

Calliope



University of Holy Cross
Literary Magazine

2021-2022

Calliope

**A collection of artwork, poems, stories,
and reflections by the students of the
University of Holy Cross**

**32nd Edition
2021-2022**

**Calliope is the muse
of heroic and epic poetry.**

**Cover Art by
Chloé Williams
*Tyche***

**Cover design by
Matthew Exnicios**

The Department of Humanities

University of Holy Cross

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About the cover art of his issue:

Tyche is the Greek goddess of good fortune and prosperity,
daughter of Aphrodite and either Zeus or Hermes.
She is often depicted in art wearing a crown and
holding a cornucopia (horn of plenty).

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Skylar Fontaine



Sierra Carter

Peaches!

Deeply inspired by "The Devil's Punchbowl"

They say they needed us,
but we were already freedmen.
They said it in the paper.

Even if we couldn't read
they let us go
without another word.

They spoke of concentration camps,

We can't even pronounce those words
way too many broken syllables.

But here we are just like our grand pappys,
shackled,
with guns to our backs.

They had on those dark blue uniforms
with the softest fabric, I've ever seen,
that was the only thing

soft about those Union soldiers.

As time went on, we started to expire
slowly from illnesses we had never seen.

We typically died from the rage of our masters
or rotten food the pigs didn't want.

Now our bodies filled the bowl,
Like the fruit on master's kitchen table did.

Sierra Carter

So golden and so sweet,
our hearts became hardened
like the pit beneath the flesh of those pretty peaches.

Soon enough we were singing like we used to do,
but this time it was a different tune.

We chanted something we never imagined.

They screeched,
even if we couldn't hear them
from their cinderblock cells.

Send us back to the plantation.

We were locked up,
like birds in a cage.

Except we would never be turned loose.

We sang that same proverb
as loud as we could,
even if it fell upon deaf ears.

Sierra Carter

Pralines

Every time it gets cold in the south, my Mimi whips out her giant steel pot from the top of her storage cabinet. Right around the beginning of December, she prepares her voice box and her arms for the family tradition: making pralines together. The tradition officially began when Roy's wife Cynthia started inviting her grandchildren and her daughter over to make "*pecan*" candy, as the Creoles say, on Friday nights. I started participating in the tradition when I was rather young. I was on pecan peeling duty. That was by far the most boring part of the tradition from my viewpoint. All I had to do was pick a pecan, use the cracker, and place it in the bowl while inspecting it for shells. Then repeat.

The real highlight of the tradition is the family bickering. That's how my Mimi communicates, loudly and boisterously. The night would always start with my Mimi yelling at us on the phone while we were in the car on the way over to her house. She would insist we get there faster. Something in me knew it wasn't always the candy; sometimes she truly missed us. If we were late, she complained; if we were in traffic, she complained. That's just who she is.

After we arrived at the house, she already had all the ingredients out for all of us to get started on our duties for the night. I always longed to be a stirrer or at least a pourer—something other than a peeler. Where was my lovely Mimi the whole time? Instructing us like a deranged captain on a sinking ship. The second to last Christmas the tradition changed altogether—I had reached the age of transition. I no longer was known as the pecan peeler; I was now the third stirrer in line. When stirrer one's arm got tired, and then stirrer two's arm gave out, it was my time to shine. I was adorned with compliments like, "Wow, who would've thought you had it in you!" The truth is I didn't know I had it in me till I did it. I was a part of the crew that put in the real blood, sweat, and tears to make the sweet morsel that my Mimi gave out as Christmas presents.

Sierra Carter

My brother, like most boys when it comes to stuff like this, stayed in the background. I became special that night: I was a part of the big dogs even if no one saw it as otherworldly as I did.

This family tradition has shaped my holidays and the beginning of the holidays for me. One of my core memories throughout my life is listening to my Mimi bicker throughout the whole process. I don't think I could ever forget those moments. They will forever reside in my heart as one of my favorite family moments.



Dirk Valdez

Sierra Carter

The Table

At family events I observed
Like I usually do

I sat and chose my muses for the next few days

As I sat
I saw the table
Where my grandfather and my great-aunts sat
Being jovial in the best ways possible
I noticed something in me shift
I realized that my brother and I will be the only ones at our table
I always wanted another sibling
I always wanted my brother to have someone when I'm gone
But as I age, I love how it's just us
I can see us now: older, gray hair, and wrinkled foreheads
Still wearing thick-framed glasses
Telling stories to the other people at the table
Surrounded by husbands, wives, and kids
And grandchildren who can't even sit on the chairs properly
Watching people that look just like us
Eating, talking, and catching up
Bud looking like the men on mama's side
And me looking like the women on daddy's side
Laughing with each other as if we were 20 and
16 all over again

Sierra Carter

Dionysus

I always viewed you as a white man
You're probably black
With beautiful skin like the dusk of the night

You probably detest wine
You probably roll your eyes when people call you
"the god of wine"
You probably drink warm cider or rum

I image you frolicking in white linens
But you probably wear nothing
Why would a god wear clothes?

