend a secret between them, but as soon as Margie saw her mom, she ran to her and told her everything. That was the last time she ever saw her father.

Margie felt her anger rising as Calliope started to run to the outdated attraction. She grabbed her arm and pulled her back. Calliope winced with discomfort and tried to wriggle away until Margie let go, feeling only guilt.

“I’m so sorry, Cal. Are you okay?” Calliope nodded, her green eyes glassy and glowing.

“Can we ride the merry-go-round, mama? Just once?”

Margie surveyed with narrowed eyes the hodge-podge herd of porcelain horses galloping around the platform in gaudy saddles, sharing their collective look of concern, like medieval mounts before battle.

“Sure,” she relented, feigning a smile. “I can’t get on though because of my headache, but I’ll be watching you the entire time. Okay?”

Calliope squealed with excitement as she took her mother’s hand and dragged her to the carousel. As she sat Calliope down on her horse, an old-fashioned fairground piano in the corner caught her eye, revealing another memory of that night on the merry-go-round and the old ride operator who helped her.

The old man noticed her after the first ride. She was the only child not being helped off by an adult. He waited for a moment, scanning the area, then shook his head as he walked over to her.

She remembered the somber look in his eyes when he asked where her parents were, and how that worried expression shifted into one of anger when she told him about her father.

His eyes darted around the hippodrome one more time before he helped her off her horse and walked her to his booth. After he started the next ride, he asked her if she liked the music.

“No,” Margie remembered saying. “It’s kind of scary.”

“Yeah, I figured,” he laughed lightly in response. “Kids stopped liking the calliope once clowns got scary.”

“What’s a calopy?”

“That thing over there,” he answered, pointing at what looked like a cartoon church organ, with uneven circus wagon wheels and shiny brass whistles rising from the top of its cherry red body.

“Why is it so loud?” “Just the way it is,” he shrugged. “You can’t control how loud it is, but the magic of the calliope is turning that noise into something beautiful.”

When Margie first got pregnant, she was consumed by fear of becoming a mother. She didn’t know if she’d be good at it, and she often worried she’d repeat the mistakes her parents made. She didn’t know the first thing about children, nor did she share their interests. All she knew was that she wanted to name the baby Calliope.

Margie always loved the name, but thought she learned it whenever she learned about Greek mythology in school, but now she remembered where she first heard Calliope. Where she first fell in love with name.

As Margie watched her daughter go round and round, beaming with glee atop her bejeweled steed, she decided the music wasn’t so bad anymore.

The Maid and the Master. Remastered.

By Aaliyah Seay

It was an average Sunday morning, the sun was shining bright through cracked bedrooms of teens who decided to sleep in and sounds of cars pulling out their driveways for church, could be heard in the distance. Yumibee, a young woman dressed in your stereotypical black and white maid dress was standing outside the door of the home of a man she worked for, and she never wanted to be too early or a second late. She would stare at her phone gripping it tightly, waiting for the time to hit 9:30 AM exactly. She was always so eager to ring the doorbell right on time, his smile every time he opened the door was something she always looked forward to.

9:30 AM finally appeared on the screen and she used her finger to press the doorbell. She straightened up her posture as she watched the door swing open, her happy excited smile was now more of a crooked smirk because the man's wife was there instead. The woman stood before her with a serene, almost ethereal air, her long, dark hair falling in curls past her shoulders. She was dressed in a simple yet elegant burgundy sun dress, paired with a matching straw hat with delicate flower embroidery. Though her outfit was relaxed, and it was something she just put on quickly, the woman herself was a certain sophistication and grace, like a classical beauty stepped straight out of the past, and that annoyed Yumibee extremely.

“Goodmorning Miss...” Yumibee would begin, she never really cared to ever learn the woman’s name, and the woman never seemed to mind being called Miss anyway.

“Are you and Mr. Preston on your way to church today?” Yumibee asked gently, as she peeked over the woman's shoulder, wondering where the man of her dreams was exactly. The woman would shake her head, her tone was soft like a mother's lullaby.

“Nope just me today, he's sick in bed but honestly I think he's just faking it, so he doesn’t have to come to church with me.” The woman would pause before laughing, Yumibee would let out a fake laugh of her own, she didn’t find anything funny, she hoped he was okay. The thought of the man being sick in bed and having to take care of him made her heart pound in excitement.

“Well, you should get going miss, wouldn't want you to be late for your service...” Yumibee giggled, trying to keep the drool out her mouth as she envisioned the man begging to be sponge bathed because he's too weak to do it himself. The woman would nod her head and began to walk away before stopping to look back at her.

“Oh Yumibee, I made a bit of a mess with my makeup earlier and it spilled all over my vanity. I'm running late like always so could you...?”

“This clumsy bitch...”

“Of course, Miss, have a good service!” Yumibee responded as she walked into the house, she didn’t look back at the woman at all, her focus was more on what the man needed not his pathetic wife. Once the door was shut, she put down her cleaning bucket on the counter. She hurried up the stairs but quickly paced herself. She didn’t want the man to be startled on her arrival and have a heart attack, she would then giggle, if he did have one, she would be the one to save him and he would have to thank her in some type of way. Her thought process was interrupted by the sounds of sneezing coming from the Master bedroom, she gently knocked, spotting the man in the bed through the cracked door.

“Sir? I've arrived, is it okay to enter?”

The man would look at her and nod his head, pulling the blanket over his body as she walked inside. Yumibee’s mind raced once again, wondering if he was actually naked under those sheets, she needed to get herself together.

“Goodmorning sir, I heard you’re sick. Would you like me to fix you up some soup or maybe a massage...” Yumibee mumbled the last bit under her breath too shy to even dare to say that aloud in front of him.

“No thanks Yumi...”

Oh those three words escaping his perfect lips that she imagined were so soft made her stomach flutter in butterflies. She could not describe in innocent words the way her body reacted every time she heard his voice, it affected her even more since now it was slightly hoarse due to his illness, but there was an appealing roughness to it that was almost addictive. His voice radiated a certain warmth, drawing her in as if his soul was reaching out through the airwaves to cradle her in its embrace. He even called her Yumi, the nickname he has been calling yumibee ever since he met her, it made her feel special, it made her want him even more.

