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PATTERNS 65

2023 Edition





I N T R O D U C T I O N

Art is hard. We work at it. We revise. We run into frustration. We give up for a moment or two then have at it again.

When the artists and writers in this edition of *Patterns* finally see their work on the page, they will have something tangible that is original and credited to them. They have released their creation into the world where it now must stand on its own. It's a thrilling and terrifying moment because their works now belong to the audience. What will the audience do with those works?

As we celebrate the power of human creativity and imagination, we must recognize the growing concern about the impact of artificial intelligence on the arts. The work contained herein may be expropriated and become part of an artificial intelligence database that then uses these works to create new texts or images without the author's or artist's permission. While AI has opened up new possibilities for creative expression, the debate about the role of technology in the artistic process is really an old one.

As we look to the future of art, we must ask ourselves: what happens when machines begin to generate art that is indistinguishable from human-created works? Can AI generated images and texts be a starting point for artists and writers? Can we assign the messy business of a rough draft to ChatGPT so that writers can focus their efforts on the really hard part, which is revising, re-visioning, and reworking their texts? Might it work the same way for those in the plastic arts?

While these questions have no easy answers, many fear the potential dangers of relying too heavily on AI in the arts. We must not sacrifice the human perspective and emotional depth that only

human creators can bring to their works. However, human beings have always used tools to create art. Chisel, quill, brush, printing press are a few technologies used to produce art. What would painters have thought of the camera? Not many writers would swap their laptop for a portable, manual typewriter. Art and technology have forever been entangled.

We cannot begin to fathom the issues raised by artificial intelligence as a means to produce art. We can assert that the 65th edition of *Patterns* has not included work that can be traced to AI, but it may be the last time we can be so certain of that claim. Will work produced largely by AI sneak into the 66th edition? Certainly, at some point in the future, AI generated work will appear. To edit and design the magazine, we use technology that didn't exist sixty-five years ago, when printers still set type. Yet the individual talent of each writer and artist still erupts from the page today as it did then. We can affirm that technology expands an artist's choices. Computer generated imagery hasn't ruined film any more than sound did in 1927. Technology opens new possibilities for art. Creators will probably find out that new technologies won't result in making it easy to make art.

Join us as we celebrate the works of our talented contributors whose effort to create something original will not go unrecognized. In a world increasingly dominated by powerful technologies that ease production in some ways, artists will likely never forget this: Art is hard for the reason that the human condition is fundamentally a struggle, which technology will never resolve. Thumb through the pages in this edition and consider for a moment that one era may be ending this year and a new one beginning with *Patterns* 66. Celebrate our contributors' hard work and our human desire for art no matter its means.



The following people have contributed to help make *Patterns* a celebrated event each year. Thank you to all of our judges, donors, and committee members. A special thank you to the SC4 Friends of the Arts, a committed group of businesses, community members and SC4 faculty and staff that support the arts at SC4, including music, theatre, creative writing and visual arts.

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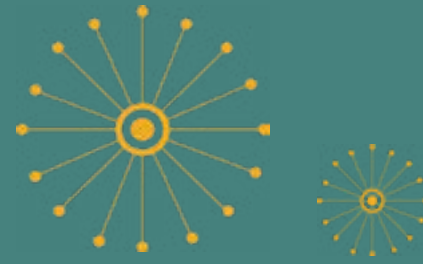




ELEANOR MATHEWS & PATRICK BOURKE

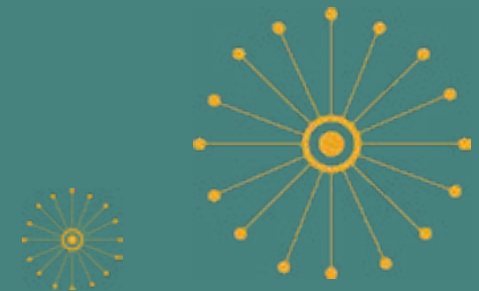


Each year **five special awards** are given, named for past faculty members who made extraordinary contributions to the arts and literature on campus and to *Patterns* in particular.



The Patrick Bourke and Eleanor Mathews Awards are awards of distinction that recognize students who have done exceptional work overall in art and literature.

The Blanche Redman, Richard Colwell and Kathleen Nickerson Awards are given for the highest quality submissions for each year in poetry, fiction and essay writing, respectively.





ELEANOR MATHEWS AWARD



Payton Wiley

For nearly forty years, *Patterns* has presented the Eleanor Mathews Award for “outstanding creativity, technical skill, and individual style,” which rewards student writers for overall achievement in creative writing. Traditionally, the Mathews Award has recognized a deserving student whose work has appeared in *Patterns* in multiple genres and/or over a number of years. This year Payton Wiley has earned the award for her outstanding work in fiction and poetry published in the 65th edition. Her story “To Bigfork” and her two poems “Lighthouse” and “Somewhere in a Van Gogh Painting” demonstrate her range as a writer from contemplative poems to an action-packed tragedy on the road. Her work in this year’s edition demonstrates a commitment to the process of creating art as well as dedication to the necessary fine-tuning of her literary works so that they resonate with the audience. Take a moment to read through her work and see why she was chosen for this prize.



PATRICK BOURKE AWARD



Ashley Cleland

The Patrick Bourke Award honors an art or design student who has made a commitment to pursue an advanced degree in one of the visual arts disciplines and has been an advocate and emissary for art at St. Clair County Community College. We are pleased to announce Ashley Cleland as this year’s Patrick Bourke Award recipient.

Ashley, a prospective graduate of St. Clair County Community College’s Graphic Design program, is an obvious choice for this award due to her exceptional artistic talent, ability to inspire others, and outstanding academic achievements. Her unique art style, characterized by humor, energy, and vibrant colors, perfectly aligns with her playful personality. Ashley’s meticulous attention to detail and innate understanding of people enables her to create artwork that resonates with diverse audiences. In addition to her impressive artistic abilities, Ashley’s remarkable interpersonal skills, approachability, and natural leadership abilities have earned her respect from peers and faculty members. We extend our warmest congratulations to Ashley for winning this highly competitive award in the field of arts.



POETRY
SELECTIONS



BLANCHE REDMAN AWARD

Depression Exits

Karen Crorey

There's stillness from the solid blow
That replaces the caterwauling.
Purple, positive fragrance floats,
As a pot of lavender simmers.

I look inward for peace.
Prayers, reflection, meditation,
Yoga, and a house tiger
Like arrows being launched
At the formidable foe.

A feline creeps and extends
Through the shadows
Tail aft as a hero's cape.
The expert ready
To mouse out the doldrums.

Wounded wrinkles of the mind
Are pressed and purred out.
Furry, striped, kneading knight
Alternates paws to pause

The brain's battle.
Peace washes over,
The duo relaxes.
Energy renews

Melancholy departs.



SELECTION OF MERIT

Smoke and Light Study
Evelyn Scarbrough

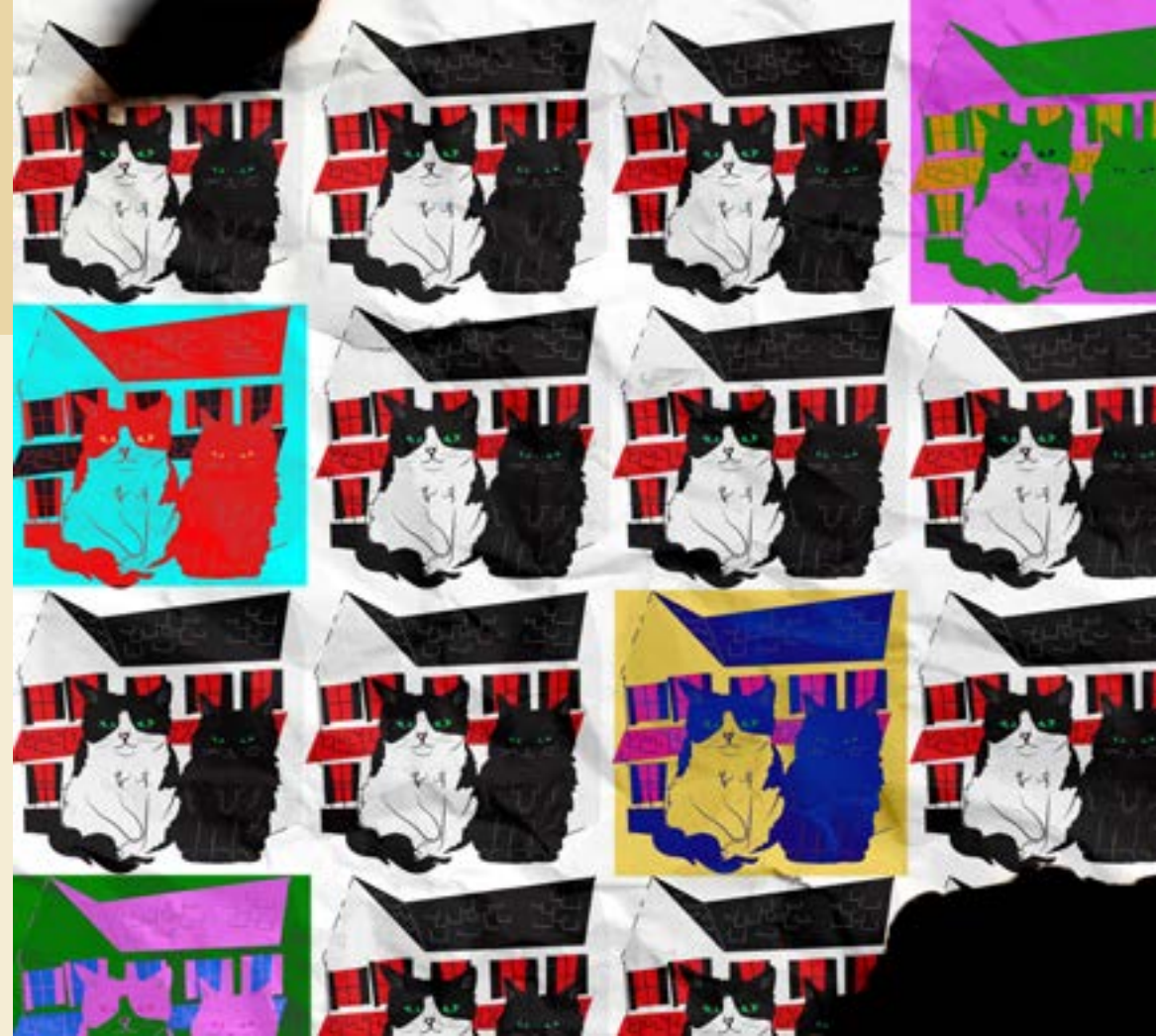
2nd PLACE



Home

Daisi Dixon

Home.
I might find it one day,
Might paint the words in my mind
in fond calligraphy,
ogling at the sweet dips and rush of feathered ink,
finding the beauty suitable and expressive
of my own inner thoughts and feelings.
Perhaps I will settle,
find comfort in the stability of four familiar walls
and a street I deem special.
Or perhaps my home will be lost in the sound of roaring waves,
warm starry nights that bleed into days,
birds chirping at sunset, sunrise.
The crumple and crash of rocks falling
as my feet kick—track—hike
under a pink-purple-orange painted sky.
The delicate touch of a lover at night.
The brush of their finger as they wipe tears from my eyes.
The rising suns, painted vigor.
The vibrant moons, an airbrushed picture.
The miles I've conquered, enjoyed
more than literature,
more than anything I could ever know.
That is more than a home. That is more than a home.
A life of memories without regimen.
That is more than my home.



SELECTION OF MERIT

Home

Isabella Perry

Car-Ride to Church

Maggie Whitehouse

I sit in the passenger seat
Head on the window, headphones in
Mind wandering far beyond the —
Constraints of the car

I imagine our destination
All forests and dirt floors
A teepee in the distance
It welcomes the cold air in

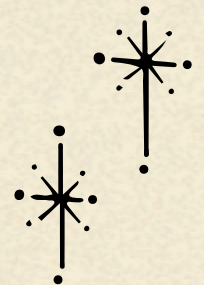
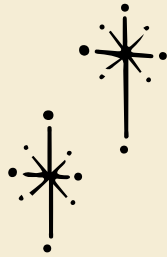
The sun will set and the music begins
The taste of tea will sit bitter on my tongue
My ears will hear the rattling of shakers
My chest, the thrumming of the drum

Songs will be sung by the elders of old
Of the sacred spirits this place holds
So then, how could a devil like me
Walk so easily through the door?

The medicine stings me
The ritual tearing at my soul
You cannot exorcise what possesses me
I'll never be made whole

I'll bleed out by morning
Left to my own devices, forlorn
I've changed into something ugly
My corpse found rotted to the forest floor

The car curtseys to a pothole
My skull kisses the window
Death would be a kinder mistress
Than living 'til tomorrow morn



SELECTION OF

MERIT

Deep Blue
Morgan McConnell

The fear of water brings a sense of sinking and crushing.
The weight of crashing waves are more powerful than most believe.
My deepest fear is being dragged beyond the light
Into the deep blue.
Beyond the horizon and the unknown, where man's light doesn't touch.
Pitch black and cold.
Unfamiliar creatures lurking about, with unknown depths below.
Strong currents that drag you with unforgiving movements
Unable to reach above the water to gasp for air.
The more you fight the more you lose as the deep blue pulls you in further.
Coldness wrapping around your body, frozen in place with no fight left.
Hungry beings swimming with ease, sneaking up beside you.
With less and less light, there's no room for hope.
Fear sets in but you continue to go numb with no way out
Of the deep blue, you have now become a part of it.