I imagine you thin

When you're probably plus-sized at best
Why do people put all these expectations on the
male body?
Chiseled, hairless, white, all these things that not
everyone is

Things not everyone can control,
standards that gods aren't even held to.

Lindsey DiFebbo

Existential Negotiations

Amara watched the stars become streaks of bright light as she flew through space and time just to reach the outer edges of the galaxy. This wasn't the first time she was sent away to some far-off galaxy to make a stupid trade for someone else. Actually, this was probably her hundredth trade. She had a specific set of skills, though, skills that the government of space found highly valuable when they wanted something from someone else.

“What are you trading this time, Amara?” The captain of the ship, Myob, once again stuck his nose where it didn't belong. He had been gifted the name Myob as a joke by the government officials he worked with, but they continued to work with him because he was one of the most reliable ship captains the galaxy had ever seen.

Amara turned to stare at the four-eyed, bipedal, silver robot manning the ship. It was no wonder he was the galaxy's most reliable ship captain. He was one of the last robots of his kind. His technological skills were something even Amara could not fathom. This ship was probably an extension of him.

“I don't even know. I just know I'm being sent off to this stupid planet in the middle of nowhere. It's called Ora.”

At the mention of the planet's name, Myob looked startled. “Why wasn't I notified of this?”

“They didn't tell you where you were taking me?”

“I was told we were going to Viata. It's within my range. Are you taking a ship from Viata to Ora?”

“I might have to now. It doesn't look like you're too eager to go to Ora anyway,” Amara grumbled, annoyed at the change in plans.

Lindsey DiFebbo

“I’m not eager to go, but I will for you. You have been one of the kindest passengers on my ship. It is only fair that I bring you where you need to go. But be warned: the people you are dealing with aren’t like the normal people I’ve seen you trade with. What they trade is usually too valuable for anyone to buy.”

“What is it that they trade?” Maybe Amara would get lucky and finally have some idea what she was getting herself into. It wasn’t often that she found herself warned about a planet, and especially not by Myob. He had traveled all across the universe. He had never warned her about a planet or its people, but to see the nervousness in his robotic, red eyes made her nervous, too.

“If the government has not told you, then I cannot tell you. Who sent you all the way out here? Was it the government in general or was it—”

“General Hotul. He said it could buy me my freedom,” Amara muttered anxiously.

Instead of replying, Myob just nodded and looked away. Before he could turn his head Amara thought she saw sadness in his eyes. She didn’t think that robots could feel sadness, but the glimpse she received caused a shudder to slip down her spine.

What was General Hotul getting her into? Was her freedom really worth it to trade with a planet that made even the most amazing pilot in the galaxy fearful for her?

“What did he send you to trade with?” Myob finally spoke up after a long, awkward pause between them.

“The general said it would arrive when I get there. He didn’t tell me any specifics. He never does.” Amara waved her hand at the robot. She was worrying for nothing. The general

Lindsey DiFebbo

wouldn't do anything to put her life in danger. She had a specific set of skills. She could convince the socks off a stranger. She was that good a trader.

Plus, it wasn't like it would be easy for anyone to kill her even if General Hotul was sending her there as a death sentence. She was immortal. She and the government had figured that out the first time her life was put in jeopardy and she had risen again in the morgue. He needed her alive . . . right?

"Well, I guess you're about to find out. We will be there in five minutes," Myob muttered as he stared out the window.

Amara let her attention return to the galactic landscape she had grown used to ever since being taken from her planet. She missed the blue skies, fresh air, and world of color. Out here, it was only light and darkness. The little bit of color she was ever allowed to see remained in the dimly lit spaceship. Even when she returned to the government officials, she was kept locked in a room that was devoid of color.

"We are entering hyper jump in three seconds," Myob announced.

Amara glanced out the window, hoping to get a glimpse of her home planet, Viata. She had the eerie feeling that if she did see the blue and green star, it would be for the last time.

"3 . . . 2 . . . 1." The ship shot forward at an alarming rate, and dizziness overwhelmed Amara.

Despite constantly traveling the galaxies, she absolutely hated hyper jump, especially the brief instant when it felt like the world was dropping from beneath her feet and tilting on its axis. It was as if everything solid she had ever known had disappeared in an instant. Luckily, as quickly as it happened, it ended, and the ship was now sitting in a different galaxy altogether.

Lindsey DiFebbo

A galaxy that was nonexistent except for a little green planet. Amara thought that in order for a planet to exist it needed a sun, but not this planet. It was only a small green and blue orb in the middle of space. There was no logic to its existence, but it was still there, and it was eerie.

As Amara peered closer at the little planet through the window, she realized with troubling certainty that this blue and green orb in the middle of nowhere wasn't a planet at all but a machine. Through the opaque surface of the planet, she could see cogs, wheels, and gears turning in a constant rotation. Even from the distance of the spaceship she could hear the ticking, as if the whole sphere was a giant clock. How was she supposed to land on a planet that looked like it was made of glass?

As if the people on the mechanical orb read her mind, the giant sphere boomed loudly, and the clear surface of the planet moved, sliding open. Amara quickly realized that life did not live on this mechanical orb, but in it.