“Well I just wanted to let you know I’m here sir, I’ll get started on my chores right away” She would say softly as she watched him smile back at her. She waited for a response from him, but there was none. The man closed his eyes and proceeded to get some more rest. Yumibee let out a soft sigh, as she left the bedroom and went downstairs to the kitchen, wishing she could be the one to sleep besides him, cuddling and holding him. Her mind wandered as she began to wash the dishes, a look of disgust when she held up a wine glass with a particular lipstick mark on it.

“Alcoholic bitch, can’t even go a morning without drinking huh?”

Yumibee thought to herself, using the sponge on the glass and wiping the filth away. As she cleaned, she would hum a soft tune, the tune in which was the music that was in the background when she first met Mr. Preston. She was hired to pick up after a small party his wife hosted for his birthday. He stood there, drunk off his mind with a bright smile on his face and left over cake on his lips like a toddler, laughing and singing loudly to the tune.

“Yumi Yumi~” He called out for her, his dreads swinging side to side to the beat of the tune almost hypnotizing, Yumibee finding his childish drunken behavior adorable, not to mention the nickname.

“It’s Yumibee sir,” Yumibee would correct but Mr. Preston scoffed and shook his head, his brown eyes those long lashes looking into hers, she could feel herself grow nervous.

“Nah, I like calling you Yumi better” Mr. Preston would respond back, his voice a bit slurred but he finally wiped his mouth. His hands dug into his pocket, without hesitation handing her a 100-dollar tip.

“Keep up the good work Yumi!” He winked, and that little interaction is the exact moment she fell for him. She felt as if his drunken wink was his subtle way of letting her in.

“Yumi..Yumi” His voice echoing in the back of her mind like a song that she couldn’t get out of her head, the voice got louder and louder, but it was because Mr. Preston was calling out from behind her.

“Yumi, you alright?”

She quickly turned around and was instantly overcome with a sensation of heat as she caught sight of him in his robe and boxers standing behind her. Her stomach knotted with a mix of excitement and anticipation as she was struck by a feeling of desire and curiosity. She could feel herself growing hot and bothered glancing at his body and imagined all the possibilities that might lie ahead.

“I-I..Sir..you should be in bed..” Her voice shaky, trying her hardest to keep eye contact with him. Mr. Preston shook his head walking towards where she stood. His body gently came closer to hers, her heart started to race. Was her dreams all coming true, but then she heard the coffee maker coming to life and she realized that Mr. Preston was simply reaching past her to turn it on. Still, she couldn’t keep herself from blushing at the unexpected closeness.

“Forgot to tell you I wanted coffee..” He would say with a smile, moving away and leaning against the counter in front of her. She let out a soft sigh, swallowing the spit as her mouth watered from the preparation of Mr. Preston taking her right then and there against the sink.

“O-Oh, of course sir, would you like me to bring it up to you when its done?”

Mr. Preston's gaze lingered on her for a moment longer than necessary adding to the intensity of the situation. His smile hinted at a sense of amusement as if he picked up on her internal struggle. He then finally spoke.

"Sure."

He then turned around and headed back to his bedroom. Yumibee exhaled in frustration, she wished he would stay just a little longer, but she knew she would probably end up blurting out something she regretted.

oooooooo

Throughout the day Yumibee would finish up her cleaning, but just as she was about to leave, she realized she had forgotten to clean up the makeup spill on misses vanity. She let out a soft groan as she hated cleaning up after his wife, but it gave her an excuse to enter the bedroom and occasionally have subtle glances at Mr Preston. She carefully knocked, but no response. Gently peeking into the room there he was, lying in bed, completely unconscious to the world. Seeing him like that got her adrenaline pumping, her hands twitching with desire. Even the way he slept was alluring. The way his body shifted with his breath, the way his hair fell over his forehead. It was too much for her to handle. She thought about what she could do to him, but she quickly caught herself before she could act on impulse and headed towards vanity instead.

But for some reason she couldn't really ignore these thoughts she was having, she would stare down at the half-dried foundation she was supposed to be cleaning, as her cheeks began to flush red. the corners of her lips twitched as her gaze would turn at the sleeping man through the mirror.

"Just a little cuddle..."

She quietly approached and noticed a soft smile playing on his lips. As if guided by an impulse she couldn't resist, Yumibee slipped under the covers beside him. She lay beside him, taking in the soothing rhythm of his breathing. The room was filled with a calmness that seemed to envelop them both. Yumibee felt a sense of peace she hadn't known before, and she simply enjoyed the quiet companionship. As she lay there, Yumibee enjoyed the subtle warmth of Mr. Preston's sleeping form. Unexpectedly, he stirred and, without waking, draped his arm around her, pulling her closer. In that unconscious gesture, Yumibee perked up, a mix of surprise and comfort. It was as if, even in his dreams, Mr. Preston sought solace in her presence.

Yumibee hesitated for a moment, her heart pounding with a mixture of fear and affection. Gathering her courage, she whispered, "I love you," believing that the bond they had formed went beyond their roles as employer and maid. The words hung in the air, and the room held its breath. Suddenly, Mr. Preston's eyes shot open, wide with shock. Confusion and disbelief flickered across his face as he registered Yumibee's presence beside him.

"I... Yumi?" he stammered, his voice a mix of surprise and unease. He quickly pulled away from her and out of bed, creating a distance between them. His eyes darted around the room as if trying to make sense of the situation.

"I-I'm sorry, sir," Yumibee stammered, her cheeks flushing with embarrassment. "I didn't mean to overstep. It's just... I felt a connection, and I thought—"

Mr. Preston interrupted her, his expression a mix of disbelief and discomfort. "Yumi, you... why....why are you in my bed..?"

Yumibee misinterpreted the connection they shared, and now, with a heavy heart, she confessed her feelings.

"I'm sorry, sir I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable. It's just... I thought there was something more between us."

Mr. Preston's face tightened with a mixture of frustration and anger.

"W-what the hell...are you talking about?! Im married!"

Yumibee's voice trembled as she continued, "I understand, sir. I never meant to disrupt your life. It's just... I care about you so much. I couldn't help but fall in love."

His anger intensified, his voice now sharp and furious. "Love? Get the hell out of here with that and get out my bed!"

Yumibee's tears fell freely now, she quickly got out the bed and she pleaded, "Please, sir, I didn't mean to betray your trust. I just... I couldn't hold back my feelings any longer. I thought you should know how I feel! Maybe your wife is cheating on you..so you can forget about her!"