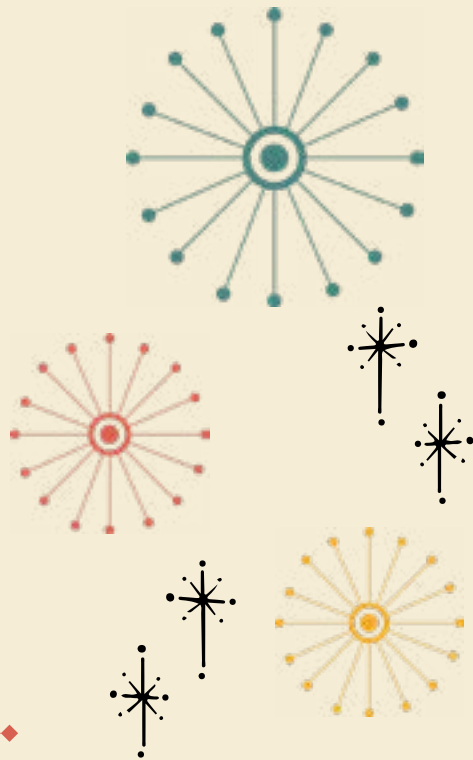
SELECTION OF MERIT
Lucid Dream of Sunrise
Henry Charron

SELECTION OF

MERIT

Somewhere in a Van Gogh Painting
Payton Wiley

Hoary blues bleed
Into the remanent of
Unremembered lilac
That bear
Textured sky.
It
Darkens the tor's silhouette.
As daytime
Is slowly forgotten.
The snowcapped mountains
Stand
Barring the path
For the man and his dog.
Trudging through
Thickets of wet, olive grasses
Enveloped in seas of frost
That prolong their travels
Just a little
More.



SELECTION OF MERIT

Lady Snaggles
Ashley Cleland



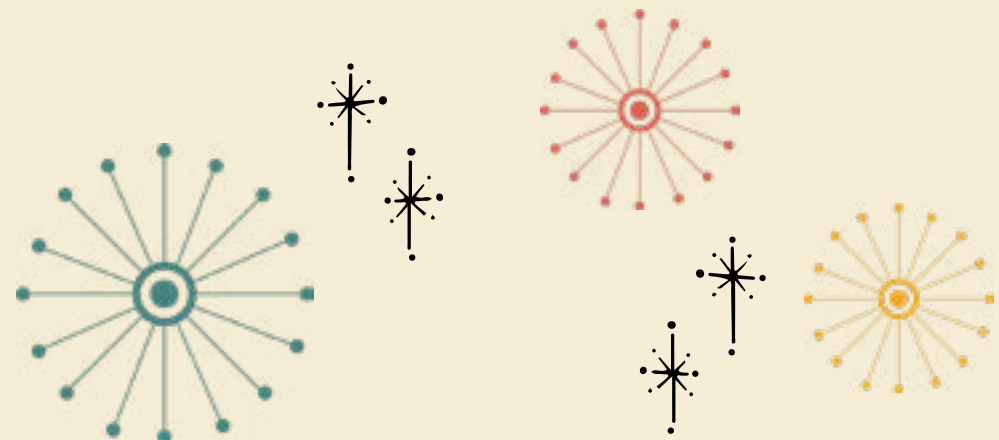
SELECTION OF MERIT
Mushroom Buck Lamp
Cass Gordon

SELECTION OF

MERIT

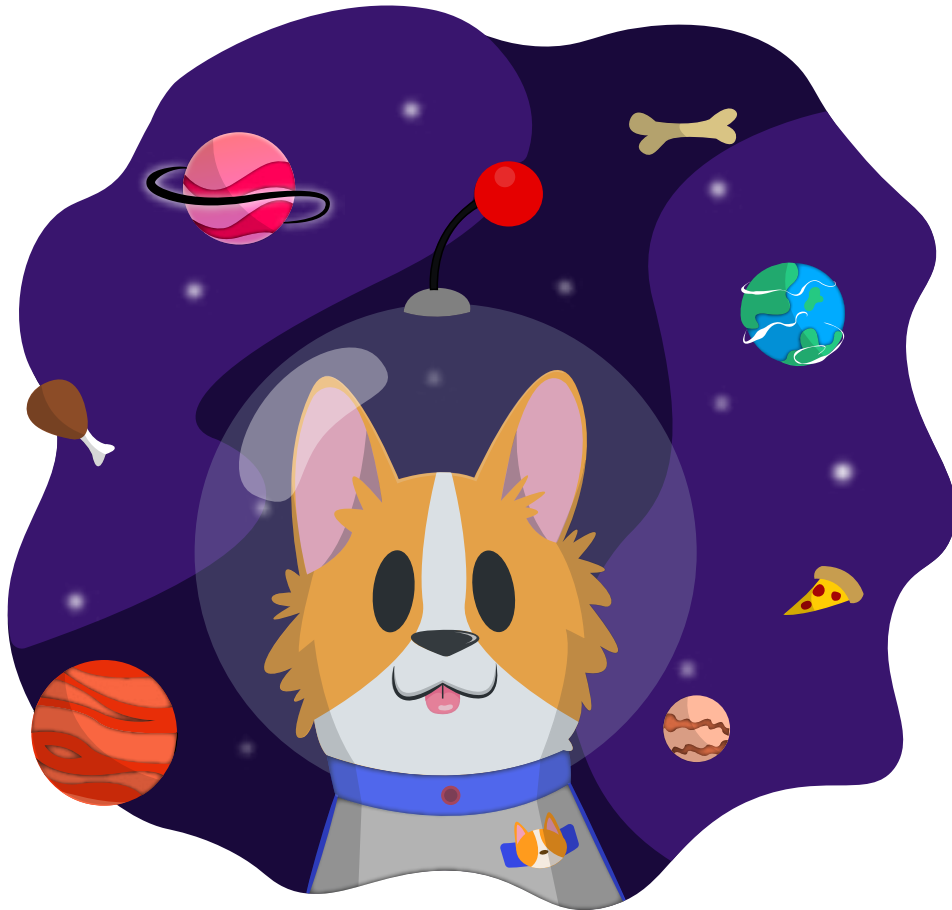
Severed
Riley Petit

An observer in the distance.
My body may pursue,
But my soul does not follow.
From afar I lie in anguish,
For our realities are not shared.
My conscious stuck in a separate dimension,
Dark as oceans deepest trench.
Here there is no solace,
The mirrors, deceivers who speak lies,
My reflection, a shadow not my own.
In this sorrow brimmed gorge I sit idle.
A viewer drowns alone in the dark,
Grasping for a hand to pull me out,
Yet my body stands tranquil beneath the sun.
It does not mourn me,
Damned to be left crying out forever,
From my skin I am severed.



SELECTION OF

MERIT



Corgi in Space
Paige Burgos

SELECTION OF MERIT



Losing the Stars' Race

Sarah Coulter

I don't meteor or crater
I fall slowly to the ground
Once I find my feet to concrete
I see Opportunity
I surrendered to the comets



SELECTION OF MERIT

My Bathroom Nicole Marabate

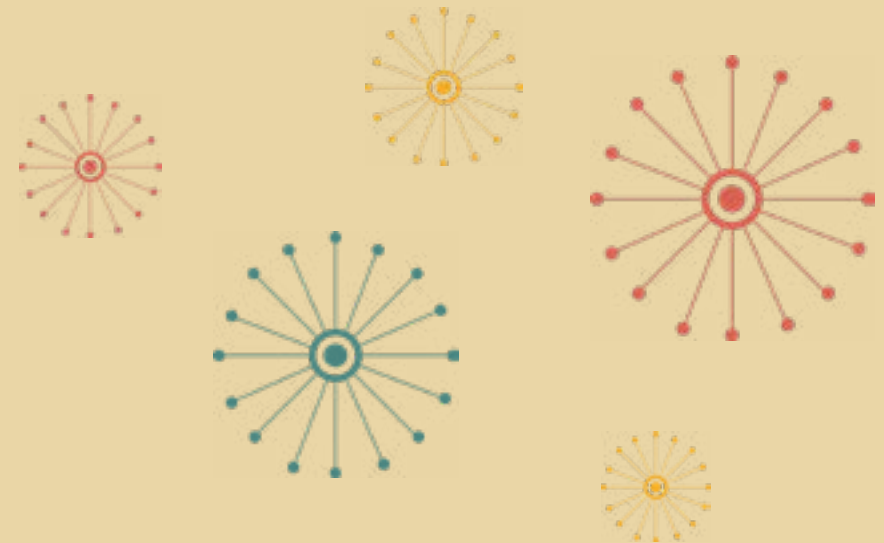
My heavy hands force open the solid oak
I flip a switch
The beaming glass orb flickers
My eyes water
It's like the sun is in my bathroom
My eyes adjust
I approach myself
Then use my fingers to rake through
My autumn-colored locks
As my hand falls
I reach for my toothbrush
The rhythmic swish of bristles
Remind me of a maraca
I reach for a ribbed knob
As it clicks and spins
The sound of melodious keys
Fill the room
I turn and adjust a metal handle
Water begins to spill from the faucet
A well-worn garment drops from my body
Onto the floor
I submerge myself
Then I soak away my worries
I rise like the moon
And run a coarse towel over my skin
I let a soft cloth drape over my shoulders
Then I tie its knot
In my hand sits an intricately decorated glass
A few spritz kiss me with fragrance
The sunny orb is extinguished
My pruned hands push the door with ease

SELECTION OF

MERIT

Fish At The Overpass Lilly Rodriguez

We spent many nights watching cars on the interstate, laughing as they honked at the children waving from above. If we had taken a second to realize that each passing car was truly a person, we would've understood how small we were. Instead, we let our town become a fishbowl and only grew as big as it would let us. Big fish, little pond was the saying we'd always hear, but I swore that back then the pond was an ocean. Fish can't drown, but they'll suffocate if you let them.



Pressure

Katrina Mausolf

Seventeen now.
Moments away from eighteen,
Feeling like Atlas with the weight of the world on his shoulders.
One slip up and I'll lose it all.
The wreckage of my life, abandoned on the floor.
My knees creak under the pressure.
My arms quake,
failure waits at every corner,
and dares me to let it fall.
I feel almost like Sisyphus,
pushing my own boulder uphill for eternity.
So close to the top.
Sore muscles forgotten,
euphoria erupting on my skin.
Steps away from the top of the hill,
only for the boulder to roll back down again.
Burning muscles and anguish stain my body
Weariness sets in as I return to my task,
close but never close enough.
My body and mind scream in pain,
begging for a break,
just a moment, but it never comes.
Forcing that boulder back up the hill,
muscles, bloody fingers, and bones
that threaten to snap under the pressure.
Thoughts intrude and tell me to burn it all down,
to dance in the fire, and scream into the void.
Scream until my voice is raw and broken,
until my lungs give out.
The warmth of the flames invites me in,
caressing my aching body.

SELECTION OF

MERIT

Like a lover, it skims my skin and blisters erupt,
and then chars my lungs black
But I cannot.
I cannot be like Icarus.
The warmth and ecstasy of freedom will remain a mystery to me.
I have my own 12 labors, so that I may atone for my crimes.
My crime wasn't murder.
I had simply matured,
blossomed into a young woman.
Aged out of tea parties and dress up.
Now faced with labyrinthian standards.
Set by my own accord,
sculpted from my own self destructive tendencies.
Designed as the perfect puppet,
fit to fill any role left.
Determined to be of use.
More so than ever as the clock ticks closer to my graduation.
Time moves on and deceives us.
Fourteen weeks till high school is over.
Thirteen, twelve, eleven,
each week closes in around me,
panic elicited from the passage of time.
Still some time to do something important,
to fill my final role of high school.
The last graduate of the family.
A space on the wall left empty,
a cap and gown hastily hung on a hook.
Clean and pressed, ready to be worn.
March 21st, 2023
A date that hangs over my head,
like a hang man's noose

SELECTION OF

MERIT

Lighthouse Payton Wiley

Ocean navigator
Who observes the moody waves
That barrel toward
Watercraft coasters
From the stone bridge's precipice
Skyscraping lighthouse,
Resilient beacon in the storm.
The sun
Is shamed with its bulb
Seaside markers with beams of Light
Guiding sailors
To asylum
A blink,
And the storm absconded.
Calm waters
Replace violence
With crystal mirrored surfaces
That display the clear sky.



SELECTION OF MERIT

Wet Hare Day
Katerina Lindsay

SELECTION OF

MERIT

Spirits Amanda Hurst

I am like a polluted river.
Flowing until my water has been dammed,
Then I pool.
Anguish drowns me,
Pulls me under the surface tension with no escape.
Instead, I take charge and drown myself.
One full liter to numb the thoughts,
Swallowing the weight that I bear.
Reeds pull me deeper,
Insurmountable.
What will it be tonight?
Usual concoctions mixed and stirred.
Thoughts escape the dam and splinter,
Like crystals they shatter.
No place is real.
A drunk man's actions,
A sorry man's woes.
Not sorry for quenching my thirst,
Spirits of an ethereal mask.
Currents guide me back,
The liter swallows me whole.
I am the polluted river.