Three ships flew out from the center of the planet and into space to meet her spaceship. The radio on the ship buzzed, and for the first time since they left government headquarters, the communication system came to life.

“What is your business with Ora?” A gravelly voice boomed through the ship's coms.

“I am Amara. I was sent here for a trade by General Hotul. He said you are expecting me.” But Amara sounded unsure. The last thing she wanted was for whoever these people were to blow the ship to smithereens.

There was a silence over the communication system, which caused Amara's uneasiness to rise at alarming rates. She exchanged a worried glance with Myob. She didn't want to be responsible for his death. She didn't want to be responsible for anyone's death, but she feared she might be as the silence dragged on.



Skylar Fontaine

Lindsey DiFebbo

Then, finally, the gravelly voice spoke again. “We will not permit your ship to enter. We will, however, allow you to board one of our ships.”

Amara gave a brief sigh of relief as one of the three ships, which were larger and more advanced than the ship Amara and Myob were on, crept closer.

“Wait! How will I get back?”

“Don’t worry about that now. Everything will be handled by your general. Come.” The gravelly voice spoke again, just as the larger ship connected to the airlock at the back of the ship, where most cargo was traded in space. At least they had a safe way to transfer her from one ship to another. The last thing she wanted to do was float out in the middle of space in a suit and be beamed up by another ship. That idea brought back too many memories from when she was taken. She quickly snuffed them out as she headed back toward the cargo area to board yet another alien ship.

“Amara.” Myob stopped her as she was about to open her end of the airlock and step into this strange planet’s ship.

Amara turned, slightly annoyed that Myob was holding her back from doing her job. But when she saw the sad look on the robot’s face she hesitated. “What’s wrong?”

“Just . . . good luck. These people can be a little . . . unorthodox,” Myob muttered, looking away from her nervously.

“I’ll be fine. I’ll be back before you know it,” Amara said with a smile, before opening the air lock and stepping from one alien ship to another.

The larger ship was much more colorful, and so were the aliens that greeted her on the other side. The people looked much

Lindsey DiFebbo

like her people, but they had very pale skin compared to her rich golden tone. Her planet was known for its sun though, whereas this planet had no sun to sustain life.

“Ah, you’re Viatian.”

Amara finally had a face to put with the voice she had heard on the communication system. The man was tall—freakishly tall—and dressed in a large golden robe that hid his silhouette well. His head was larger than most, shaped like a large, rounded rectangle. Instead of his skin being pale like the other workers on the ship, he was the color of rich mahogany and he had golden, soulless eyes. His eyes made her feel uneasy as she watched him appraise her.

“Yes,” Amara murmured, not knowing what else to say. She was struck dumb because of the way he looked at her, like a piece of property he wanted to buy.

“Well, you will do nicely, I suppose. General Hotul will be on the holo-screen in a moment to explain everything.” The man handed her a small device before turning around and walking to what Amara assumed was the control room.

She followed him, wanting to finish the sale so she could get away from this creepy man. She glanced out a passing window and gave a sigh of relief as she caught a brief glimpse of her ship, but then the moment was gone.

“I am called Conductor Morti,” the man with the golden eyes muttered, sounding bored.

“Are you the one who will conduct the sale?”

“The sale has already been made.”

Before Amara could get angry or nervous, the holo-screen beeped, and a small hologram of General Hotul emerged from it.

Lindsey DiFebbo

“Ah, Amara, I see you’ve made it safely to Ora. How was the trip?” General Hotul looked unfazed by the news that Morti had just told her.

“It was fine, General Hotul. But what is this about the sale already being made? I thought you sent me out here to make a sale for you. What am I doing here if not to conduct business for the government?”

“Oh dear, I had hoped to call after everything was explained, Amara. You see, you are the sale. You are being sold to Morti to benefit the government.”

“W-what do you mean?” Amara looked up just as she realized she had been led into a holding cell without realizing it.

“Amara, you are an immortal Viatian. Your life force, your essence, is what is so valuable to the government, not your ability to make a sale. We have countless people who can do that.” Hotul scoffed as if he were offended by the idea that she meant something personally to the government.

“What does my life force have to do with any of this? I don’t understand!” Amara was doing everything in her power not to break down, but it was hard. She was coming to the realization that she might be about to face a very painful and slow death.

“Dear child, you have had lifetimes traveling the cosmos. Why do you sound ungrateful for all that the government has given you? You have the privilege of having your life force recycled into a government official. You should be honored,” Hotul said angrily.

“Honored? Honored? You . . . You . . . bastard! Do you seriously think I would be honored to have the life drained out of me to extend your pathetic time in existence?”

Lindsey DiFebbo

Hotul laughed. “Oh, you’re not extending my time here. You are extending the Raul’s. He needs to make sure his power continues to stretch across the universes. You are being used for a higher purpose.”

“I didn’t agree to this,” Amara said sadly, as she slowly began to realize what was really happening. The darkness that had plagued the universe and that was constantly expanding fed off the life forces of other alien species. It’s how the darkness had sustained its strength. And now, this dark spirit was slowly starting to rule the universe, taking the light with it.