His face tightened with rage, Mr. Preston cut her off sharply, "Enough! You have no right to make baseless accusations about my personal life. My marriage is none of your concern!"

Tears streamed down Yumibee's face as she desperately tried to salvage the situation.

"Please sir I know it sounds strange, but I truly believe we're meant to be together. I've been watching you, learning everything about you. Your likes, your dislikes, even the way you take your coffee. I could make you happy in ways she never could."

His eyes widened with a mix of horror and anger. "Are you fucking insane..? Leave immediately, or I'm calling the fucking cops, I don't ever want to see you here again. You're done!"

Yumibee suddenly felt a crushing weight on her chest as Mr. Preston's words echoed in the now tense and charged atmosphere. The air seemed suffocating, and her heart shattered into a million pieces. Tears continued to stream down her face, each drop carrying the weight of her heartbreak. The room, once a haven of quiet companionship, now felt like a cage of despair. She tried to speak, to explain herself, but the lump in her throat choked every word. Yumibee felt a profound sense of loss and isolation. The man she had grown to love, or at least the illusion of him in her mind, now saw her as a threat, an intruder in his personal life.

The realization that her feelings were not reciprocated hit her like a tidal wave. Yumibee's world crumbled around her, and she struggled to find a reason to go on. In her mind, the significance of her existence seemed to diminish to nothing. The pain was more than emotional, it felt physical, as if her heart had been ripped from her chest.

"I-I'm sorry," she managed to whisper, her voice barely audibles amidst the chaos of emotions. She wants to scream, to beg him to change his mind, but her voice fails her. She stumbled back into the dresser, in an instant, all her hopes and dreams of them being together came crashing down.

Without a second thought, she reaches for the bottle of pills on it. The bitter taste lingers on her tongue as she swallows them down. She knows it's impulsive, but she can't bear the thought of living without him, she closed her eyes waiting for the exact moment where her soul would escape from her body. Suddenly she felt her body being lifted.

"Get up dumbass, those aren't going to kill you.." He exclaimed as he stood her up and rubbed his temples. She turned to look at the bottle realizing she tried to overdose on vitamin C pills, the worst she would receive was a stomachache, how embarrassing. She gently gripped the bottle again and threw it at him, then made her way out of the room.

"I need to get out of here...I can't even take my own life right."

As tears scorched her cheeks, she found it unbearable to meet his gaze in such a state. With a heavy heart, she made her way towards the front door, each step weighed down by a mixture of anguish and resolve. Yet, the prospect of encountering Miss, along the way gave her pause. She couldn't afford any additional conflicts, not now, especially when he was likely trying to reach her at this very moment.

Yumibee's hand trembled as it reached for the doorbell, torn between the desire to flee and the reluctance to leave everything behind. Her gaze flickered back to the staircase, where Mr. Preston's voice echoed with venomous words.

"She's crazy, I found her in bed with me..." His words shattered any lingering illusions of a fairytale romance, leaving her heartbroken and lost. A soft whimper escaped her lips as she turned the doorknob, the chilly breeze sweeping in and causing the nearby keys to jingle faintly. She recognized the familiar

sound of the house key, a stark reminder of the life she was leaving behind.

Biting down on her lip, she fought to drown out the hurtful echoes of his accusations, his betrayal cutting deeper than any physical wound. With a steady hand, she slipped the key into her dress pocket, a silent acknowledgment of the finality of her decision. Without a backward glance, she stepped out into the night, leaving behind the echoes of shattered dreams. As she ventured into the darkness, a whisper escaped her lips, carrying the weight of her unspoken resolve.

"If I can no longer be his maid, I'll always be in his presence somehow..."

The Strangers

By Brandon Clune

I feel guilty that he died and I didn't.

I should've been on the street,
When the car came barreling.

It should've been me.

But it wasn't.
He was my best friend.

Now, when I think of him,
I think of her.
He soared for her and

I stole her from him.
We sparked flames
From spoken words and with time,
We became smitten for each other.
We loved through hurt.

We became addicted through sadness.

We shot our veins full,
Until the air we reached for,
Stretched too thin to grasp.
Each letter took the space
Of what more
We could barely inhale.

I used to know her.

With every exhale,
We drift further apart.
Until we see ourselves
Mirroring the strangers
We promised we'd never forget.

The Habits of Ekria Pyrah

By Carla Diaz

1987

Esperanza Culloden was a girl of twelve, an older sister to a seven-year-old Amelia, a sweet little thing with bouncy curly pigtails that made her want to cut them off. Amelia always got the adoration and the attention, in the harmless kind, unlike Esperanza, who was constantly put down by her father, a short, balding man drowning in booze and debt. Her father loathed her because she reminded him of her mother, the woman he loved; he'd had her physically yet could never reach her heart. She left when Esperanza was three and could barely remember anything, left her daughter with the man she couldn't bear to be around nor the child they'd made together, a physical reminder of her night of weakness, the mistake she would never be able to take back.

When Esperanza was sixteen, beaten again by her drunk father, she took his pocketknife as the old man stumbled, the alcohol in his system slowing his reflexes. Her stepmother and sister were on a trip to visit their aunt, leaving Esperanza at the mercy of her abusive father. Even when there was no reason, he still beat his daughter purely because of her looks and didn't stop until the girl was on the brink of death.

With her heart pounding against her ribs, she had used her father's pocketknife, he'd left it on the coffee table before he decided to take a nap on the couch and plunged the steel blade into the side of neck, hands shacking violently from the anticipation. Not only had he been drunk but inebriated as well so when his eyes flew open in shock, his moves were frantic but sluggish and uncoordinated as he tried to apply pressure to his wound.

His efforts were fruitless in the end.

The crimson liquid poured from the uneven wound like water from a broken dam, drowning the floor and soaking the young girl's feet.

Most people would have been disgusted, horrified or in shock but Esperanza just stared in fascination, thinking how beautiful the blood looked and wondered if her own looked hypnotizing.

For longer than normal she stood there, in a trance that held her captive, and it wasn't until the sounds of the city outside the apartment window snapped her back into reality.

Thankfully, there was no carpet in their home that she had to clean out which took hours and hours. She dumped the body in the street in the middle of the night when it was dark and couldn't be seen and kept the knife instead of disposing of it. There were no security cameras, and she wore all black. Hollywood movies weren't always wrong when it came to things like these and for once she was thankful for the constant television playing in the background where she picked up things like using alibis and fake excuses to get her out of sticky situations.