SELECTION OF MERIT

Flamboyant
Glow-in-the-Dark
Dragon
Cass Gordon



ESSAY
SELECTIONS



KATHLEEN NICKERSON AWARD

Rise of the New Woman: An Analysis of Historical Context in "The Yellow Wallpaper"

Tony Cole

It is all too common to look back on history through the distorted colors of rose-tinted lenses. As an example, the Victorian Era is often remembered as a time of great political change and societal reform, spurred on by the power of the Industrial Revolution and a myriad of scientific and technological advancements. Something that often gets buried in the mix of those great progressive steps forward is the people that progress and society tried so hard to leave behind. The rights of women in the Victorian Era were slim to none, and though this age of progress would inspire many women to take these new values and use them to change their status in the world, it was not met with the same enthusiasm as advancements like the telephone or the steam engine: it was one part of Victorian society that people seemed reluctant to change and resisted terribly. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" highlights the oppression of women during the Victorian Era, serving as a societal whistle-blower on the misbalance of power within marriage and the cruelest methods used to suppress the voices of creative, ambitious women of the time.

It is important to understand that in the Victorian Era of 1837 – 1901, gender roles in society were grounded in centuries of unmoving traditionalism and strictly enforced. The notion that "Wives stayed home and cared for the children while husbands

worked and made money" (Zeidanin 1416) was the broad stroke that tends to be associated with the status quo of the time. The reality is not quite so idealized. In actuality under the laws of coverture, while an unmarried woman retained her rights to property and make contracts in her own name, a married woman was immediately restrained by a form of legal non-existence. Her property was legally surrendered to her husband, down to her very children, and her rights to enter into contracts or business arrangements under her own name simply evaporated. This in no small way "severely limited married women's ability to engage in formal business ventures, collect rents, administer estates, and manage bequests through wills" and "symbolized the subordinate status of women in the wake of the Revolution" by forming the legal notion that once a woman entered into marriage, they no longer existed as an individual: only as an extension of that union (Lemke 294, 292).

Once this status as a second-class citizen in the eyes of the law is recognized, the dynamic of power within the Victorian marriage can be fully understood and realized within that of "The Yellow Wallpaper." The narrator's husband John expresses his power over her through his use of belittling and child-like pet names and phrases to set himself above her as a dominant father figure. The use of "blessed little goose" (Gilman 8) may appear as a harmless nickname, but when combined with appellations like "little girl" (Gilman 12) and moments like "'Bless her little heart!' said he with a big hug, 'she shall be as sick as she pleases!'" (Gilman 12) take on a more demeaning nature. Constant repetition and variations upon the narrator being small or little are an expression of how she is viewed in the relationship, child-like and naïve, completely under the protection of her big and strong competent husband.

While not a word-for-word true-to-life telling, "The Yellow Wallpaper" is at least semi-autobiographical in the manner in which it calls upon Gilman's own personal experiences with health crisis and recognition of her subordinate place in marriage. Over the course of her life, especially around the time of her pregnancy, "Charlotte was variously diagnosed and treated for mental distress"

(Horowitz 117), ultimately leading to her care falling into the hands of renown neurologist Dr Silas Weir Mitchell. Weir Mitchell had worked with soldiers in the American Civil War and was particularly interested in the treatment of hysteria, a condition he claimed to recognize in a number of women he treated. He developed what became known as the "rest cure," involving "removing the patient from their environment" (Pearce 381) and placing them on a strict regimen of enforced bed rest, "electrical stimulation, and a nutritious diet" (Pearce 381). Modern views on the treatment are less forgiving, describing it as "a reversion to infancy" (Horowitz 127) an extension of "Mitchell's deeply traditional approach to women" (Horowitz 127, 128). His methods have also been called into question; in one instance while treating a deathly ill woman, Mitchell remarked, "She will be out of the door in two minutes; I set her sheets on fire. A case of hysteria..." (Pearce 381).

This "rest cure" then becomes less of a treatment and more an enforcement of traditional gender roles in Victorian society. It appears the viewpoint of Weir Mitchell that creativity and ambition in women are little more than symptoms of hysteria, and the only cure is a strict return to their proper place in the home. Gilman makes her feelings about the treatment and the man behind it clear in "The Yellow Wallpaper". "John says if I don't pick up faster he shall send me to Weir Mitchell in the fall" (Gilman 10). This line stands isolated in the text, evoking a clear sense of dread. Weir Mitchell is used here as a threat to the narrator more than an offer of help. Either she gets better or she'll lose even more power in her life by remittance to a sanitarium.

In this way, "The Yellow Wallpaper" strikes back at the antiquated ideals of the Nineteenth Century toward women, as "expected to live a life that has no purpose other than to please her husband" (Zeidanin 1417). The wallpaper itself, this absurdly patterned and hideously colored tormentor of the narrator, stands to represent the very patriarchal society in which women of the Nineteenth Century find themselves: trapped behind oppressive "sprawling flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin" (Gilman 7). It is poignant that immediately after the reader is introduced to the wallpaper, the narrator is forced to stop writing



SELECTION OF MERIT

Wet Hair, Blank Eyes

Alina Poplawski

because John is coming and “he hates to have me write a word” (Gilman 7). As the narrator is being oppressed by the sickly and ridiculous patterns of society, so too is she oppressed by the dominance of her husband. She is kept from doing the things that invigorate her life beyond mere existence in the service of another.

Beyond the patterning of the wallpaper, the narrator sees a “strange, provoking, formless sort of figure, that seems to skulk about behind that silly and conspicuous front design” (Gilman 10). Taking the wallpaper to represent the patriarchal society of the Nineteenth Century, this creeping and crawling apparition imprisoned behind its pattern becomes the women the system entraps, at first an unknowable form but ultimately recognized by the narrator as herself. Here, Gilman is presenting us with the very process of realization she must have gone through while enduring the treatments of Weir Mitchell, at first seeing the oppression manifesting before finally realizing it was herself who was imprisoned within society and within her marriage.

Gilman’s imprisonment by the so-called “rest cure” came in the form of Weir Mitchell’s suggestion upon her return home in 1887. “Live as domestic a life as possible. Have your child with you all the time. Lie down an hour after each meal” (Horowitz 140). Unseemingly suggestions perhaps but he also went on to add, “Have but two hours intellectual life a day. Never touch pen, brush or pencil again as long as you live” (Horowitz 140). This deprivation of creativity and expression is reflected in the circumstances of the narrator, an experience which Gilman would describe as bringing her “to the edge of insanity” (Horowitz 140).

“The Yellow Wallpaper” on its surface looks to do nothing more than tell the story of an unwell woman slowly going insane, but like the eponymous wallpaper itself, something far more sinister is going on just under the pattern. “Gilman uses the conventions of gothic fiction to attack women’s situation within the institution of marriage” (Zeidanin 1417). The narrator stands symbolic of all ambitious married women in her time, devoid of voice and of control in their own lives. The patriarchal system woven into the inane patterns of the wallpaper becomes the bars behind which

these women are imprisoned, held down by a society so ready to embrace the change and advancements of the times in every field but this one. Ready to hear voices carried by radio waves but not ready to hear those of women on matters of politics.

Gilman herself was able to escape her prison through divorce, a declaration of “Dr. Mitchell be-----!” (Horowitz 146) and a total devotion to her life in service of her feminist agenda. This act of self-liberation is subsequently reflected in that of the narrator tearing down the oppressive wallpaper and freeing herself to creep and crawl about the room, declaring “I’ve got out at last,” (Gilman 17) to the shocked faint of her husband. The message is plain to see, a call to action to ambitious women everywhere: if they want to be free, they must tear down the system that imprisons them.

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Zoe Palmateer 9/7/22

SELECTION OF MERIT

Under the Moonlight

Zoe Palmateer

2nd PLACE

"My Friends Are My Power!": *Kingdom Hearts* and the Importance of Connection

Kathryn Manhart

Kingdom Hearts is a video game series that recently had its 20th anniversary. It all began back in 2002, on the Playstation 2, with a boy called Sora. But before people really got to know Sora, two companies came together in a special partnership. These two companies were actually Disney and Square Enix (then known as Square), one from the United States of America, the other from Japan.

Kingdom Hearts was initially defined by its unique combination of American and Japanese culture, but over time it has built up a structure of complex characters and ideas that come further than a coalescence of two cultures. The use of characters from a Japanese company alongside characters from an American one within the universe of the very first game drew in people from both countries. No one had ever seen a game featuring Donald Duck alongside characters from Square's popular *Final Fantasy* video game series before. On the surface, *Kingdom Hearts* was simply a unique, transcultural wonder. But the overall structure of *Kingdom Hearts* focuses on human connection, rather than simply defining itself as a transcultural phenomenon; this can be seen primarily in the use of Disney and *Final Fantasy* characters, but also in the concepts, story, and characters present in the games. *Kingdom Hearts* is a story of connections. The protagonist, Sora, shows us the strength of friendship and our connections with the ones we love. The Nobodies tell us what it means to be human, and whether a lost heart can be regained through connections with others. Finally, the depiction of people and worlds tells us something much more meaningful about our own world – we are all people with

hearts, and we share a connection stronger than the boundaries of the worlds that separate us. Through its complex depiction of friendship, sacrifices, humanity, and worlds, *Kingdom Hearts* does not only succeed in surpassing transculturality. It shows us the sheer importance of connection – connection with ourselves, and with others.

Kingdom Hearts Condensed

Before taking the deep dive into *Kingdom Hearts*, it is important to note that it is an action-based JRPG¹ video game series in which the player controls a character and fights monsters. A product of American company Disney and Japanese company Square Enix, *Kingdom Hearts* was and still is directed by Square employee Tetsuya Nomura, who assumed complete control over the characters and the development of the story from the very first game. To return to the series' focus on connection, we must first take a look at the in-game story so that, in the end, we can focus on particular characters and scenarios and why they are important to the central theme of connection without confusion. I will simply summarize the three main entries (although *Kingdom Hearts* is made up of over a dozen games):

- *Kingdom Hearts* (2002): A boy called Sora lives on a set of islands with his best friends Kairi and Riku. They dream of adventuring to the outside world, but one night monsters suddenly appear and the friends are thrown to other universes. Sora obtains a weapon resembling a giant key – the Keyblade. He meets Disney favorites Donald Duck and Goofy and travels with them to other worlds, searching for their respective friends. In the end they defeat a villain called Ansem, but lose track of their friends.

- *Kingdom Hearts II* (2005): Sora, Donald and Goofy fervently continue the search for their friends and are pitted against a group called Organization XIII, a collection of misguided people. They defeat Organization XIII and finally reunite with their friends.

¹ A JRPG is a Japanese role-playing game. Role-playing games feature the player taking on a certain role within a game. Role-playing games can be virtual or otherwise; a virtual one could be a video game while a non-virtual one could be, for example, a card game.

- *Kingdom Hearts III* (2019): Sora and his friends prepare for a battle against series villain Xehanort and a new Organization XIII. In the end they emerge triumphant, but Sora disappears from the world.

The Transculturality of Kingdom Hearts

Kingdom Hearts is seen as a random mix of Japanese and American culture by many fans of the series, and many of them love it for that quality. The games are the product of a Japanese company and an American one, and this initially defined the series. In the end it became something more, but it is still important to look at the elements gained from each culture.

Many people have come to see *Kingdom Hearts* as a mash-up of *Final Fantasy* characters and Disney characters, as *Final Fantasy* characters were used in many of the early *Kingdom Hearts* games and came to be an expected feature in following games. As Disney is an American company and *Final Fantasy* is a JRPG video game series created by the Japanese company Square Enix, people told only that *Kingdom Hearts* is a mix of Disney and *Final Fantasy* would come to the conclusion that it is simply a combination (perhaps a weird one) of American and Japanese culture. But while *Kingdom Hearts* has both Disney and *Final Fantasy* characters, this feature does not define *Kingdom Hearts* – at all. Disney characters have come to play an important role in the series (though not as important as the original characters), but the use of *Final Fantasy* characters was simply the solution to an early problem. Director Tetsuya Nomura explains this in a 2022 interview with Game Informer: “When we released the first title, we had only a few original *Kingdom Hearts* characters. When they were interacting with really well-known, beloved Disney characters, I felt nobody really knew these new characters, so it was harder for them to stand their ground just yet. And so, we had a lot of *Final Fantasy* characters involved to lend a hand for everyone to get to know these [original *Kingdom Hearts*] characters better. Now, there are so many original characters from *Kingdom Hearts* that are so well-loved, and people want to see more of those characters” (Alteration in original). Nomura said this in response to fans of the series disappointed with the release of *Kingdom Hearts III* in 2019. The

game did not have a single *Final Fantasy* character in it. After all, *Final Fantasy* was never really a core part of *Kingdom Hearts*.

On the other hand, the Disney characters are important, and the original characters like Sora – even more so. However, *Kingdom Hearts* is still not defined by the combination of American culture (Disney) and Japanese culture (Square). However, although *Kingdom Hearts* is not to be understood solely as a combination of American and Japanese culture, both contribute important, foundational structure to the games. One particular concept actually relates to and expands the series' theme of connection through the use of Disney characters and “worlds.”

Throughout the games, the protagonist Sora travels to various worlds modeled after Disney films; these worlds are populated with familiar Disney characters. Anh-Thu Nguyen writes, “Sora is akin to a tourist in the *Kingdom Hearts* universe, as he keeps marvelling at the new worlds he encounters...” She writes that he is basically visiting a theme park, “specifically” a Disney theme park (Nguyen, 2019). As both people in Japan and the U.S. take trips to Disney theme parks, this can be a familiar feeling to audiences on both sides of the globe. I have seen in the games that Sora is often happy and interacts with the Disney characters as if he is one of them when visiting the Disney worlds, as a child might at a Disney park. But when Sora travels to worlds original to *Kingdom Hearts*, he becomes much more serious. This can be seen as returning to everyday life after a visit to a theme park. But even in Disney worlds, Sora sometimes encounters people and pieces from worlds original to *Kingdom Hearts* and trades in his Disney demeanor for a more practical mindset, which can be seen as dealing with serious personal issues while in a Disney park. So even when Sora is seemingly not acting the part of tourist, he is simply dealing with life, which all tourists must do at some point. Here you can see a tenuous link between two completely different worlds – a vague connection between our happy fantasies and our serious realities. We see, through Sora, that every world we visit becomes a part of us, a piece of our heart. When Sora is in trouble and overwhelmed by his reality, he remembers his happy visits to these “theme parks” and the bond he shares with the people who live there. We see a connection between worlds. All of this partly defines



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Brooke McIntyre

Kingdom Hearts and its central theme of connection, and it wouldn't be the case without the use of Disney characters and worlds.