“It doesn’t matter if you agreed to it or not. Your will does not matter. We can do what we want with who we want because we are the ones in charge. We serve the Raul—the lord of all evil—because there is nothing in the cosmos beyond him. We have searched beyond the universe and have come up with nothing more powerful,” Hotul said, starting to sound bored.

“What about souls? What about what makes us who we are? There has to be something more to us!” Amara tried one last argument, but as Morti unlocked the doors to her cell and stepped into the room holding a large and dangerous-looking machine, all hope drained from her.

“You are just a body with a life force. There is nothing more to you than the physical and the life force that sustains you,” Morti said with a shrug, as he stepped closer to her.

Amara backed toward the padded wall in terror, realizing with stunning clarity that her freedom would only come with her death. Wanting to put up one more challenge, one more fight, she screamed, “What about when my life force is gone? What about when the Raul needs more?”

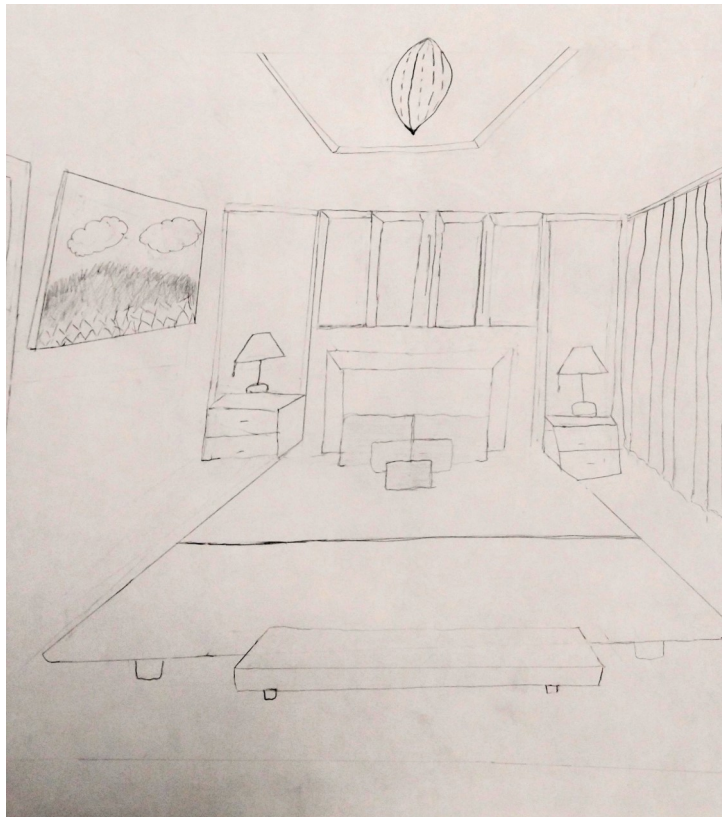
“Then we take more. We will kill every Viatian if it’s what he asks of us.” Morti took another step towards her.

“And what about when all Viatians are gone? What then?”

Lindsey DiFebbo

“Then? Then we will start abducting and taking humans,” Hotul said with a laugh. And with one more step Morti was on her, and her life force was being sucked into the large machine in his hands.

It was like going into hyper jump. It felt like the world was dropping from beneath her feet and tilting on its axis. Everything solid that she had ever known was painfully disappearing in an instant. But this time it didn't end.



Collae Marshall

Lily Gilson

**The Painted Promenade:
An Image of Faultlessness**

Treading along the way, a promenade. / There are lines of trees with delicately colored flowers, both light pink and hot magenta. / The gentle colors bring me back. In memories I tend to sink / Innocent, humble petals on the ground, I want to pick them up as I did before. / Lime-green vines on the old, rustic walls, wildly twisted against each other. / In the distance, I see the white froth on a rough but lively shore. / Sky is blue, sand is white and soft, clay is also soft, but black. / The sunflowers proudly hold up their gay heads, without looking back. / It is a long walk, but it does not feel like it. / In reverie my subconscious treads. / In tragedy my mind now falls. / The sun is radiant but not hot. / Nearby, hearty fishermen glance at the squid they have caught, fiercely alive and squirming in the net. / The breeze is cool, but not cold. / In reflections, my heart will not forget / Cannot forget / How I was growing older, but never growing old.



Skylar Fontaine

Mary Gilson

The Poet: The Truly Empathetic Soul

As the break of day draws near,
It seems to inspire a kind of needless, yet uneasy fear.
As the musky, dark dusks of dawn reappear,
The pangs of dissatisfaction and waste become ever clear,
And nor do they cease or disappear.

The showers of April do not encourage May blossoms to bloom,
For the drenching showers have drowned the flowers,
Choking every tender bud, hastening each to an early tomb.

All things are from One, so why is everything shattered in utter
chaos?

Pieces of glass all over the floor.
Scrambling to pick up each piece,
As if the broken can be fixed.
We cut ourselves in the process. Is it even worth it?

The blaring, glaring lights blind the eyes, making us unable to
see.

The artificial light competes with the stars, thinking it can
overcome them.

Man, by trying to overcome the true Light, renders his own
created light,

In fact, a kind of darkness.
A darkness darker than the dark.
For at least the dark knows what it is.