When the police came, she was clueless and grief-stricken, like her stepmother and sister. No one questioned her directly; her father had owned a lot of people money and was extremely unpopular in the city among the criminal groups.

Esperanza and what remained of her family went to live with the aunt her stepmother and sister had been visiting. There, Esperanza was able to live in false peace under the distrustful stare of her stepmother.

At least for a few years.

1993

On her eighteenth birthday, Esperanza Culloden had died and Ekria Pyrah was born.

Her stepmother had never fully trusted her after the night her father died, and to avoid any potential confrontation, Ekria left the moment she could and changed her name. The years had been

awkward at first, Ekria had no one she could rely on except herself. After what she'd done, Esperanza had died and been reborn, reliving the glorious memories of blood at her feet, so she changed her name.

The name came to her one night, suddenly popping up in her mind. A new identity in which she could be herself.

Like a snake shedding its skin, Ekria strutted through the streets with her head held high. She'd gotten accepted in the college she'd applied to and even managed to get an apartment nearby it. Ekria was working as a waitress in a diner, it wasn't the most glamorous job in the world, but it paid her bills.

It kept her mind distracted most of the time, though every once in a while she found herself spacing out whenever the topic of blood was mentioned. Her hands would shake, breaths increasing as images of her father's blood infiltrated her mind. On more than one occasion, her coworkers had to help her slip back into reality. Her face would always flush with embarrassment, an apology her body memorized on her lips before she rushed to do whatever task was needed of her.

Any peace she had in her life was nothing but a façade. He would never let her be.

1997

The tension that broke the surface came in the most unexpected way.

It had been at a grocery store, a man cutting open a box to stock up the shelves had cut himself, and she couldn't help but stare, at the liquid of darkness, a temptation like no other. She wanted more, ached to see where it came from, to open the skin and bear witness to the life that flowed through a person.

She was brought back to that night, her father's gurgles and wet gasps, thick short fingers wrapping around his neck as he strangled himself to try to preserve his life's longevity.

The door opened, the bell chimed and snapped her out of her fantasy to find the man staring at her with a disgusted look on his face. Ears turning red, she dropped the basket and fled the store, as if the Devil himself were chasing her.

She never understood, not until she began experimenting.

Distraught and frustrated by the multiple times Ekria had been pulled into her memories and out of the present, she went home that night, grabbed a small knife, and cut a small line on her palm. The crimson liquid that dripped from the opening in her skin was only part of the beginning of her downfall.

"It's so beautiful. Fuck." She had whispered, kneeling on the floor of her kitchen, her right hand grasping her left tightly, tears rushing down her cheeks before she tentatively slipped her tongue out of her mouth to lick the blood away.

2001

Ekria Pyrah had a strange habit, an addiction she kept hidden due to its peculiar nature. Honestly, the oddness of it all was the least of its problems. She liked to cut herself, curious to see what was hidden beneath the organ that covered her entire body, she wanted to see what the likeness of her insides was.

Expose her meat suit.

Perhaps there she would find the ugliness her father saw inside her, maybe then she would be able to rid herself of the plague that ruined normality for her.

Ekria wasn't into pain or suicidal, goodness, no, she was a burlesque dancer who hid her ruined hands behind beautiful expensive velvet gloves. One of her loyal customers was a surgeon who provided her with the local anesthetics she would need in exchange for private dances.

Without our skin, we're terrifying monsters, Ekria thought in delight the first time she'd made the first incision onto her hand after applying the anesthetic. Her hand shook, not from fear but from excitement.

Obviously, she didn't do it often, after using the scalpel to reach down the hypodermis, exposing her nerves. She had researched a lot before committing to this, even attended a medical institute before life interfered and forced her to pursue other careers. Topics she didn't like to dwell on, there was no point, the past was the past and there was nowhere else to go but forward onto new and grander things.

The image of her dead father seemed to have other ideas because it still plagued her. At least in the beginning, yet as time went on she relived the day like a fond memory instead of a nightmare like she had once considered it.

She took photographs, keeping them close to her heart since she would have to wait for months for her to be able to get her next fix. Once Ekria had mastered the craft by herself, she decided to expand her horizons.

As it turns out, among her crowd was a coroner.

Looking at herself in the mirror, Ekria's thoughts fractured as she was brought back to the present and away from the alluring memories, the images of the pink and white flesh, the colorful veins pulsing with life. Ekria looked at herself in the mirror of the wooden vanity. Her hair fell down to her waist in thick dark waves, like a slithering snake in the shadows, and her eyes were so bright they almost looked white, on more than one occasion, people on the street had mistaken her for a blind person, generously offering their help when she did not need it, nor had she asked for it.

She was devastatingly exquisite. Considering how much time and effort she put into her appearance, she better. Her skin was practically porcelain without a single blemish to be seen, she was still fairly young, so there were no wrinkles for her to worry about.

Yet.

Ekria glanced at her ruined hands and felt her arousal elevate, hands shaking as she gazed at the white scars on her hands, the skin around them tight and uncomfortable whenever she made certain movements, making her have to moisturize them constantly so it wouldn't be so discomfoting.

She let out a small whimper, inhuman and feral, as she carefully rubbed her lips against the textured skin. Another animalistic sound left her mouth, legs shaking violently with anticipation.

The naked flesh of her vessel was seated on the velvet seat, her scarred hand pressed against her lips while the other was wrapped around her hard nipple, furiously tugging at it as she slipped her tongue past her flushed lips to lick the scars and her eyes rolled into the back of her head.

It was as if she were possessed.

Perhaps she was.

Ekria wouldn't hesitate to sell her soul to live in this kind of ecstasy. She wouldn't mind becoming a demon, trading her mortal body for something that could withstand the sadistic nature of her desires.

Her habits.

An addiction far greater than any experienced. Sex was a mild tingle she felt, it brought her no pleasure, no completion, not like this, not like knowing that beneath her beautiful shell that she maintains for others could not compare to what she looked like on the inside.

Literally.

Her father was the reminder that people only saw the outside because they believed it was a reflection of how they were on the inside. She regretted not being able to cut him open properly, see what hideous thing hid behind the greasy skin and the stench of regret. The man had been a loser and a failure, a common insect that plagued her almost daily throughout her entire life. He had been the reason why she couldn't be normal.