Disney also seems to lend *Kingdom Hearts* the ideals of following your dreams, of strong friendships, and of never giving up. But another way to consider this is through the *shōnen* character. *Shōnen* stories are commonly seen in Japanese manga comics. *Shōnen* manga is typically aimed at young and adolescent boys, featuring a male protagonist of a similar age, though *shōnen* manga is read by boys and girls, and by people of all ages. *Shōnen* stories usually focus on action, featuring a protagonist with spiky hair. The protagonist in *Kingdom Hearts*, Sora, can be seen as a *shōnen* character. He is a young teenage boy with spiky hair who goes on action-filled adventures. But according to Rachael Hutchinson, “*shōnen* JRPG narratives tend to favour tales of winning, friendship, and perseverance, the three pillars of manga storytelling in *Weekly Shōnen Jump*”² (Hutchinson, 2022)³. Since *Kingdom Hearts* is a JRPG series that prominently features “tales of winning, friendship, and perseverance,” the aforementioned qualities presumed to be inherited from Disney could also be seen as inherited from the shonen manga genre. Perhaps they came from our universal humanity?

Interestingly, our protagonist Sora exhibits visual traits from both the shonen genre and from Disney. Designed by director Tetsuya Nomura, Sora wears clothes that echo the color scheme of Mickey Mouse. He wears similar big red shorts, giant yellow shoes, and white gloves; he also takes on cartoonish proportions. But at the same time he exhibits the spiky shonen hair, and his outfit is detailed with zippers and buckles often used in character designs by Tetsuya Nomura, whose other characters often have shonen characteristics. This is a stunning blend of two cultures in an appropriate situation.

Kingdom Hearts seems to be defined by these transcultural elements. But behind this elegant mask is something far more intriguing.

³Hutchinson cites (Schodt, 1996, pp 89-90).

²Weekly Shōnen Jump is a popular shōnen manga magazine (one of the most popular manga magazines in general.)

Sora: One for All and All for One

Kingdom Hearts all revolves around one central point – Sora, the protagonist and playable character in the majority of the games. The series follows his adventures, and after twenty years, a vivid picture has been painted. The word sora actually means “sky” in Japanese, and this fits the character perfectly. The sky's the limit for him – and, like the sky, he is connected to everyone and everything. However, his most important connection is with his friends.

Sora's journey began with the very first *Kingdom Hearts*. He was introduced as an optimistic, carefree 14-year-old boy. In her analytical book on the themes of *Kingdom Hearts II*, Alexa Ray Corriea compares Sora to his friend Riku, an older boy who fights with a darkness within himself. She comes to the conclusion that Sora always has a pure heart and is a simple, sometimes boring character. On the other hand, she finds that Riku is a more complex character who thinks lowly of himself and his previous bad actions before deciding to use his pain as a power to walk a road between his good and bad sides (Corriea, 2017). However, she seems to dismiss Sora too easily. Yes, Sora may almost always choose to do what is best for the people around him. But just because he doesn't overcome self-deprecating thoughts using both the good and the bad within him doesn't mean he is less “interesting.” While Riku would be an interesting and complex character to analyze, I will focus primarily on Sora here, as he is the protagonist.

Sora cares for his friends more than anything else – including himself. Sora spends the first three games in the franchise searching for his friends. He doesn't ever really think about what he wants to do for himself – he only thinks of seeing his friends again. Wherever he goes, he asks the new people he meets if they have seen his friends, and if they haven't, he looks under every rock for them until he meets the next new person. Sora has four important friends in the games. He spends an incredible amount of time searching for his two childhood friends Riku and Kairi, and he constantly laments over being away from them and unable to find them. Donald Duck and Goofy are his constant companions, helping him search for Riku and Kairi. They come to understand Sora through his firm mindset as exactly what he is – a person who only cares about his friends.

However, there is a scene in the first *Kingdom Hearts* where Donald, Goofy, and Riku leave Sora – additionally, Kairi is in a coma. What did such a relationship-driven person do in this situation? First he fell to his knees and cried about it, but after seeing another character go against the odds to save their friend, Sora got back up and confronted Riku. Riku had taken away Sora’s weapon (the Keyblade), but Sora said he had a better weapon – his heart. He went on to say that he was strong because of his connections with his friends, ending with the words: “My friends are my power!” Sora uses this power throughout the games, but losing it results in catastrophe. For example, in *Kingdom Hearts III*, several of Sora’s friends die and he once again falls to his knees. He cries out to Riku, the only other survivor, that he is “worthless” without his friends. Although he was still physically able to defeat the monsters that killed his friends, he was unable to fight without the strength of his heart, and he died moments later. This shows us just how important our “hearts” and connections with other people are. Even when physically able to accomplish anything, when we have nothing and no one to motivate us, when we have no connection left – we cannot succeed in anything.

Sora sacrifices his time searching for his friends, but he also makes even greater sacrifices. He makes all of these sacrifices because of his connections with the people important to him. When they are in danger, he doesn’t think twice – he gives up whatever he has to. Connection can drive people to do anything, and in Sora’s case, it drives him to sacrifice everything.

Sora makes his first great sacrifice in the first *Kingdom Hearts*, shortly after claiming “My friends are my power!” Sora finds Kairi in a coma. He learns that the only way to save her is to plunge a Keyblade of darkness into his own heart (the heart being a manifestation of one’s spirit, one’s light and darkness). He does this with almost no hesitation, freeing Kairi’s heart which had somehow ended up inside him. Kairi wakes up when her heart returns to her, but Sora loses his own heart and completely disappears. This was one of Sora’s most important sacrifices.

Sora’s other enormous sacrifice is made in *Kingdom Hearts III*. Sora’s friends all die, but he uses a special power known as the “power of waking” to resurrect all of them, breaking the rules of

the universe. And of course, using such great power came with a tremendous price. Currently the price is not fully understood, as *Kingdom Hearts III* and subsequent entries have not explained it in its entirety. What is known is that at the end of *Kingdom Hearts III*, Sora disappeared from the world he knew and went to an “afterworld” (explained briefly in the recent *Kingdom Hearts IV* trailer). Sora made this sacrifice for his friends, completely forgetting about his own needs.

Throughout the entire *Kingdom Hearts* series, Sora has made sacrifice after sacrifice; he has done and given up everything for the good of everyone else. From sacrificing his heart to save Kairi, to endlessly searching for his friends, to helping every well-meaning person in every Disney world, to finally sacrificing his very self for the lives of his friends, Sora has given everything away to others, keeping none for himself. Corriea begins her book on *Kingdom Hearts II* with asking what it really means to be good. Is being good giving everything for everyone else? Is it too hard to truly be good? Is it worth being good? Is being good different things to different people? What about when you give up too much of yourself and it starts to harm you? This is a perfect introduction for a book about *Kingdom Hearts*. Being good comes to define all of the characters; every character has their own view on light and darkness and what’s right and what’s wrong. Organization XIII does what they think is right, even when to others it is blatantly wrong (to be discussed momentarily). At times it just seems too hard for Riku to be good; it means admitting he was wrong and starting over. Perhaps Sora sometimes questions if being good is worth it, as it seems that every time he does a good deed, he is forced to do another, and another, and another until he has nothing left. In the end, it hurts him. It even sometimes takes away his ability to do any more good deeds. Will he always have the strength, the good will to keep being good?

John Rawls looks at a similar idea in *A Theory of Justice*. He proposes two principles of justice; the first applies perfectly to the situation: “First: each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with a similar liberty for others.” This means that any person has basic rights (such as the right to live) and the right to do whatever they want as long as those rights



SELECTION OF MERIT

Freshwater Triad

Anna Rieck

don't override another person's basic rights and right to do what they want. In a way, Sora gives everyone else access to their inherent rights to life, happiness, freedom, and peace by helping people and sacrificing things for their good. But this clashes with Sora's basic rights and liberties, as he loses his heart, he loses his time, his own happiness, and in the end his very life.

This is an example of any "hero": A person who gives all for others, a "one for all." But because Sora made friends with all of the people he sacrificed for, they started to support him as well, creating a reciprocal relationship. Sora's many friends are always ready to return the favor. After Sora disappeared at the end of *Kingdom Hearts III*, several of his friends spent an entire year searching for him, sacrificing their time for his. Sora gives for everyone, and everyone gives for him – creating a "one for all and all for one" situation. That's the thing about connection – it's not confined to one person. So when one person is connected to another, both people share that connection. And if one person sacrifices for another, possibly damaging the connection (as Sora did when he disappeared), the second person will sacrifice anything to restore connection and see their friend again.

Even beyond death, connections are the key to Sora. His name means "sky," and like the sky, he is connected to everyone. He can only fight with the power of his friends, and he will only return once they succeed in saving him. And once he returns, it is inevitable that he will make bigger and greater sacrifices – but perhaps, one day, he will learn that enough is enough. Being good is giving to others. But we are only human, and we can only give so much before losing both ourselves and our connections.

Nobodies: What it Means to be Human

What does it mean to be human? Conversely, what does it mean to lose one's humanity? *Kingdom Hearts* takes a good look at this, but does not offer the most straightforward route. Deeper meanings are hidden beneath a misleading muddle of video game lore, but once truly seen and understood, these meanings are beautiful.

While the lore part is rather confusing, understanding it is necessary to have any grasp over the deeper concepts. *Kingdom Hearts* shows us humanity through the "Heartless" and the

“Nobodies.” In the first *Kingdom Hearts*, when Sora lost his heart to save Kairi, he became two separate beings – a Heartless and a Nobody. The Heartless was the physical manifestation of his heart, tainted by darkness and transformed into a shadowy monster. The Nobody was actually his body and soul. Heartless and Nobodies are created when a strong-willed person loses their heart. It is possible for a person to regain human form, but both the Heartless and Nobody need to be destroyed for this to happen. However, in the strange case of Sora, his friend Kairi brought him back with her love and the Heartless disappeared, replaced by human Sora. For some reason, the Nobody didn’t disappear. He instead had his own, separate existence.

The Nobody – named Roxas – was recruited into Organization XIII, an entire group of Nobodies. Their leader, Xemnas, had them all convinced that they had no hearts, no true emotions – and that they’d only ever become human again if they followed his orders. It was all a lie, but the members of the Organization believed it. They thought they were doing the right things – becoming human again seemed so innocent! – but really they were just being used.

The truth was, Nobodies could regain hearts by simply allowing their emotions to exist, and by learning to love. Roxas was at first cold and emotionless, but he eventually made a couple of friends in the Organization, and as time passed, they grew happier and more expressive to each other. They cared for each other. They really seemed to have hearts, contradictory to what their leader told them. But eventually they were all lost to tragic fates, and Roxas returned to Sora’s heart. Even after he learned how to be his own person, live his own life and have his own friends, he was still sent back to the heart of someone seen as “more human” than him.

Kingdom Hearts is all about the meaning of the heart. When the heart is lost, a person seemingly becomes “inhuman,” becomes something else. They are no longer somebody – they take on the role of “nobody.” Losing the heart is seen as losing the power of love and losing the ability to feel emotion. These powers are what make us “human.” Without them, we are cold, empty shells of our former selves. But by choosing to love again, it is possible to regain

our humanity and our hearts without fully returning to the way we were before losing the heart. “Growing a new heart” (Corriea, 2017) rather than getting the old one back can be seen as evidence of loss of the heart, or as a scar. But scars themselves are evidence of surviving hardships, of picking up our pieces and moving forward. A heart can be lost, but it can also be found again through love and connection. But before you can love another and truly find a heart, you must also accept, love and find connection with yourself.

Connections: People and Worlds

Kingdom Hearts is all about connections and humanity. While these concepts are presented through Sora and the Nobodies, we also see them in the depiction of “worlds.”

Throughout the games, Sora, Donald and Goofy travel through a plane similar to outer space known as the Ocean Between. They travel quickly and easily between planet-like “worlds,” no matter how sparsely dispersed they are. All worlds in *Kingdom Hearts* also share an important quality: each world is home to living beings with hearts. Sora makes friends with these beings, and even when they are worlds apart, Sora never forgets any of them. This is analogous to our Earth. Even if we are separated by country, or continent, or anything else imaginable, there’s always a way to get to those other worlds. We know that there are people everywhere, and we don’t forget this, even if we can’t always see them. Together, we all live together in one greater world.

Kingdom Hearts shows us that no matter what world we live in, we all live together in a bigger world. But through characters like Sora and the Nobodies, and in the depiction of the heart, we see that we don’t just live together. We find that we are stronger because of the connection we share with the other people in our lives. We understand that through caring for, loving, and giving to the people around us, we all become better people. Without our hearts, we are nothing. But once we open ourselves up to the people who love us, once we realize that they are our greatest power... We connect to a beautiful, meaningful world.