Man's light has covered our eyes in the sentiments of "progress."
We have forgotten how to see, and how to hear, and how to feel.
We see only what we want to see, and hear only what we want to
hear, and feel only what we want to feel.

But we must learn to feel it all. To feel the whole weight of the
universe. To empathize with every single human suffering. To
cry with every tear ever dropped. To rejoice with every smile
ever smiled. We must feel all and be all

And die all.

Christian Graves

My Journey to Virtual Learning and Graduating from It

In 2012, my mom had to decide whether to let me go to a district school in the area or a private school to start sixth grade. We could not afford private school just for one child. It would have not been fair to have me in a private school and my siblings in a public school. The middle school (Truman) in the area was a bad school, a failing school. I thought the school must be horrible for teachers to tell her my mom not to send me there.

The first week of school was approaching fast, and my mom did not know what to do. She was searching for different schools online, but none was going to work. She came across the website called K12 and saw an online school called Louisiana Virtual Charter Academy. The same day she registered my younger siblings and me at the school.

The first two years were a struggle getting familiar with the platform and the idea of attending school from home. I thought it was like traditional homeschooling, but they did not call it that. They called it Online Learning or Virtual Learning. The online program was a state-accredited school, where we still had to take LEAP, EOC, and the ACT or SAT. The school was following the TOPS graduation plan as well. There were also in-person field trips where we went to laser tag, the trampoline park, and more.

The next four years became interesting. One year, I found out my former elementary school friend was enrolled in the program as well. The fact that someone I had known prior to this was in the program was fascinating. Between my sixth and eleventh grade years, there were many courses I completed early. When it was time for twelfth grade, only three classes remained. One of them was pre-calculus/trigonometry. It was not my choice to take this class, but I had already completed the minimum number of math classes to graduate.

Christian Graves

As graduation approached, the thought of walking across a stage was exhilarating. When Covid got worse, graduation was moved online. At one point, the school did not want us to wear caps and gowns because other students did not get theirs in time. But they received a lot of backlash, and finally we were told we could wear them. Even if we had had an in-person graduation, many family and friends would not have been able to attend. So online graduation became convenient for everyone. My whole family came online, and it turned out well.

Those years were very tough, but they prepared me for what to expect when I got to college. My mom's decision to enroll me in virtual learning in sixth grade was the best thing that has ever happened in my life



Dirk Valdez

Quintin Gustin

Trombone Lips

I

Mrs. Meg stood up behind her desk. “Everyone line up,” she said in her deep, throaty voice, which we all might have described as “commanding,” had we the vocabulary to do so. She was our third grade teacher—a short, somewhat plump woman, whose body resembled the shape of a pear. It was for this reason that we called her “Meg the Egg,” words spoken in a tone that asserted some small sense of rebellion. Even her nephew, my classmate and playmate, Grant Spivey, called her this, a fact that, even then, at that innocent age, should have tipped me to his inherently ignoble character. And yet, it would be another seven years before I would come to understand the capacity he held within him for disloyalty and deceit.

We were going to the band room. “Bring your tonettes,” Mrs. Meg urged in afterthought. I fingered the key holes and pressed the hard plastic of the mouthpiece to my lips. It felt odd, foreign to my mouth. I was reminded of the day I had tried my father’s pipe between my lips. Of course, the tonette did not have the same spicy, tongue-tingling edge to it, but the hard plastic held a similar feel to my lips and tongue. I placed my fingers over the open row of holes and rolled them up and down, silently playing a tune I had never learned. Then, we marched in quiet parade to the band room.

The band director greeted us at the door. He was a balding, overly large man, in a time when not so many of us were, who was already perspiring noticeably in the humid warmth of the room, which, like all the others in the school, lacked even a fan to push the thick air.

We were asked to gather round his desk and then, each in turn, invited to repeat a pattern of rhythmic pounding that he slapped out on the desktop with his wide, fat hands. We were auditioning for drums. After each of us had tried to simulate the beats he had measured out so easily, he pointed to three boys.

Quintin Gustin

They had the timing and rhythm of the true drummer, he said, and they could be drummers in his band, if they wished.

I had not been selected and, in truth, had no desire to play drums. However, when I noted that Grant Spivey was one of the boys selected, I did experience a singular twinge of jealousy. I was certain I would later hear his boasts.

Abruptly, the director ordered us back into line. We were then invited, one by one, into his office to tell him which instrument we had chosen. Instrument selection was no small matter. For days, we had discussed its intricacies with all the eight-year-old logic at our disposal. The bass horn was too large. Stringed instruments hurt the fingers. For the boys in the class, the clarinet was a girl's instrument. Drums held some interest, but I had already dismissed them as lacking the melodies I wished to make. I had settled on the trumpet. I already knew of Al Hirt. He was still a young man, then, and already a Louisiana icon. His was no instrument that would be lost in a cacophony of other sounds. It seemed bold, tuneful, and, perhaps more importantly, the trumpeter looked good playing it.