This was all his fault.

It was his fault that she hurt herself in every single way possible.

And it wasn't just her hand she wanted to cut open.

She dreamt of gory endeavors of utter euphoria where she takes her scalpel, no need for drugs to subdue the inevitable agony, and Ekria cuts herself open from collar bone to belly button, pulling her skin apart like she's pulling off her jacket.

Flesh, blood, and bone.

This is what she really is.

This is what she wants from herself to herself. A grandiose gift that cannot be compared to anything else. Ekria wants to see herself. Unfortunately, it is just a fantasy, and her desires must remain within her head. Her orgasms were never truly satisfying, at least with everything she's tried so far.

With a disappointed sigh, she released her swollen breast, glancing at the outfit she'd be wearing to work later that night. She slowly smirks at the thought of the coroner, the way his beady eyes tracked her every movement on the stage.

She'll be having him eat out of her palm before the night was over.

2003

It was velvety, warm, moist, and the mixture of textures was sending her into a sensory overload of the most satisfactory variety. The man beneath her garbled, mouth full of blood and missing a tongue; she'd bitten it off when her victim screamed too loudly, hurting her ears. He'd been tossing slurs and other non-creative insults in her direction that Ekria cared very little for. She'd been doing this for almost a over year now and knew that her victims didn't need their tongues, so it was one of the very few things she got rid of, but she'd been hunting this one for weeks, luring him and seducing him when she placed on opening him up while he screamed, bleeding and she'd moan at the sight he made. Open for her, vulnerable, and to do with as she pleased.

Her face, hands and breasts were covered with blood and gore; she loved to fuck them while they watched in horror as she ruined their insides, biting their bones teasingly, making their bodies artful masterpieces, and taking photographs.

Oh, she had albums full of photographs.

When she couldn't feed into her habit, her addiction, her overwhelming need to feel the cut flesh, wet organs, and hard bone, she looked through her carefully hidden photographs.

Unfortunately, her victims never stay alive for long, only a few hours if she doesn't cause major damage right away, but when she's careful, it is her twisted version of Eden.

Ekria had done a lot of experimenting in the last few months, and as it turns out, she preferred her prey to be alive rather than dead, nonetheless, the corpses provided by the coroner had been useful as well as beneficial. She'd perfected her craft until she was ready to experiment on live targets. The first had been some random stranger whose name she didn't bother to remember, it was his identity she cared for, it was what they had to offer on the inside.

Literally.

Her first had died too soon for her to fully enjoy the experience, it was short-lived and left her wanting. She'd gotten too excited, it was her mistake, and so she made a missive to be more delicate when using her scalpel to cut them.

Alas, they never lasted too long.

2004

Addiction and curiosity were a dangerous combination to hold close to your bones. Ekria had considered herself one of the most exquisite creatures to have ever graced this earth, her ruby was like no other, her veins bluer than the North Sea, and her insides were pinker than cherry blossoms. She was a work of art like no other, it was her biggest pride, yet pride was the deadliest of all the sins.

No one could assuage Ekria.

Her gluttony grew and grew with each victim she obtained.

No matter how much she cut and fuck, there was not a single being that could match her beauty.

The last time she looked in the mirror, she gazed with disdain at her milky appearance, like a porcelain doll, unearthly captivating, and it sickened her. Men and women alike threw themselves at her, whether they wanted to be her, or love her didn't matter, they were at her feet, and she felt nothing but disdain for them. They were blind fools who could not see true beauty for what it was.

True beauty was from within.

Literally.

And it was time to show the world what they should have really been admiring.

Ekria had been in her apartment, once again sitting in her vanity chair, gazing into the mirror while she ran her scalpel from an inch below her navel up to her collarbone. It wouldn't be enough to cut through bone, but it was enough for her to grip the openings of her wounds and pull the ends apart, tearing the skin off her body like it was a winter coat.

Beneath her skin was the mortal beast she'd always expected and more, Ekria didn't live long due to the blood loss, but what she saw was enough for her to die with a smile on her red lips.

Even when she was buried, her smile would never leave.

This Incessant Cancer

By Gabby Russell

"I became, in my own person, a creature eaten up and emptied by fever, languidly weak both in body and mind, and solely occupied by one thought: the horror of my other self." -The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde

You sickness!
I have dealt with you for far too long.
You are a persistent leech that drains
Vitality, an insidious vine that chokes
The essence of the mind.
How do I get rid of you?
My wit is left to the mercy
Of your parasite, tethered
To your voracious appetite.

*I'll consume you slowly
An unbidden flame
Flickering within the delicate
Corridors of your mind
Spreading, devouring
The tranquility of thought
Ashen fumes stinging the nerves
Fogging up your skull*

Scalpel in hand,
I must cut this darkness out of me,
Piece by piece,
Until my hands are crimson
And my mind is carved,
So as to have this incessant cancer
Removed from my brain.

*You believe you can be rid of me
So easily?
Your fear is a brittle armor
Against my gluttony
I can taste the chilling realization
When you become aware of how friendly
You will soon be with Death*

I am no longer ashamed
Or afraid of you.
You are purely a mass,
A shadow lurking within my flesh.
I refuse to grant you power
Over my spirit's flight.
For you are but a transient intruder,
While I am the essence of life.

My Dear Sister

By Ayla Gower

I have lived for 7,305 days.
She didn't even get one.
I was seven years old when my parents were pregnant with their third daughter,
My dad was deployed while the baby grew in my mother's womb.
He came home early, and they left for the hospital.
I expected them to come home with a new baby sister,
one I was finally big enough to hold.
From what I remember they were gone all night.

When they finally came home, their arms were empty.
No baby sister in sight,
My mothers' eyes were filled with tears she tried to hide.
It wasn't long after that they sat us down,
Not ready to tell us something that brought our universe to a halt.

She didn't make it.

I was seven when my baby sister passed away at 3 hours old.
My mother was broken for a while, reeling from the loss of a child.
A decision I learned later was much more complicated than just loss.
Spina bifida was the diagnosis, painful and dangerous.
One that took her from us.

Years later I finally saw her, the only picture I have ever seen.
Pristine and now far older than her.
She was small enough to fit into the palm of a hand.
Her skin was translucent; every vein visible to the naked eye of a teenage me.
Blood red skin now 13 years old.