Conclusion

Kingdom Hearts initially began as a collaboration between Disney and Square, between American and Japanese culture. We can see this in, for example, the use of both Disney and *Final Fantasy* characters, and in the design of the main character himself. Although *Kingdom Hearts* wouldn't be *Kingdom Hearts* without these elements, in the end it becomes something greater. Earlier I discussed how both Disney and shonen manga share similar ideals of “winning, friendship, and perseverance” (Hutchinson, 2022). This is because *Kingdom Hearts* incorporates elements of our universal humanity; concepts like “friendship” come from the human self, not from one culture or the other. *Kingdom Hearts* tries to depict humanity in many ways, revolving around the central theme of connection. The protagonist Sora is defined by his sacrifices and his time spent searching for his friends. This is not linked to a combination of cultures; it is simply a depiction of our best human self and our need for connection. The tragic predicament of the Nobodies, particularly Organization XIII, shows us how important our love and the grasp of our own identities really are – even if you can not find your identity, connecting with others and letting your emotions and self shine through will show you the way. And finally, *Kingdom Hearts* is the story of connections between people, between worlds. Kairi once wrote in a letter to Sora, “There are many worlds, but they share the same sky – one sky, one destiny.” *Kingdom Hearts* connects the U.S. to Japan, but also connects every place to everywhere else in the world, because although our worlds may have borders, although we all look different, although we speak different languages, have different beliefs, and even if we appear to be separated by land, sea, or even sky – we are all people. We all have hopes, and dreams, and fears. We all have hearts, and we find our greatest power in our connections with the ones we love. Together, we all live, connected, beneath the same sky.

I hope this connects with you, and I hope that you'll connect it to your own relationships. Cherish your time with the people you love, and keep your connections strong.

Our connections are our power!

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SHORT

STORIES



RICHARD COLWELL AWARD

Guidance Olivia Brody

Death strolled through an expansive garden on an early May evening, pocketwatch in hand. The sun shined through the foliage of the vibrant wisteria that hung down from high arches above his head, the light leaving splotches of shade along the path. The flowers swayed with a gentle breeze that blew through the garden. Songbirds perched along a stone wall in the distance and Death watched as they hopped along. A smile tugged at his lips as he closed his eyes. He couldn't feel any sensations present in the mortal world, so he could only imagine what the bits of sunshine felt like as they passed over his face. His footsteps made no sound as he walked along a stone path that had been planted into the lush clover. He imagined they would make a sort of click as his dress shoes made contact with the pieces of flat stone.

A light brown rabbit, not much older than a year, crossed the path in front of Death. It didn't acknowledge his presence as it disappeared just as quickly as it came. It vanished into a patch of peonies and left a narrow path in its wake. He sighed as he continued his walk down the serene path to meet the next soul. It felt wrong to him to be in a place full of so much life. He pondered for a moment as he carried on down the path. He rubbed his finger over his pocket watch in discomfort. He had grown mostly accustomed to being in places like this garden, but he always felt out of place as he walked among so many new beginnings.

The path soon sloped downhill and the wisteria arch disappeared. Death had to lean back to keep his balance as he tramped down the hill. The garden gave way to a more natural

environment, the plots of planted flowers were now wild patches of foxglove and tall grass. He looked ahead and saw the figure of a person sitting on a garden bench underneath a willow tree at the bottom of the hill. Death increased his pace. A few butterflies drifted by while some honeybees buzzed about the flowers. As he grew nearer, his heart sank. The girl who sat on the bench looked no older than twelve. He couldn't see her face, but he knew by seeing her frail figure that he had made it in time. Death studied her, taking in her appearance. Her legs had lost most muscle which prompted him to wonder whether or not she was capable of walking. A light breeze rustled the greenery around them, and Death watched as her dress flapped loosely around her torso. The light that was usually in a child's eyes was absent in this girl's glassy gaze. The life had truly left her body and soul.

Death steeled himself for the task at hand and sat next to the girl. Her face was sunken in, and her dull auburn hair was brittle and thin. However, the dying sunlight and light breeze made it look like flames danced around her head. It brought a bit of life back into her, Death thought. Her breathing was strained and raspy. She fiddled with a white lily while gazing at the brook in front of them. The water babbled over stones of various sizes, and Death wondered if it felt as crisp as he thought it would if he were to dip his hand in the gentle current. Keeping his gaze fixed ahead of the brook, he folded his hands in his lap. He fiddled with his thumbs, unsure of how to engage in conversation with her.

"It's a beautiful evening," he finally said as he watched the girl out of the corner of his eye. She didn't startle like people usually did.

"It is," she agreed, her voice nearly ragged.

They sat in silence for a moment and listened to the ambiance of the surrounding area. Death shifted and crossed his legs before he leaned back. In cases like these, he wished he could defy the rules of his job and spare her. His sole purpose was to help souls move on and enter the afterlife. If he failed to fulfill his duty, his very existence would be erased. Death wished that things could be different for the sake of the undeserving souls that had to move on too early, but this was the natural order of life, and he needed to uphold that.



SELECTION OF MERIT
Lord of the Bees
Rylee Pihaylic

“It’s a lovely lily,” he noted.

“It is?”

Death smiled. “It’s one of my favorite flowers.”

“My mother says it’s a flower of death.”

“It’s also a flower of peace for a departing soul.”

She coughed viciously—Death felt an overwhelming sense of pity. He decided that he’d help her pass away soon, but he needed to make her more comfortable with the idea of it first. Most people were reluctant to go, and he feared that she would be the same way.

“How long have you had that cough?” Death asked softly.

The girl wiped her mouth, and Death flinched as he saw a smear of crimson on the back of her hand. “I’ve had it for nearly a year now,” she replied as she wheezed a bit. “The doctors said I don’t have much time left. I don’t feel good, and I miss being able to do anything besides lying in bed or sitting out here.”

Death could hear the hopelessness in her voice. “I could help you with that,” he offered.

The girl looked at him with sunken eyes. He could feel her calculating stare as she studied him. “I know who you are.”

“You’re perceptive.”

“I thought you’d be different.”

“Skeletal? Scarier?”

“Yes, all of that.”

People often expected a tall hooded monster with a scythe that came in the middle of the night to collect souls. He appreciated the creativity, but he was much simpler than that. Death resembled a well-groomed older man, perhaps in his late fifties, with soft brown eyes and a kind face. He wore a black suit, complete with a silver pocketwatch that kept him on schedule. Death was grateful for the simplicity, for it made it easier to help people into the afterlife. People were more willing to go with him when he looked kind.

“Lots of people think that I look like that,” he said, “I’m grateful that I don’t.”

She continued to pluck at the lily in her hands. Death noticed that her lip trembled with fear. “I’m why you’re here.”

Death pursed his lips. “I’m here to help.”

The girl went silent while she continued to rip at the petals of her flower. The once full and beautiful petals now resembled tattered curtains as bits and pieces of it floated to the ground.

“Is it scary?” she asked.

Death shook his head. “No, I don’t think so. You’ve already gone through the worst of dying. After this, it’s quite peaceful.”

Across the brook, a doe with two fawns emerged from the forest. The doe cautiously peered around before she looked back. The three of them approached the babbling water and leaned down to drink. The fawns’ legs shook as they struggled to keep their balance while they sipped from the brook. The girl coughed and the deer retreated into the woods, their white tails held high.

“What will happen?” she asked him after recovering her breath. Her voice had become weak and ragged, and Death had a feeling that he’d have to act soon.

“I’ll help guide you into the afterlife. It’s strange at first, but it all gets better soon.”

“Will I feel better?”

Death smiled once again. “You will. I swear that everything will get better.”

The girl relaxed a bit and Death watched as the lily drooped in her loose grip. He could sense that it was almost time to accompany her soul.

“Will my family be okay?”

He couldn’t imagine that any family would be okay after a relative’s death. He especially couldn’t imagine the pain that this girl’s family would feel after finding her down here. Unfortunately

in the state she was in, he knew that she didn’t have enough time to say her goodbyes. He needed an answer for her, and he needed it now.

“It’ll take them some time, but they’ll be okay.”

The girl seemed fine with this response, which surprised Death. It seemed like she was almost ready to go.

“Will I be able to see them again?”

“You will,” he replied. “You don’t really leave them. You can always come back and check on them.”

A small smile tugged at the corner of her mouth, a small gesture that told Death that she had accepted that it was time. He checked his pocketwatch. The girl seemed relaxed now, her body slumped in the corner of the bench. The lily hung from her fingers before it finally fell to the ground. Death could see that her eyelids had begun to droop. He took a step towards her and kneeled on the ground at her feet.

“Are you ready?” he quietly asked with his hand stretched out. In the distance, he could hear a woman calling, but he couldn’t make out what name she had shouted. The girl reached out and placed her hand in his.

As they stepped away, Death noticed that this girl’s soul looked livelier, her face fuller now. She no longer resembled the crumpled husk that sat behind them. Her sleek auburn hair flamed brilliantly in the setting sun, and her eyes sparkled as she looked around. Her hands were warm, a feeling that Death relished. He couldn’t feel anything in the land of the living, but he could feel sensations from the souls of people. From the girl, he felt a buzz. This was the energy that she should have had during her life. Death took a step forward, but the girl didn’t follow. He turned around and looked at her; she was looking at her feet.

“I’m scared,” she said, this time without struggle.

Death kneeled in front of her and took her other hand as he spoke.

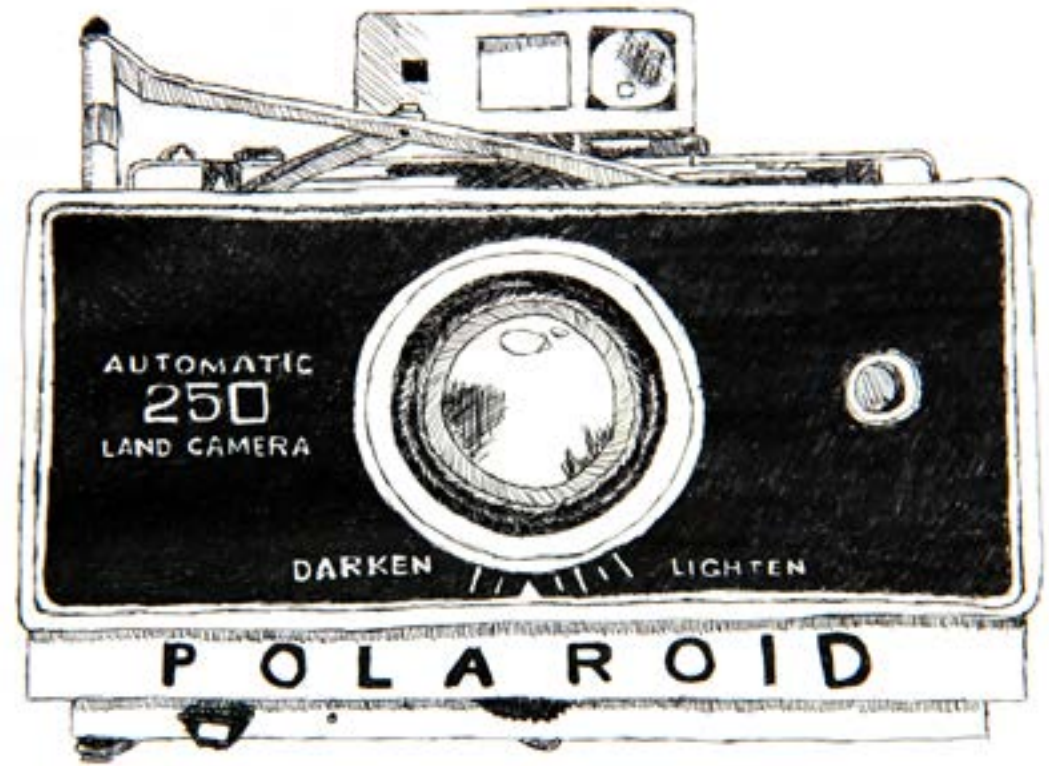
“I know,” he said as he studied the frightened look on her face, “but I’ll be here with you the entire time.”

The girl nodded and Death stood up. When he took another step, she followed. He instructed her to look forward as they walked down the bed of the brook. The landscape around them began to fade away and Death knew that they were close to entering the afterlife. A warm light embraced them as they walked on, and soon fields of lilies covered the ground. A simple trail led the duo to an archway. Engraved in the archway’s face was *Mors Mihi Lucrum*. “Death is my reward.” The phrase was familiar to him, especially this particular one in the archway above them. He had seen it every time he came here, yet it stuck with him. He glanced at the girl next to him and noted the way she tightly gripped his hand. She was nervous, and a pang of sadness and guilt hit him in the chest. Perhaps dying was beautiful, but it was also sorrowful.

As they neared the archway, Death released the girl’s hand. She looked at him, confused. Death couldn’t cross the threshold so he usually left the souls here at the entrance to the afterlife. He looked down at her and nodded with encouragement. She seemed to understand and stepped through the archway. Death put his hands back in his pockets and waited at the threshold as she walked away. As she continued down the path, Death continued to watch over the girl as the visual of her soul finally disappeared. He stood there for a moment as contentment washed over him. He felt around in his pocket and removed his pocketwatch to check the time. A new time was displayed on the face of his watch, which indicated that it was time to move on.

Death glanced at the archway behind him. He then turned on his heel, straightened his jacket, and began to walk. As he continued down the path, his surroundings began to change. Instead of a garden, Death found himself in a hospital. Outside the window of the room was the skyline of a city. The sun was beginning to set, the light casting an orange hue across the room. Lying in a bed hooked up to a variety of monitors was an elderly man. Death found a chair near the edge of the bed and sat down. The noise stirred the man from his sleep, and Death smiled at him.

“It’s a beautiful evening,” he said as he prepared to take on the duty of providing guidance into the afterlife yet again.