All of us were excited, made impatient and restless by the anticipation. Perhaps as a small blessing, the line moved quickly, and soon I was beckoned into the director's small, warm office. He watched me enter, as he dragged a dingy handkerchief across his moist forehead. He was one of those men who, balding on top, grew his hair long on one side in order to comb the strands over his shiny head. His eyes were pale and humorless. He was a man who had little interest in children and who had truck with them only because it was his job to do so. He was weary and bored, not from the day, but from the years. "So," he said, without preamble, "Have you decided on an instrument?" He stared at me, waiting, his eyes empty of both emotion and interest.

I looked back at him, ready. "The trumpet," I said. "I want to play the trumpet." I grinned, hopefully, expectantly. I could hardly wait. The sparkling brass, the fluidity of the three

Quintin Gustin

keys with the inlaid mother-of-pearl floating on puffs of air under my flying fingers, the sweet melodies that would issue forth all danced in my brain, sugarplums of excitement.

The director looked down at his desk with an expression of contrived sadness as he slowly shook his head. “Son,” he said, “I’m sorry, but the trumpet is not for you. You were born to play the trombone. You’ve got trombone lips.”

I was too young yet to resent his unwelcome familiarity, too young also to assert or rebut or even question further. And yet, I was stunned. It had been my understanding, the belief of each of us, that we could choose our instruments. I said, “Yes, Sir.” I had no inkling what “trombone lips” were, nor did I ask.

He turned in his chair and bent awkwardly, picking up a long, well-used case. He pushed it across the desk to me. “Band’s at one o’clock every day,” he said.

I cannot say I truly made an effort to learn the trombone. I didn’t. I never warmed to it. I was never sure when I had hit the correct note, never clear on whether the slide was in the precise position. To add to my woes, a previous student had slightly, almost imperceptibly, bent the slide so that it would occasionally catch and destroy any small rapport I might have with the music. I also found the fluid that I was required periodically to evacuate from the end of the slide to be quite abhorrent, and it tweaked even my own rather broad preadolescent sensibilities. It was true, however, that the mouthpiece fit my lips, quite well in fact, although I never became accustomed to the cold, metallic taste of it.

Nor did I ever become comfortable with the feel of the horn. Merely holding the instrument felt awkward, unbalanced. I began to see it as an alien appendage, a brush tied unforgivingly to my hand, with which I would never be able to paint. Throughout that year, I progressed little. We played scales; I played them badly. We played the quick, easy tunes; I played them haltingly and often off key. During that time, I would look

Quintin Gustin

down at the trombone in my hands and close my eyes, turning it in my mind into something else, a trumpet, of course, even a clarinet. Anything else.

Then, the year ended. I was to start fourth grade at St. John Brebeuf's, a new Catholic parochial school. "Do they have a band?" I one day asked my mother. "No. Sorry, dear, they don't," she said. "Oh," was all I answered, for some reason quietly masking my pleasure with a bland look and a noncommittal word. I was free!

II

When I entered the eighth grade at Jesuit, with a new fusion of Latin, Algebra, and Theology in my head, I had little time to fret over my lack of musical enterprise. Music was still passively a part of me, through the radio, as I lived and longed in adolescent whimsy to the songs of the Four Seasons and Irma Thomas and later, of course, the Beatles and the Stones.

There was still a pull, however, and, although subtle, it was no less strong than the moon's uncompromising tug upon the sea. By midterm of my sophomore year, I found myself hanging around the band room with three friends whose very lives seemed to center around music.

Delacroix—it may have been the Marine uniforms we were required to wear, with the carefully placed name tags, but we often called even our closest friends by their last names—played the French horn. I would sometimes go into a practice room with him and listen in unspoken awe. His passion with that horn, his inflections and interpretations, the emotions he pursued, all left me strangely exhilarated, and yet empty and aching for the music I could not play. I felt sure that, if angels truly sang, their chorales must have sounded like Delacroix's horn.

His instrument often seemed a part of him, an extension not merely of how he viewed himself but, in many ways, a



Photo Art
by

Matthew Exnicios



Photo Art
by
**Matthew
Exnicios**



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physical extension as well. When he played, it seemed as if a circle of metal had sprung forth from his lips and hands, contrasting neatly with his blonde hair and even paler skin. He carried his horn with him everywhere and would often open the case merely to look at it or touch it or take an old, soft rag to it and shine the brass that already glistened.

One afternoon, Delacroix and I were in the corridor of the band hall, locked out of the practice rooms, watching Gardner and Mancuso pitch quarters against the wall. Gambling could get you nearly three hours of Penance Hall or worse, and, in the past, we all had abandoned a few quarters to the cold tile when a priest or prefect walked past. In retrospect, it was only a minor rebellion, but breaking the school's strict rules left one with an air of small courage that was quite stimulating and much more rewarding than winning a dollar or two from one's partner in errancy.

"Tell me something," Delacroix began, his eyes still on our friends. "How come you aren't in the band? I know you hang out with us as much for the music as for the friendship."

I agreed that I was indeed drawn to the music. Then, I told him of my third-grade experience and the disappointment and sense of loss that had remained with me. "And so, you see, Delacroix, I have these trombone lips, and yet, I have a complete dislike for that particular instrument."