I grew up trying to imagine a person I had never known,
Searching for anything physical to remember a sister I only know in name.
A laugh never voiced.
A smile never seen.
A life never lived.

It took a long time to speak her name without tears in my eyes.
Sometimes I still cry when thinking of her,
but I'm proud to say it is mostly with joy,
Because I get to call her one of my sisters.
13 years have passed, and she has inspired me through every single one.

I have lived 7,305 days,
And I'm grateful she lived for even part of one.

The Mirror

By Joseph Chirido

When Chloe, and I first pulled into the parking lot of the apartment complex we were ready to call home, we were pretty surprised to find that the moving truck was nowhere to be seen. But it was no big deal, really. We filled up our car the day before and got on the road extra early in the morning. We figured it would take about 10 to 20 minutes for them to get here.

That was about 3 hours ago.

Chloe, who desperately needed some fresh air and legroom, decided to step outside and call the moving company with an annoyed flair to her step. As expected, she started pacing around the parking lot with her phone pressed firmly against her ear; her tone accusatory and stern as she spoke to whatever poor soul was on the other end of the line.

“What the fuck ever!” she shouted, hanging up and surely ending their conversation on a high note. Huffing out an angered sigh, she made her way back to the car. An annoyed expression still glued to her face. “Ok, so-”

I interrupted her before she could finish. I’d already heard the whole thing and would rather not go over it again. “They’re delayed and they don’t know when they’ll be here.”

Unimpressed, Chloe raised an eyebrow and spoke with a tone oozing exasperation. “You and your damn super ears...I have half a mind to buy a dog whistle and start blowing it into your ear on repeat.”

“Why, so you can try to order me around and hand out treats?” I said, rolling my eyes.

Thankfully, my playing along seemed to lift her spirits a little, because right after I said that she smirked and started making clicking noises with her mouth like she was calling a dog.

“Awe, who’s a good little vampire? You are! Does someone want a blood cookie? Oh yes, she does!”

We both got into a laughing fit for that one, but it didn’t last long. As soon as Chloe remembered we’d have to wait at least a few more hours for our stuff to get here, her mood soured.

“I guess we’ve got some time to kill,” she said. “I say we drop our bags off at the apartment and greet the new neighbors. Whaddya say?”

Bringing our bags to the apartment? I was totally on board with that. Meeting our new neighbors? Not so much. I was already tired from the drive and 3-hour wait. Meeting and greeting a bunch of people I’d only ever interacted with a handful of times sounded like it would be a total waste of energy. Besides, it was already 12PM. Vampires and daylight don’t mix very well.

“Do we have to?” I asked with a tired groan.

“Wow, an introverted vampire,” Chloe remarked. “Really breakin’ the mold here, huh?”

“I am totally gonna bite you...in approximately 12 hours.”

She giggled at that. “Come on Annie, get your ass out of the car and let's get inside.”

oooooooo

The interior of the building was as tremendously unimpressive as I remembered it. The lobby was small and painted in the most boring shade of beige possible. Off in the corner, you could see the only decoration in sight: a single potted plant. I couldn’t tell you what it was specifically, but it looked kinda sad. While the poor thing stood tall on its old wooden stalk, the large leaves it had- which I would’ve expected to be a nice vibrant green- were wilted a yellowish brown at the edges, drooping toward the ground. The only other thing in the lobby that was even remotely noteworthy was the mailbox cluster posted right next to the door leading into the building proper. I was about to walk right past it and head straight for our apartment, but Chloe stopped me by yanking the hood of my jacket, pulling me backward while I made an audible ‘HYUCK’ noise as a result of the sudden pressure on my throat.

“Not so fast, batbrain,” she said. “We have mail.”

“What gives- wait, we do? Already?” I asked.

Just then, Chloe opened the mailbox with our apartment number on it and pulled out a single letter.

“Sure do.” She flipped the envelope in her hand to see who it was from, scanning it over with scrutinizing eyes. If I didn’t know any better, I’d say she was trying to make sure it wasn’t some kind of bomb. Just as quickly as her suspicions died down however, her eyebrows knit together in anger.

“I’ll read this later. It’s from my dear old dad,” she grunted.

Chloe was always so loud and outspoken, so it was comically easy to hear when her voice faltered. We never really talked about her dad all that much; not just because it was a touchy subject, but because Chloe would rather not talk about it at all. Having him already knowing our new address probably wasn’t doing much to help soothe the poor girl’s mind. Deciding to ignore the tonal change for now, I looked toward our open mailbox to see that there was nothing left inside, which was weird. My parents said they’d be sending me something and I figured it would’ve arrived with the rest of the mail.

“Nothing for me?” I asked.

“Doesn’t seem like it,” Chloe said. “Maybe whatever your folks sent you will get here in the next few days.” I shrugged, deciding that was probably the best conclusion.

Once we were closing our mailbox back up, the two of us made our way into the building and started walking toward our new apartment. As soon as I saw it coming up in the distance, I noticed a small brown package lying in front of the door. It was thin, and had a letter attached to it. The whole thing was held together by a bit of twine, and it was so old-fashioned that I immediately knew who’d sent it.

Oh god. Really guys?

Before I could even get to the damn thing Chloe bent down and picked the package up off the ground, giving it a curious once over.

“I...think it’s for you, your majesty,” she said, handing me the package.

The letter was of course addressed to me, and the red wax stamp keeping the envelope closed confirmed my suspicions. My parents really couldn’t have just sent me a normal, mundane letter? Not even a few hours into moving and my best friend was already going to witness just how weird living with me was going to be.

“It’s from my parents,” I said, trying not to sound *too* annoyed.

“You think they got you something from the 1700s?” she said, slightly smiling.

“Knowing my mom, I wouldn’t be surprised if she sent me the original copy of the constitution.”

“Ah, Vanessa...” Chloe responded with a wistful glint in her eyes. “So thoughtful, and so hot--”

“Keep it in your pants, Chloe.”

Chloe snickered at that, which I thought was a good sign. It was always nice to see her lips curl into that mischievous grin of hers. “Your hot mom aside, what’d you get?” she asked.