SELECTION OF MERIT

Vintage Cameras

Ryan Churchill



2nd PLACE

Wine is Thicker Than Blood Krysta Saunders

When I was a kid, my elementary teacher asked us to draw our mothers for a Mother's Day gift. I was quite proud of my drawing of my mother: tall, skinny, her thick bangs that never went past the eyebrows, and a wine glass in her hand. I drew what she always had – wine in a long-stemmed glass, colored in with a red crayon. My teacher seemed concerned and even talked to me about it, asking me questions about my mom and if she ever did anything else. I was just a kid; I didn't know how to answer that question. She pointed out that other kids were drawing their parents with their dogs or with the other kids in the family, or with their fathers... My parents had been divorced since preschool, and my brothers were older than me, so they knew to avoid spending extended periods of time with her. I insisted to my teacher that this was the only thing she spent more time with other than me. I took my little picture home to my mother and handed her the card with glee. I remember the hurt look on her face, then shock. I could see the question on her face, but I didn't realize what it meant till later.

“Is this what you see me as?”

Wine gradually vanished from my house as I grew up. There were other drinks in the house, but my mom stopped drinking her wine. At least, till she started dating again. Whomever she was dating she adapted to them and what they drank. If she dated a country boy, then suddenly she had cowgirl hats and whiskey around the house... Dated a fireman, there would be fireball and 9/11 memorabilia around the house. She went on vacation with the cowboy boyfriend and left us in the care of one of her long-time friends. The friend slept on the sofa and the week went on.

SELECTION OF MERIT
Fear It
Zoe Palmateer

My brothers and I played in the basement to avoid our newfound babysitter and only came up when we were hungry. My brothers, Sam and Kyle, had been watched by this babysitter before. They knew to stay out of her hair and let her sleep on the sofa and made sure to instill me with that information, but never really told me why. When my mother returned, some of the whiskey she kept on the top of the fridge had been replaced with water. To this day, I still don't know if it was my brothers who switched it out or if it was our babysitter trying to replace what she may have taken. But my mom didn't care. She was livid and everyone was telling her, "No. Wasn't me." Which just made her madder. It didn't help that the cowboy was breathing down her neck, complaining that he had nothing to drink with his friends now, which just seemed to make my mom more agitated. She grounded all of us and I never saw her friend, our former babysitter, again. My mother took all the whiskey and booze off the fridge, as I watched from the living room.

Eventually, my mother settled down with what I would call a "normal" man. He drank beer but only socially and he liked hockey but wasn't passionate about it. He was the guy who had asked my mom out a dozen times and she kept turning him down, seeing him as nothing more than a friend. But he was nice, smelled good, and rode a motorcycle. He was, and still is, my favorite out of all my mom's boyfriends. She even married him one day. But I always think about one night when he was still just a boyfriend, and my mom was still sober.

I was asleep in my room, and I heard a thump in the night. Nothing uncommon in my house filled with three boys and my mom and me. There was always something going bump in the night, and I was the "light sleeper from Hell" in the house. I got up, holding onto my blanket as I shuffled out into the living room. Just in time to see a very drunk boyfriend, fists raised, lunge at my mother who was sitting on the couch. I screamed and threw myself between my mother and her boyfriend. He was so drunk he stumbled and fell before he even got close to my mother, but the image terrified me. It still scares me when I think about the delirious look on his face and the way he tried to get at her. My mother was a tight ball on the couch, instinctively going into a cradle position to protect her face. But the second she felt my back on her, she unraveled and wrapped herself around me, pulling me

away from him. She screamed and demanded that he go back to his room, and he listened. He looked dazed and confused. That dazed look might have been from when he slipped and fell; my heroics weren't needed as gravity took over, but he still listened to my mother and went into his room.

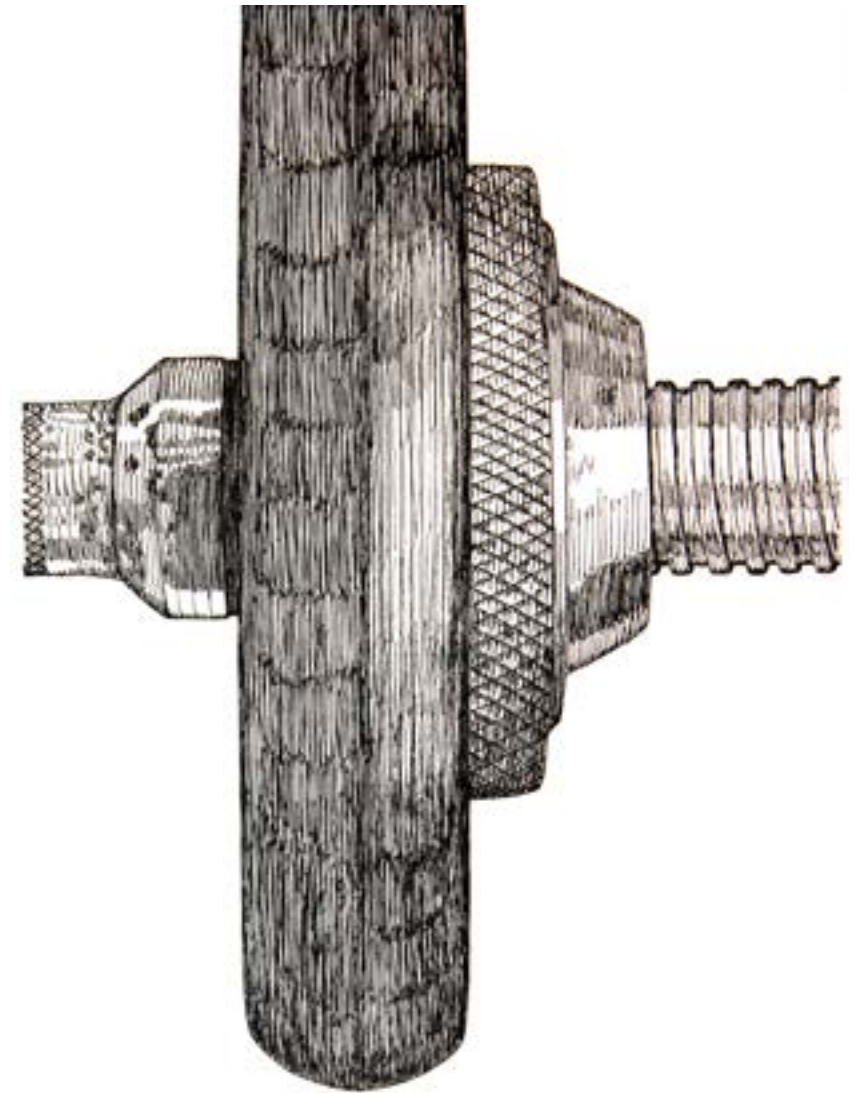
All liquor was gone from the house after that, but only temporarily.

My mom got married to "normal boyfriend" (Yes, despite that night) and he became stepdad, my brothers moved out, we moved to a different house, I graduated high school, started going to college and worked in a pharmacy. One day, while I was at work, I got a call from my stepdad, which was not normal. My stepdad never reached out to me on his own; it was always through my mom. I think my mom liked playing messenger between the two of us. I stepped off to the side and answered the phone. It wasn't my stepdad on the other end, but a police officer who had taken the phone off my passed-out stepdad. They found him in my driveway, half out of his truck, with the truck still running. He was wasted and they couldn't get information out of him. But he was in a parked truck that was still running, so they arrested him. They called my mom's cell but couldn't reach her. Nor could they find her.

They couldn't find my mother. While I battled that internal panic, the cops were painting a picture for me of what my parents had been up to. They had been drinking at a friend's house and got into their truck to go home. Everyone was drunk, so no one questioned if my stepdad should drive the truck or not... I'm sure they tried to rationalize it by saying the house was just two turns away. Well, during one of those turns, they plowed right through one of our neighbors' yards. Took down a fence and some festive decorations, then side swiped their car on the way out. He managed to pull the truck into the driveway, then passed out trying to get out of the truck. Everyone kept saying that my mom was in the truck with him when he went through the yard; the neighbors attested to it, but they still couldn't find her. I left work and told the cops to search the house, that I was on my way home to help. I called my brother, who called his girlfriend, and she went to the hospital to get my stepdad. I was on my way home to help search for my mother when I got a call from the cops; they found her. Sound

asleep in her bedroom and she only woke up when the cop started to shake her.

There was no change in the house this time. Once everything was squared away, my mom was fine, my stepdad was taken home, and I was left to repeat the story to my mother. No matter how many times I repeated it, she had to hear it again. Always a bewildered look on her face, like she couldn't quite understand what I was saying. My stepdad had the same look on his face when he lunged at her. But nothing changed. No matter how many times I told them about how scary it was to get a call from the cops and to have to rely on strangers to get my stepdad out of the hands of the cops at the hospital, there was no small revelation like all the other times... Maybe I had made those up. Maybe I had just wished my mom had an "Oh, no" moment and realized that something was wrong. There could have always been booze in the house, and she could have just been hiding it from me. I still can't bring myself to drink anything in front of strangers. I can't go out to the bar and drink because I will think of my mom and stepdad, driving through the neighbors' yard and getting a call from the cops. In the past it was always confined to family business, but then strangers got involved, cops too, and there was no moment of clarification. No understanding. It suddenly became too real for my mother to handle, and she just brushed it off. I wish I could say I don't have any more drinking stories, but I do. My mother is still the same person I drew all those years ago... She might be a little shorter, still skinny, and those thick bangs have thinned out, but she's still got that wine glass in hand.



SELECTION OF MERIT
Weight Study
Marcus Helton



3rd PLACE

To Bigfork
Payton Wiley



Violent gusts of wind assaulted Coleman as he sprinted alongside the interstate. The buckets of rain that poured overhead beat down on his exposed skin, striking him just as bullets would to their target. He could see clouds of his breath disappearing just as fast as they appeared. It was only October in Durham, New Hampshire, but the temperatures had been dropping into the low 40's at night.

Coleman's feet slapped the pavement as he ran. He'd lost his Nikes miles ago. Running through the swampy sides had turned the ground into glue. He was lucky he still had his wool socks. After losing the shoes, he got smart and ran on the road instead. He left around midnight; it was probably close to 2 A.M. now, he predicted. The rain hadn't let up a bit since. He couldn't see more than ten feet in front of him, which meant that if he couldn't see anything, then nobody could see him either. He just needed to cross state lines; then, he could relax more.

He ran the back of his hand across his forehead, trying to unstick his hickory hair. The adrenaline couldn't take him much farther. Coleman slowed his pace down, moving in a slow walk now. *Any movement was better than no movement*, he told himself.

His feet trudged across the pavement, the thick denim material dragging as his pants struggled to stay up from the added weight. His t-shirt was completely see-through hours ago and wasn't supplying much warmth. Coleman knew the police wouldn't suspect anything for a few days. He was safe for now, but he wanted as much distance between him and the small colonial town as possible.

Just as he put his hands on his knees, trying to catch his breath, a blinding light turned the curve of the interstate. Nobody had been on the road as long as Coleman had. He straightened his posture, squinting, trying to see what was headed towards him.

Two beams of light barreled forward, almost warming him from the cold rain. They sat much higher than typical car headlights would. Coleman felt like he needed to cover himself up under the newfound spotlight he was in.

The mighty vehicle slowed significantly, the squeal of the brakes piercing ears, the diesel engine roaring. Coleman could barely see above the tires. A great blue semi-truck had pulled over, towering over him. A long silver trailer was its shadow. Coleman gulped hard. His palms started to sweat, and a shiver trailed up his spine. He wiped the rain from his eyes before looking up again.

It felt like years before a window was rolled down. An older gentleman poked his head over, "The hell are you doing out here," he demanded.

Coleman looked around, frantic for an answer. He didn't know what to say! What would this guy even want?

The truck driver leaned over more, getting a better look at the slim figure presented at the side of his 18-wheeler. "Need a ride?" His face softened, realizing it was just a child. Coleman shook his head yes, maybe a little too eagerly, and ripped the door open. The truck was headed out of New Hampshire, that was the most important part. The road they were on only headed out. There were no exits before leaving the state. It was twenty more miles before they would hit Massachusetts, just outside of Georgetown. Coleman had memorized this route for weeks leading up to tonight.

He sat himself next to the driver, the yellow lights illuminating the cab. The driver stared at him long and hard. He was balding with a leather face. His nose was crinkled slightly, and the end of his mouth pointed upward. "You know it's raining out, right? What're you doing, kid?" He wore a red and yellow flannel and dark jeans. His face was painted with concern. Coleman took a deep breath in; Cuban cigars and pine filled his lungs. The cab of the truck was much cleaner than he expected. His eyes danced



SELECTION OF MERIT
La Cantina
Jacqueline Rodriguez

on the ground, staring at the driver's work boots that were rather shiny. They looked brand new. His father had the same pair.

Coleman scratched the back of his neck; "I'm going to my grandmother's house." Was that saying too much? Should he have lied? Was this his next big mistake? He slipped his hand into his pocket. The tips of his fingers danced around the metal handle of a pocket knife. They traced the edges. The detailing of a bear was his favorite part. He felt the bubbled metal of the animal's face. It was at a river, with its paw up in the air, ready to attack. Its expression is intense. *For my protector* was written on the other side.

"At 2:17 in the morning? Where's your grandmother living?"

He looked around the cab. The floorboards looked nicely vacuumed. Behind their seats was a single bed with a fridge and microwave off to the side. He had some grocery bags with a case of water tucked next to the appliances. Coleman slipped the handle into the palm of his hand. "My grandmother lives in Bigfork,"

"Montana?" The man yelled, startling Coleman.