Delacroix paused a long moment, as if to see if I were serious, then burst into a howl of laughter, startling in both its intensity and its suddenness. We were sitting on the floor, our backs to the wall, but his laughter caused him to roll to his side on the floor, holding his trembling belly with both hands. Mancuso and Gardner, who had been listening to us as they tossed their coins, also got in on the fun, laughing and then puckering their lips to each other and then to me, in parody of what they thought such lips might resemble. Mancuso stooped down, his face very close to mine and, with exaggerated slowness

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inspected my lips, turning his head this way and that, his brow knitted in mock seriousness, a smile quivering on his own lips. Everyone laughed again.

Delacroix recovered and sat up. “Listen,” he said. “We’ve been laughing because it’s all bullshit. There’s no such thing as trombone lips. That director just needed a trombone player, and you were it.”

“Sure,” I said, appreciating his effort to salve my feelings. But the loss had been ingrained long ago, and my sense of futility was still quite real. And he could see it, too.

“No!” he continued emphatically. “I mean it. There is no such thing as trombone lips.” He pounded each word, the last two pronounced very slowly, awash in his sarcasm. “Really! And, if you come back after last period, you can catch Peterson here and ask him for an appointment. Tell him you want to join the band. He’ll ask you what instrument you wish to play.”

“Okay,” I nodded. I stood and walked away, still doubtful, but with the rising hope that I might actually learn to play an instrument, one that pleased me. There were so many choices.

Drums were still not an inviting alternative. Aside from drums lacking the promise of melody, I had noticed that many drummers seemed to be bad boys who barely kept their hostilities in check by beating them out in this socially acceptable way. The trumpet was still enticing, but after seven years it had lost its brassy hold on my affections. Now, there seemed a harshness to its sound that I often found somewhat annoying.

The possibilities of Delacroix’s French horn were quite appealing, but I rejected it as well. Trombone lips or no, I knew I would never fit that instrument in the flawless way that Delacroix did. The bass horn and bass fiddle both seemed like

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too much work for too little profit. I placed even the Sousaphone and baritone in that same category. The violin, the flute, the oboe all suffered in my eyes from one fault or another or, more likely, simply left me unmoved.

And so, it came down to the saxophone or the clarinet. They both felt good in my hands, and I liked the feel of the vibrating reed in my mouth. I settled upon the clarinet, the instrument which, just a few years earlier, I had thought too feminine. But I had come to appreciate its sound. And its straight, slender shape, combined with the interwoven mysteries of its keys, gave it much added attraction.

Yet, there was something else, I think, that drew me to the clarinet. Played well, its notes are clear and piercing, like a surgeon's knife coolly slicing sound into discrete, measurable portions. I believed that, if I learned all its complex fingerings, I could be as precise in playing it as I had been imprecise with the trombone. If the trombone was an instrument whose seeming ambiguity had filled me with consternation and perplexity, here was an instrument ready to provide sharp, strong notes with needle point clarity.

And so it was that I saw Peterson that day after school, and he ushered me into his office. Now was just as good a time to meet as any, he had said. He seated himself with some care behind his desk and motioned for me to take a chair. He was middle-aged, trim, and neatly dressed. His tie was in place and drawn tightly in a full Windsor knot that contrasted with the asymmetrical regulation Marine half Windsor which we were required to tie. His desk was neat, his walls and bookshelves filled with trophies, medallions, plaques, and other honors attesting to his expertise and his past successes. Each had its place, and they created an orderly whole as well integrated and organized as a Bach concerto.

He leaned back in his chair, eyes on me, attentive. He had seen me in this domain, his domain, many times, but I felt this

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was the first time he had actually looked at me. “So, what can I do for you, Mr. Broussard?” He softened and stretched out the “r” in my name without rolling it and omitted the “d,” yielding a pronunciation similar to that spoken in Cajun communities some forty miles to the west, though not usually in New Orleans itself.

“I want,” I said, nervous and hesitant, despite my new-found optimism, “to join the band.”

“Excellent!” He said the word as a staccato burst. He didn’t so much smile as gleam. “And what instrument would you like to play?”

I was breathing easier, feeling relief. This was working out after all. “I want to play the clarinet,” I said, smiling and even nodding a bit for assertion.

I watched a small frown crease his forehead. I felt no immediate alarm. It simply seemed as if he were thinking, caught for a moment at the edge of some serious idea. His eyes never left mine. “I don’t think the clarinet is going to be right for you,” he said.

“Not going to be right...?” I repeated, questioning, the last word trailing off a bit.

“No, not right at all. You see, Mr. Broussard, you have what we call,” he paused for effect, “trombone lips!”

I couldn’t help my response. I emitted a loud, brief snort of laughter, perhaps at the absurd comedy I seemed to be playing out. It also suddenly occurred to me that this was some elaborate prank that Delacroix had cooked up with the director. But when I looked back into his sharp, brown eyes and noted their intensity, I knew this was no joke. Music was his life, what he cared about. It was not fodder for foolishness.

I stammered a bit at this recognition, then asserted, “I don’t like the trombone. I tried it once.”

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He opened the palms of his hands and nodded, conciliatory and understanding, “You were made for the trombone. It is your instrument. Give it another try. I think you will find it different this time.” His voice was soft, placating and yet insistent.