I didn’t have to open up the package to tell what it was. From the moment we entered the hall I could smell the faint hint of blood oozing out of the cardboard package. To me, it was like an intoxicating miasma. A beautiful flurry of scents and smells tingled the back of my brain. They must’ve gotten me a pretty tasty haul, but I wasn’t about to let Chloe know that. If she was going to be living with a vampire from now on, I might as well try to ease her into it. I didn’t wanna weird her out any more than I probably have over the past few years already. I still didn’t think she ever fully recovered from that one time she walked in on me bleeding a pig so I could refill my stash.

What? A girl’s gotta eat.

With that in mind, I pressed the package close to my side and decided it was best that I *didn’t* open it until later. Knowing my mom, she probably wrote an extremely formal letter of some kind detailing everything that was inside.

“You’re not gonna open it?” Chloe questioned, her brow furrowing in confusion.

Great. I was hoping that exact combination of words wouldn’t come out of Chloe’s mouth, but I guessed that was wishful thinking on my part. As I tried to work up an answer that wouldn’t involve me

telling her it was a bunch of pre-packaged blood vials, I felt my chest tighten, constricting my voice until it was tiny and uncertain.

“Uh – no...I’ll just find out later.”

Chloe narrowed her eyes in suspicion, but to my relief, she shrugged and started fiddling around in her pockets for our keys. After pulling out the two we’d gotten from the landlord, she handed me my copy and planted hers into the lock of our door. After taking a deep breath in, she turned her head to look at me with excited anticipation. “I was really hoping to do this after we got all our shit inside but...Annie, I present to you: our new place.”

After turning the knob, she made a big show of pushing the door wide open in order to reveal our new (and barren) apartment. For what it was worth, the place was nice. It just lacked any...personality. The walls were empty and lifeless, the hardwood floor had no carpets, and the lack of furniture made the place seem way bigger than it actually was. I could only hope that’d be fixed as soon as the moving truck finally came around. After we placed our bags inside, Chloe turned to me and wasted no time in declaring our next move, right on the spot.

“Alright, time to go meet the neighbors,” she said.

I’d almost forgotten about that. And no, I didn’t wanna go around greeting people any more than I wanted to when Chloe first asked. Still though, I didn’t protest. Who knows? Maybe I’d enjoy some people around here.

oooooooo

Meeting our new neighbors wasn’t as bad as I thought it would be. It was actually worse.

For one, the average age of the residents was probably around 65. While a lot of old people are pretty nice sometimes, a lot of them don’t really care to have a couple of fresh young adults walking around the halls making noise. We met three people in total. There was our closest neighbor, Doreen, an older graying woman that had a thin wispy mustache on her upper lip. She owned about six cats, which all hissed the moment they saw me. I was certain having that many animals inside an apartment was against the rules, but I wasn’t about to snitch.

Next, we met a middle-aged woman with deeply etched laugh lines on her face. Her apartment looked nice, but all the metal crosses and religious imagery made my skin crawl. Vampires and religion don’t mix very well, so I just had to hold out until we were finally done talking.

Chloe asked me if I was alright afterward. I assured her I was fine.

Lastly, we met an older gentleman named Dan. He wore a white tank top and had barely any hair on the top of his head, which was ironic considering his shoulders were some of the hairiest I’d ever seen in my life. He said he had cookies we could eat, but I couldn’t really get into his apartment without being invited first. Don’t ask me how it works because I honestly have no clue. It’s like there’s this invisible barrier inside the doorframe that I can’t cross – It’s extremely annoying.

All in all, our greetings did nothing but prove that I was pretty incompatible with just about everyone in the building. I could only imagine what Chloe might’ve been thinking. Maybe something along the lines of, ‘I’ve got my work cut out for me’, or ‘Seriously? Is it gonna be this difficult *everywhere* we go?’

The only saving grace was that we didn’t get the chance to decompress. Just as we were about to head back to our apartment, our moving truck arrived and we were finally able to bring our stuff inside. It was at least a chance for me to show Chloe that I wasn’t *totally* helpless. It turned out that moving furniture was pretty easy when you had someone with super strength to help you out. The moving guys seemed pretty impressed. Either that or the sight of me carrying a couple hundred pounds so easily had shocked them into going nonverbal. It’s anybody’s guess.

After hauling couches and chairs through the tiny door frame, the last thing we ended up bringing inside was a mirror, which I decided to let the moving guys handle. After they all left, it was just me, Chloe, and about a gazillion boxes that neither of us had the energy to start unpacking yet.

The second we got a chance to sit down and relax, the two of us started rifling through our laptops in search of different job postings around the area. We had a bunch of money saved up already, but we'd still need jobs to keep ourselves afloat while we attended school.

Chloe was sitting on the couch, deep in thought as her fingers tapped and clicked on the keys of her keyboard. I was doing the same, except I was sitting on a stack of boxes close to the ceiling. Being a vampire and all, I needed a specific schedule. I'd actually die if I had to work any day jobs, but there weren't many postings for decently paying positions that also worked late hours. Figures.

Sighing in frustration, I decided to stare off elsewhere just so I didn't have to continue destroying my sensitive eyes by looking at that damn computer screen for so long. The first thing I noticed was the mirror we brought in earlier. It was elliptical and ornate, meant to hang on a wall inside someone's foyer so the reflection made the place look bigger. Inside it, I saw the two spots Chloe and I were sitting in, except, I wasn't visible. Vampires don't have reflections, so all I could see was my friend alone in our apartment.

Something about seeing that made me feel so...hollow. Like there was a massive pit in my stomach too big to be filled by the surrounding dirt.

I'd known Chloe for a long time, and for a while I was certain we could make all this work, but it was becoming clearer with each passing second that our lives were too different. I mean, hell – I probably wouldn't even see Chloe that much if I was going to be working so late anyway. Between her own job and the classes she was attending at school this semester, we'd never get the chance to hang out and relax like we did in highschool.

"Yo Annie, you alright?" Chloe suddenly asked. "I can practically hear you brooding."

"Yeah- it's nothing. I'm fine."

Crossing her legs, Chloe gave me a knowing look. That usually didn't bode well. "Dude, if you think being undead makes you a good liar, you're *dead* wrong."

That pun seriously made me wanna puke.

"So come on, what's up?" she continued. "You know you can talk to me about anything."

If I wanted to, I could reassert that I was fine and go on about my day. Chloe wasn't the kind of person to push very hard if she knew you weren't comfortable talking about something, but I *did* know that she'd remember this. That our current conversation would be in the back of her head until she got the chance to bring it up again. I just feared that telling her the truth would increase the distance between us. Chloe wasn't only my best friend. She was my only friend, and I didn't want to take a chance at losing her.