He nodded his head.

"Where're your parents at, boy, I gotta take you home," The driver reached behind him and pulled out a towel. "Dry off with this. Do you know your address?"

"I don't talk to my parents. I just need to go to my grandmother's house. Right now." Coleman pierced his lips. His breathing started to stagger. He gripped the knife tighter in his pocket.

The driver took a long breath and sighed. "Well, I'm not headed to Montana, just goin' to Springfield," He eyed the boy. "It'll get'cha half way or so," He continued to stare, his eyebrows rose slightly now. "It's the best I can do."

"That's fine," he spit out.

With that, the roar of the engine started again, and they were back hauling through the rest of New Hampshire. Coleman didn't dare sleep as they travelled. He didn't trust the driver.

He kept his hands balled in fists, ready to move at the drop of a hat.

After almost twenty minutes of silence, the driver leaned over, “My name’s Harlan. They call me Blue Pirate over the radio,”

Coleman stuttered for a second, “My name is James.” That would have been the name of his little brother.

The pair shook hands. Harlan’s hands were much larger and felt leathery compared to Coleman’s. He had a firm grip, giving his small hand a slight squeeze.

“How old are’a, James?” Coleman picked up on the slight southern accent the driver had.

“Nineteen.” His fingers had yet to release the knife in his pocket. This felt like an interrogation. Why did he need to know so much about him? Coleman stared at Harlan. His eyes were hard as he looked at the man sitting inches away from him. His eyebrows crinkled down. What information was he trying to get? What did he know about him?

Harlan glanced over, being greeted with a glare. Coleman refused to break his eye contact. The pair sat in silence for several more minutes, Harlan doing his best to ignore the intense watch. He navigated the roads slightly quicker now, eager to come to a rest stop. The atmosphere was thick enough to cut. The hairs on the back of his neck stood up.

It was about three hours into the drive, inching towards six A.M, when Harlan explained he needed to stop for the night. “I like driving at night better, less traffic. I think maybe you should go now,” He looked sternly at the boy, squinting, studying.

Harlan put his hand out for Coleman to shake. He looked awkwardly at it for half a second, realizing he would need to release the knife in his pocket to shake back. Coyly, he pulled his hand out and gripped the man’s hand. Coleman quickly realized there was a dark maroon liquid on the tips of his fingers, that wiped onto the back side of Harlan’s hand.

Harlan looked at what Coleman did crossly.

“It’s motor oil, I use my knife when I work in the shop,” He stammered out, knowing it was a poor lie.

The man didn’t say anything as he climbed back into his big rig and drove off.

Coleman was dropped off at a gas station half an hour past New Haven, Connecticut. He had no ride and no idea where to go from there. The sun was slowly peeking above the horizon, bleeding into a soft pink from the nighttime dusk. The area was still asleep, not a car in sight.

It looked to be an older small town, similar to Durham. Coleman surveyed the area. Past this intersection one way there was the expressway they just came from. Looking the other way, away from the general stores, was farm fields. He was pretty much in the middle of nowhere.

He dug his hand in his pocket and pulled out two wadded up hundred-dollar bills. They were still slightly damp from the rain this morning – he thanked the Lord that had stopped. The gas station had opened up a few minutes ago. He needed something to eat, and new ideas. But thinking on an empty stomach did nobody any good.

Focus, man, focus.

Coleman studied the parking lot. He needed a new plan. Hitchhiking here would only get him another town over, and he wasn’t sure which way he needed to go. He needed a greyhound bus, actually, but didn’t know where to start with that, so that plan was tossed. Maybe a city bus? This town looked too small for that. The longer Coleman sat, the longer he risked getting found. His palms started to sweat. He twiddled his thumbs, anger beginning to boil in the pit of his stomach. Why would Harlan abandon him like that! How could he not see he needed help more than anything right now? And he left him to rot in America’s smallest town. He was left for dead here.

Coleman exploded, kicking the dumpster next to him, leaving a dent in the green metal. He tossed as much anger into the kick as he could, but still somehow felt worse. He then turned and began



SELECTION OF MERIT

War is Hell

Katsiaryna Trapashka

punching the brick wall next to him. As he punched, a black pickup truck pulled into the parking lot. It was the first vehicle that came in all morning. It screeched as it came to a stop. The truck was dotted in rust spots and looked like one pot hole would send the body flying. It was an older two-seater pickup. A younger man in his early twenties came out, slamming his door shut. He wore a yellow construction vest and a baseball hat, and he was of average stature. He walked around to the other side of his truck, placing his keys on the roof, and fiddled with the pump just outside of Coleman's view.

This was it! This was perfect! This is what Coleman needed! It was clear that some positive force was now on his side. The young man headed into the gas station, taking long strides, not thinking twice about his keys or his truck. Why would he? This small town didn't even have a stop light. It was too small for anything bad to happen, right?

Coleman crouched down, peering around the corner. Nobody was by the door. Nobody could see him or the truck. He took the opportunity and sprinted across the parking lot. The air was finally starting to warm; the sun hit his face and he felt like a flower in full bloom. The familiar adrenaline pumped through his veins once again and he was reborn. Just ten strides to run this time.

Coleman approached the truck, hopping up to grab the keys. He threw the gas pump onto the concrete, the fluid spraying all over the truck and himself. His jeans took the front of the beating. The smell was nauseating, but there was no time to focus on that. He stabbed the keys into the ignition. His mind was level, his hands steady, and his heart rate regular. He slammed the door shut.

Coleman had only driven a few times. He never took a driving lesson, just had his grandfather show him how to use the golf cart on the summers he would visit. His eyes danced along the dash as the truck came alive. He pushed his foot on one of the pedals, and a screaming noise erupted. That wasn't right. This was different from the games he played. He shifted into drive after testing some of the levers and pushed the pedal as far as it would go. The wheels screeched and the smell of burnt rubber engulfed his nostrils. The truck twisted right, then left, fishtailing, as it tried to pick up as much speed as Coleman demanded it to do. It swayed back and

forth, much more sensitive than the golf cart was. Smoke trailed behind him.

The pickup hit a curve, bouncing, and left the gas station in the dust. Nobody seemed to notice from the mirrors that it was gone as he turned the corner, merging back onto the expressway. He was free once again! Only him and the open roads, just like it should be.

The dash clock read 7:22 A.M. Coleman's father would have been leaving for work right about now, still buzzed from the evening before. His staggered footsteps would have been heard through the entire house, announcing his departure.

Coleman shook his head like it was an etch-a-sketch and tried to focus on something else. He began rummaging through the cubbies and storage in the truck, hoping to score something good. He poked his hand in between the seats, slipping in until he felt the carpet.

Only, he didn't feel the carpet. He felt something warm and plastic. His arm jerked up, eager to see the new prize. A cell phone? It looked like it had been charging for a while. A nice score, even if he only had a few moments before it was tracked. There was no doubt that the police would be called and they would find Coleman. And then he was screwed.

No need to stress like that. *Focus.* Coleman shifted gears and looked back at the phone, he swiped to unlock it, and was pleasantly surprised when it didn't have a password. It appeared to be a cheap burner phone. One that someone could get at a CVS. He opened a web browser and plugged in his grandmother's address as he merged onto the expressway. *This should be easy enough.* He had half a tank of gas, and 35 hours to go until he was home.

It was right as he entered Allentown, Pennsylvania, that the truck started rolling to a slow stop. The city looked to be lively, colorful, and harmonized with its people. The area seemed larger and wealthier than the two cities he had been in earlier. Durham was too close for comfort still, even more so now that he could add grand theft auto to the list of charges he would face. He only made it two hours. He still had an entire trip across the country to make. Coleman gulped hard. He wouldn't mind some

water, and maybe something else to eat. But first, he needed to ditch these gasoline-covered clothes, and find something warmer. The truck owner seemed to keep a collection of work clothes on the passenger seat, a typical work truck. Coleman sifted through.

A pair of jeans that were slightly too big and a sweatshirt would have to do for now. With some luck and zip ties, the pants managed to stay up. Coleman also scored some sneakers that fit just snug. He contemplated using the deodorant for a second and decided that it would be going too far. He changed into the new clothes and poked around more in the truck for other goodies.

He kept the phone, found another forty dollars in crinkled bills, and a handgun under the driver's seat. Coleman decided that this was all he would take, abandoning the truck on the exit ramp where it ran out of gas.

Coleman began to mope, dragging his feet along the pavement. When was the last time he slept? Two days ago? His eyes burned, his head felt fuzzy, and it was harder to remember things. Cars raced past him as they entered the city, and very quickly, Coleman found himself engulfed in the excitement Allentown had to offer.

He wandered aimlessly, unsure of where to go. He wanted to be away from the crowds. Every corner he turned, he seemed to run right into more people.

Eventually, he found an alley inside a strip mall. Under the benches, he made a blanket with his old t-shirt, and wadded up some newspaper as a pillow. He hugged his knees for as much warmth as possible. It was a cool 60 degrees, and he was outside on the cement in the shade. Not the best mix for things, but Coleman wasn't exactly in a position to complain, either. He just needed a few hours to rest, then he would be back on the move.

Coleman was woken up at 12:39 p.m. to a child kicking his shoe.

"Momma, I told you he was alive!" She cried. The woman the child was with pursed her lips together, her eyebrows rose with concern.

Well," Another voice said, off to the side, "Why don't we let him

sleep then, huh?" The boy was around eight years of age, Coleman guessed.

The woman sighed deeply, "We are so sorry to bother you." She tucked some of her light hair behind her ears. It sat just above her shoulders. "The kids were concerned, and you look like you might need some help." She glanced around between the two children, "And you see, you look just like their older brother."

The little daughter spoke up, "He's in the Navy."

The mother nodded her head. "He is."

The daughter was probably four or five years old. She was a spitting image of her mother. Identical, almost. They both had sweet and innocent faces, with little button noses and big brown eyes. The son, who was jumping from bench to bench now, had strawberry blonde hair and millions of freckles on his face.

He spoke up: "His name is Ben. He's twenty. And he gave me his Nintendo before he left."

The mother held her daughter and sat on her knees to be eye level with Coleman. "How old are you, dear?"

Coleman scratched the back of his neck, "Just turned nineteen."

"Do you have anywhere to go? Or did you just need a quick nap under this bench?"

He shrugged his shoulders, "I needed some rest." He pushed his eyebrows down, slight annoyance growing.

The mother smiled softly, "Would you like to get breakfast with us? My treat."

Coleman stood up now, stretching his legs. His back felt tight from sleeping on the concrete. "I would like that."

It was past noon, but apparently these children would order pancakes and chocolate milk at any hour of the day. Coleman learned that the mother's name was Kelly. Her husband Robert was in Michigan for the week, and she and the kids were driving to go visit him. He worked full time out that way, and she was waiting

until Ben left to officially move out there. They would be going house shopping when they arrived.

Kelly was also a chatterbox. "So, where is your family? You ought to have some, you're still young. Where's the parents at?" She asked, as they left the restaurant.

Coleman shrugged his shoulders, "I'm trying to go to my grandma's house, but it's taking a long time, actually."

Kelly puckered her lips, "Where does she live? I could take you," She opened her purse and pulled out her cellphone. "What's the address, sweetheart."

"It's actually in Bigfork,"

She looked up at him. "Bigfork?" Her head tilted to the side, like a confused dog. "I've never even heard of that!"

"Yeah, it's in Montana."

Kelly sighed again, a long drawn out one. "Now, I don't normally do this, and I think my husband would kill me if he found out I did this," She looked at her two children. "But you could come with us to Michigan if you wanted. We are headed to Kalamazoo. I don't know how familiar you are with that area. It's in the lower half of the mitten, and it's on the west side of the state. Then maybe you could take a bus farther west." She spoke like her words were involuntary. "It is about ten hours or so, but we are driving straight through. We should get in by midnight." Coleman looked at the two children, then up at her.

"I promise we aren't killers or anything either! Come on, mom's decision here, you're coming with us." On that note, they all piled into the little four door sedan. It was nice, with updated gadgets and screens. Futuristic, almost. It was very different from the truck Coleman just left on the exit ramp.

It was now about eleven p.m. The children were finally asleep after endless hours of I Spy and twenty questions. They stopped twice for bathroom breaks and food, setting them back slightly on time. But Coleman didn't mind. He was thankful they were able to travel as far as they did. He wasn't sure what he would've done if



SELECTION OF MERIT

Fear

Cass Gordon

Kelly hadn't insisted that he joined them on their journey.

"So, Coleman," Kelly asked, "What are you most excited for in Montana?"

He shrugged his shoulders. It felt nice talking with her. "All of it. My grandfather died ten years ago. My grandma needs my help around the house. I'm the only one around anymore."

Kelly nodded. She reached over and rubbed his shoulder softly, "I get it," she glanced over at him, her expression soft. "I hope Montana brings you peace."

He smiled at her, "I do too."

The two were interrupted with the radio making an emergency announcement. The buzzing startled Coleman.

A man on the line spoke up, "We apologize for this interruption, but police are asking you to be on the lookout for a killer on the run."

"Ooh," Kelly gasped, "How crazy. Nothing interesting ever happens around here. I hope this isn't still stuck on Pennsylvania's location."

"Coleman Bryer, nineteen years old, white male, brown hair and brown eyes, is believed to have murdered his father, Samuel Bryer, late Tuesday evening, around eleven p.m. in Durham, New Hampshire."

Kelly's face had lost its color, her expression falling as she listened to the radio.

"He is believed to be travelling alone and is extremely dangerous. If you have any information, feel free to anonymously report to our hotline."

Coleman shut off the radio before it could continue on any farther, not that it mattered.

Kelly had heard all the important information. His hand slipped under his sweatshirt, "Kelly, I-" His fingers grasped the handle to the gun, not even sure if it was loaded.

She whipped her head around and stared at him. The car slowly pulled over to the side of the expressway. Her eyes were wide, and her mouth gaped open. Tears started to bubble along her eyelid. “Did you...” She stammered, her brain going a million miles at once. She looked back at the radio, waiting for it to finish her sentence, it seemed.

“I just wanted to see my grandma,” Coleman blurted out, after a moment of silence. “That isn’t me!” His nose felt tingly, and his eyes burned. “You don’t understand.”

Kelly eyed him. “I understand enough.”

He felt his mouth curl into a frown. It was like he had been kicked in the chest. He was so close to his grandmother it didn’t even feel real. And now this news anchor ruined it for him? How was that fair?

The two sat in silence for another moment. The sounds of the two children sleeping in the back seat were comforting.

“Are you going to call the police?” Coleman stammered.

Kelly pulled out her purse. “I don’t know who you are, I’ve never seen you before, and you have never seen me.”

He sank into the seat. “It’s not what it looks like, Kelly,” he pleaded.

She shook her head, “No, it looks like I’m transporting a fugitive,” she spat back. She dug through her purse.

Coleman looked at Kelly. His heart ached. It was like losing his mother all over again. “I can explain, really -”

“Here’s three hundred dollars, and a gift card to Applebee’s. I don’t have anything else to give you, but I want you out, and I don’t want you to ever mention seeing me.” She put her foot down, making the deal with him. “We were never together, we never talked, I’ve already forgotten your name, understood? I won’t call the cops, but I need you gone in the next ten seconds.”

She slapped everything down on his leg, not looking at him. Coleman didn’t have anything to say. He wanted Kelly to hug him,

to tell him she understood, and would have done the same in his shoes. Nobody seemed to understand him.

Coleman grabbed the money and threw open the door, darting across the expressway. On the other side, there was a rest area. Maybe here he could use it to call his grandmother and wait for another trucker to hitchhike with. He ran across the lanes and dividers, tears streaking his face as he left the vehicle. He was so close, and it was ruined now. He was back to square one again.

He had no idea where he was. Coleman had an idea of a general direction he needed to go in, but that was it. As he approached the rest area, he couldn’t help but feel explosive. He was waiting to erupt; he needed to hit something or be hit. He wanted the feeling of pain to be had or given. Something. He needed to feel again.

Coleman tore open the door to the rest area. It was a tiled room that reminded him of a hotel plaza, only there wasn’t a front desk. It was much nicer than he was expecting. There were soft yellow lights illuminating the room, a navy sofa off to the left, tables and chairs with vending machines and a small kitchenette to the right. T.V.s were hung up from either corner in the rest areas. Three men were already inside, crouched over one channel, gossiping. They snacked loudly on a bag of chips. Coleman spotted a pay phone by the vending machines. Bingo. There, he could call his grandmother and explain what was going on. She was probably so concerned for him.

The payphone only took coins, Coleman quickly realized. *What to do now.*

He eyed the area. He could probably bum some loose change off of those guys, they had to have some. Maybe if he put his bills in the vending machine, change would dispense?

Coleman pulled out a crumpled one-dollar bill and tried to flatten it on the edge of the table. *This better work.* He inserted the money, waited a second, and pressed the change return. It sounded like the machine was working, until a “Make a Selection” message appeared on the screen. He selected a snack instead. Then, discovered the machine had eaten his dollar when nothing came out. He sighed and pressed his forehead against the glass. Coleman’s next choice was to ask the guys for change.

He trudged his feet across the tile, a sour feeling in his throat as he approached them. He gulped hard. "Hey," Coleman said barely above a whisper, "The machine ate my dollar, can I have some change for the payphone?"

The three men parted, showing the television screen, and eyeballing the boy in front of them. They all had crooked looks plastered to their faces. Coleman looked between all of them, his heart beginning to pound. His eyes lowered to the screen, watching what it was playing.

It was a news station, with a woman in bright red lips reporting the story. Closed captions below her explained the situation.

COLEMAN BRYER, AGE 19, STANDING AT 5'10 AND 145 POUNDS, HAS MURDERED HIS FATHER, CONGRESSMAN SAMUEL BRYER, TUESDAY EVENING. COLEMAN WAS LAST SEEN IN A STOLEN BLACK PICKUP TRUCK IN ALLENTON, PENNSYLVANIA. HE IS BELIEVED TO BE EXTREMELY DANGEROUS.

His high school photo flashed on the screen. Coleman gulped.

A \$100,000 REWARD IS BEING OFFERED TO ANYONE WHO CAN PROVIDE INFORMATION ON HIS LOCATION.

One of the men stepped forward. "Is this you?" He was missing a front tooth and smelled like tobacco. He wore a baseball cap.

Coleman shook his head, "No, sir," his heart pounded in his chest. His face felt hotter than hell.

The man glanced at the television, then back to Coleman. "You sure? Looks an awful lot like ya." He looked to the two guys at his side.

Coleman, again, shook his head no. "That's not me,"

The man stepped forward. He towered over Coleman's frame. "Hey Matt," he called over his shoulder. "How tall would you say this fellow is?"

An older man without any hair shrugged his shoulders and leaned against the table.

"Probably about 5'10, I'd say."

Coleman took a step back.

"How about you two go wait outside for the police. I have some things to take care of," The first man ordered the other two. He eyed Coleman carefully. "You know, there's a hundred grand reward for whoever catches you right now," he taunted. He stepped forward again.

Coleman stepped back, once more, hitting his back against a table.

"A hundred grand is what I make in about three years. That's a pretty nice penny there." He spat at Coleman's shoes. "And you see, I like Congressman Bryer, I like him a lot. And you've killed him, huh?"

Coleman squinted his eyes at him.

Before anything else was said, the man tightened his fist and landed it right into Coleman's gut, doubling him over immediately. He landed another to his jaw, pain erupting into his face, and causing him to spit out blood. The man clenched his fists again. "You deserve hell, you know that?" He threw his weight into a kick that landed in Coleman's ribs. A cracking noise was heard and echoed through the tiled room. Coleman couldn't breathe anymore, he felt like his lungs were closing in. He didn't want to die here. He collapsed onto the tile, his gun falling from his waistline, and sliding in between the man's black boots. The man snickered.

"Oh, the feds will love seeing how you pulled a gun on me," Coleman tried reaching for the weapon, but the boot crushed his fingers before he could grab it. More cracking was heard. It pierced his ears, and Coleman let out a scream this time. His hand was crushed. White fragments pierced his skin as blood began to drain from his hands.

"I just," He breathed, "Wanted," Coleman struggled to fill his lungs with air. "To go... to... my..."

Men in black uniforms swarmed the rest stop, flooding in through the front doors. They ushered the man on top of Coleman away. One officer pulled Coleman's assaulter to the side and began



to take a statement from him. Another officer confiscated the gun that was several feet away. A different officer placed a knee in the small of his back, pushing Coleman further into the floor. Shackles were placed tightly around his wrists, the cool metal shocking him.

“I didn’t do anything!” Coleman pleaded to the officers as they lifted him to his feet. “Please, my grandmother needs my help!” His throat felt tight and his face grew hot as the men ignored his cries.

Their hands patted down Coleman: they spoke, but nothing made sense. His head was fuzzy. He didn’t understand what was going on. Why would they do this to him? Treat him like an animal? Their voices were loud and demanding, but Coleman couldn’t comprehend.

‘Coleman Bryer, you are under arrest.’

SELECTION OF MERIT

T-Rex Skull

Bryce Hurd



**VISUAL
ARTS**

AWARD WINNERS

1st

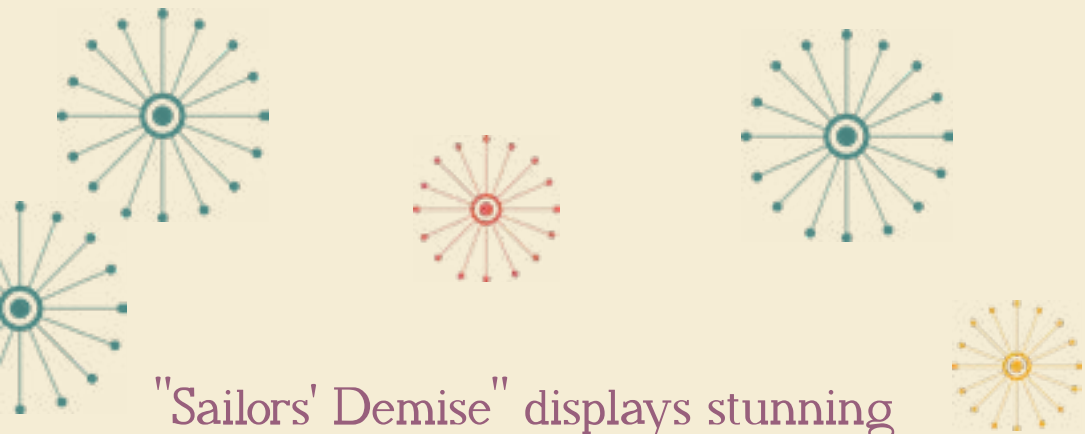
PLACE



Scrap Bucket Sculpture
Cass Gordon



Cass's creation is a testament to the ingenuity of the artist, who has skillfully transformed reclaimed clay into art. By repurposing what is considered trash, this sculpture highlights the possibilities of artistic expression using found materials. It is a beautiful example of how art can be created from virtually anything.



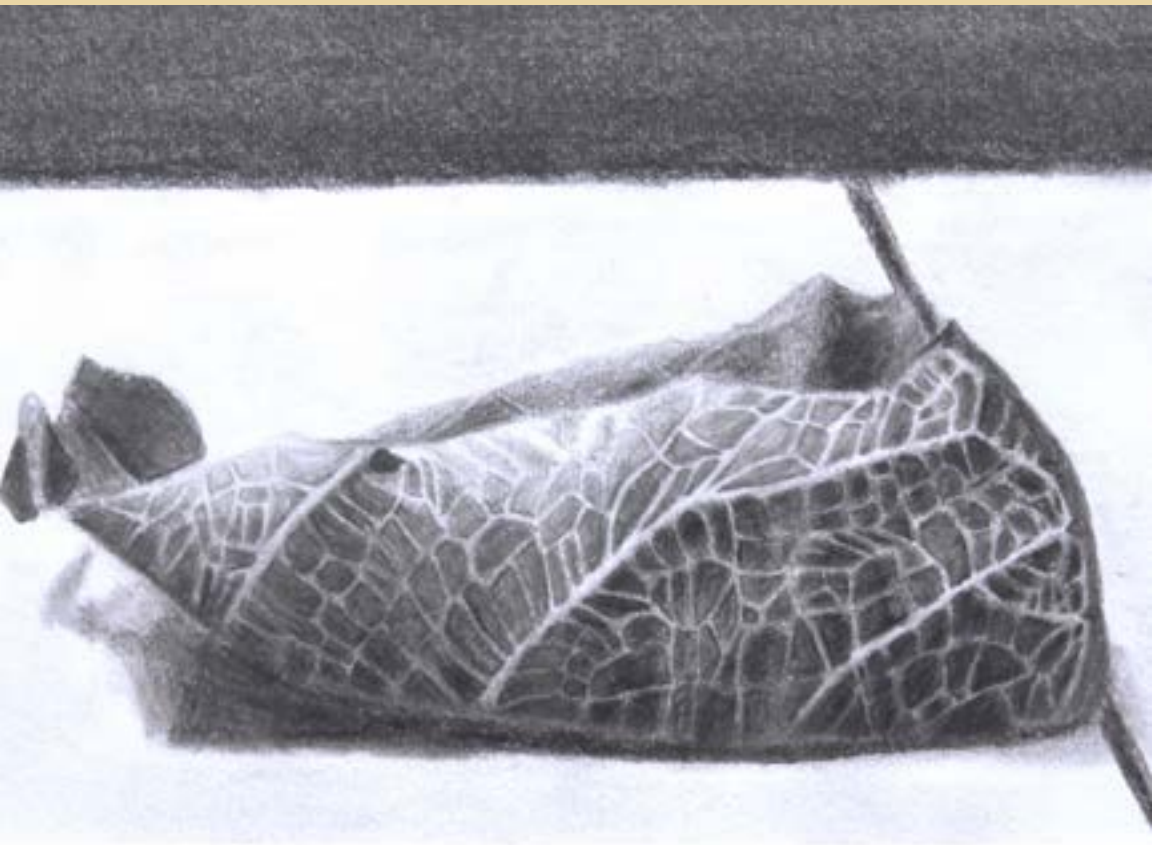
"Sailors' Demise" displays stunning technical ability through its use of line, color, light, and composition. The contrast in scale between the ship and the octopus conveys a sense of awe and terror in the face of the creature's ferocity as it envelops the ship. Zoe captures the imagination in this visual narrative in which the winner is unmistakable.



2nd PLACE

Sailors' Demise
Zoe Palmateer

3rd PLACE



Leaf at Table Edge
Henry Charron

"Leaf at Table Edge" is a remarkable example of technical skill in realism. However, the drawing is more than just a simple still life. Upon closer examination, the composition and title communicate a profound sense of tension, loneliness, and fragility. Henry has captured this emotionality by focusing on a single withered leaf and adding tension via position, framing, and closeness. Taken together, the leaf displays in a purposely unsettling way.