"I'm fine. Seriously," I said, pretending to continue scouring for more jobs online.

"Alright, I didn't wanna say it out loud but you leave me no choice," she said, closing her laptop shut. "I know you don't really feel all that comfy here. It's been written on your face all day. I know it's probably really weird to suddenly be living with a human instead of other vampires like your mom and dad, but I was hoping we could have a fresh start. Un-fucking-fortunately though my dad already knows where we live and I know that probably makes you feel even less at home, so-"

"Chloe, what are you talking about?" I interjected. "I don't mind living here at all, I just- I thought you wouldn't like living with *me*...y'know...blood sucking creature of the night and all that?" I said while gesturing toward myself.

Chloe blinked like she'd just been hit in the head with a baseball bat. "You were afraid I wouldn't like living with *you*?"

I nodded sheepishly, trying to avoid eye contact as best as I could.

"Annie, you're my best friend. Why wouldn't I wanna live with you?"

"Well, I'm a bit different than most people so..."

Before I could even finish, Chloe put up a hand to stop that thought from spiraling into another vortex of uncertainty. "Annabelle Elizabeth Grace, I've known you for seven years. I'm well aware of how weird and wacky you are. Did you really think I didn't know that when I agreed to this? I mean for fuck's sake, when I met you you were hanging upside down from the ceiling of the science room."

I couldn't help but rub the back of my neck in embarrassment. Maybe I was being a little dramatic in thinking that Chloe thought I was weird...but, didn't she just admit to feeling the same way toward me?

"Well- why would you think *I* wouldn't wanna live with you?"

"I dunno..." she muttered, quietly. "I guess the change of environment's pretty drastic, and when you met all the neighbors you got weirded out so..."

"Chloe, I've always been comfortable around you. I just get a little scared that one day I'll do one too many weird things and drive you away."

"You know I'd never leave you behind like that," she said, "Not unless you say my taste in music is trash, of course."

I giggled, moving my gaze so that our eyes finally met. "I guess we're both a little scared of starting fresh, huh?"

Chloe nodded. "Yeah. I guess we are."

A second of silence passed between us then. I reflected on all we'd been through together. Without saying a word, Chloe got up and walked over to me, pulling me into a hug. In that moment where I had my arms tightly wrapped around her, I peeked over her shoulder to spot the mirror once again. I still wasn't there, but despite that, I had someone there for *me*.

That Creeping Thing

By Jemeah Scott

The old me was illusory,
a relic of sermon bellows and
backyard sprints in the wildwood of
creek-rotted churches, communion
crumbs forever flaking her fingers.

Pastoral hands shaped her visage with
mold-worn mallets, contorted nappy hair
to pin-straight braids, pants into pleated
skirts, and my voice within her gurgled
into quiet.

Her body was a blueprint from brimstone,
the dissonance found between burial and
clarity. Now that I've outshined her,
she hunches as the creeping thing inside,
slowly raking her fingers through my shadow
as a remnant of the pulpit, an echoed hollow
body of provenance thirsting to perform.

I feel her harden with every passing breath,
her moving limbs stunted beneath my chest,
yet I embrace her in the curve of my spine
as she merges with the memory of bone.

Biographies

- **Joseph Chirido** is a creative writing student at Monroe Community College who plans to continue his education at SUNY Brockport. Inspired by the works of fiction he grew up reading, Joey plans to write young adult novels during his career as a writer and hopes to reach as many people as possible.
- **Brandon Clune** is a 2nd year student in his final semester at Monroe Community College and will continue to pursue his writing at Le Moyne College.
- **Carla Diaz** was born and raised in Rochester, NY and is a Monroe Community College student who is set to graduate in 2024. She writes about horror, gore, dark romance, and the twisted nature of human beings.
- **Ayla Gower** is a creative writing student. She has plans to attend SUNY Geneseo after graduating to pursue a major in Creative Writing and a minor in law. She has always found comfort in writing and hopes to one day be a successful attorney and publish a book of her poetry and prose. She hopes to use her experiences to help comfort people in knowing there is no one better to be than yourself, which she hopes to inspire people to do emphatically and authentically by using her own emotional experiences.
- **Gil Lopez** was born and raised in Rochester, New York. Gil discovered his passion for writing at eight years old, writing stories based on Jurassic Park. Influenced by history, mythology, film, video game lore, and his upbringing, Gil loves to explore characters, their past, the world around them and how they all intersect. Gil will be graduating from Monroe Community College in May before transferring to University at Albany in August.
- **Gabby Russell** is a creative writing student at Monroe Community College. She will continue her education in English at UMass Lowell, where she hopes to dive further into her journey of literature. Her poem “This Incessant Cancer” won her the Anna C. Price Poetry Scholarship. While her writings have focused on poetry in the past, she has started working on young adult fiction novels that will be her main focus as a writer.
- **Jemeah Scott’s** work aims to create a connective relationship between the mundanity of everyday life and the possibility for renewal found in richly creative inner worlds. Her writing focuses on the emotional turbulence of young adulthood and the experiential knowing associated with breaking away from generational scripts and fundamentalist worldviews. This May, she will graduate from Monroe Community College with an A.A. in Creative Writing and Advanced Studies with Thesis certificate and plans to continue her studies in Creative Writing and Sociology at her next college.
- **Aaliyah Seay** is a writer who loves Romance and Angsty stories. Her goal is to touch hearts, making readers feel love and pain through every sentence. She says, "Writing will always be the passion I can't ever shake off."

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- **Aaliyah Seay** would like to thank her college professor, Maria Brandt for helping her escape her creative's block bubble she's been stuck in for years.

Class Photo



GIL LOPEZ



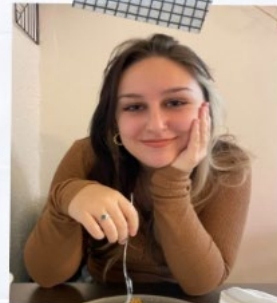
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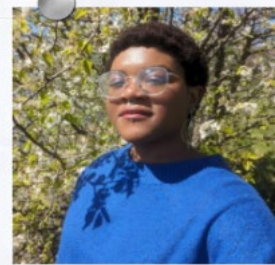
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AYLA GOWER



JEMEAH SCOTT