That night I went home and spent a good deal of time examining my lips. Despite the normal adolescent fixation on looks, I had never really paid much attention to my lips before. They were a ruddy color. The bottom lip was full, but not symmetrical, as I thought most lips to be. It seemed to thin noticeably as it ran to the right. The upper lip, slightly smaller, seemed to taper in a similar, but less apparent way. I ran my finger over them, testing the feel. I spent no little time at the mirror, puckering, making faces, thinning them with a broad grin, elongating them with a wide “O.” “So these,” I thought, “are trombone lips.”

I then pressed my lips hard together and blew air through them, creating a tight vibration, as if I were blowing a horn. I was already adjusting to this new reality or, rather, accepting an old one. Like it or not, these were my lips, my fate.

Mr. Peterson’s prediction that I would find the trombone different this time did not prove correct. It seemed that each endeavor with that instrument was fraught, at first with difficulty and frustration and later with a familiar loathing.

I found little consistency in my vibratory abilities with the mouthpiece. Correct slide placement seemed as elusive as ever. In fact, the slide of my new instrument, although unbent, would often somehow catch itself upon itself, and no amount of Selmer Slide Oil would stop it. I endeavored, struggled, then persevered, but I never learned to play the trombone in any manner that provided satisfaction or reward.

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III

As I reflect on those days when I wished so badly to make music, but never enough, it seems, to master the elusive art of the trombone, I wonder at the intuitions of those two band directors, the two men who had somehow known that the trombone fit me more perfectly than I could have ever known at the time. The trombone is not a precise instrument. There are no separate keys that, when pressed, command a single, distinct note.

The trombone quite literally slides through its notes in a hit-or-miss manner that interacts with the musician's own creative nuances. By mere observation, it is clear that this is an instrument given to flexibility and, perhaps, even freedom. If other instruments require precision to render musical accuracy, the trombone is played by "feel," which is frequently imprecise and often ambiguous. It is the difference between the scientific certainty and the educated guess of the artist.

This notion of "feel" gives the trombone its range and its power. Other instruments play a sequence of discreet notes. The trombone plays a spectrum of sound. Thus, precision diminishes in importance as attitude, interpretation, and intent become paramount. The trombone is as open to the subtleties of its environment as a chameleon moving along a garden wall, poised to blend in satisfying harmony with the instruments that surround it.

I have never been a person compelled to precision. In those rare instances in which I have been required to bow to the tyrant of detail, my life seemed to slow with the tedium of ponderous effort, the forcing upon me of uncommon and often unwelcome ways of thinking. What I have learned about myself—and I think it is the ultimate lesson of the trombone, one I failed to grasp when it was first presented to me—is that attentiveness to one's environment often may be preferable to precision within it. Perhaps more so. Context is everything; it is the ultimate reality for each of us.

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That overindulgence in detail which precision sometimes requires can be like a noose around the carotid of creativity, limiting, constricting, and shutting off inspiration. The hard scientist or the mathematician might see this as blasphemy, but theirs is a different world. To each his own. Some of us must yin and some must yang.

In myself, I find that this sense of “feel” dominating precision provides certain freedoms, not least the freedom of flexibility, which always opens a panoply of possibilities. And there is also a type of expertise in some endeavors that cannot be engendered by mere slavery to detail. The result of this is that I can be many things to many people. It also means that I am able to act rather than react, to choose rather than to have chosen for me.

Like the chameleon, I am able to blend, to fit into my world with a certain comfort. And yet, by paying attention to it, I am able not merely to bend to it but to act upon it as well. I can change the colors and tones of the world around me, causing it to respond to me as much as I respond to it.

IV

It occurred to me that kissing her full, lush lips was like kissing a warm, tasty pudding, yielding and yet somewhat resilient. Her lipstick, the hint of Merlot still on her breath, and the subtle haze of her delicate perfume mingled to tease and delight my senses. I felt her lips part slightly, submitting willingly to the gentle determination of my own lips upon her. I began to explore the tender, moist flesh at the inside of her lips. Our tongues met in lazy caress.

I could feel her breath on my face now, faster, warmer, more urgent. My fingertips at the curve of her breast rose and fell in the sweet cadence of her longing. I pressed my lips with more firmness against hers, taking her mouth in an enveloping swirl of sensations, potent and nearly overpowering with desire.

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I began to kiss down her neck, carefully, but with a telling pressure. This was not a precise art, but one did have to be attentive. I was taking in every nuance of her responses. She tilted her head a bit, offering me more of that silken expanse of welcoming flesh, as if it were a bridge to the rest of her body. She was vibrantly alive to my touch and I to hers.

“Your lips feel so good,” she murmured, the words spoken with slight pauses between each, measured in the rhythm of her breathing.

I spoke then into the delicate fullness of her warmth, my voice low and hoarse. The words I uttered were as much for myself, I think, as for her. “Trombone lips,” I whispered.

Gabby Holmes

ICU

The fear in her eyes speaks volumes
As she goes through the hardest time of her life
She makes you promise not to hurt yourself
Because she knows she's not going to make it out the same
One wants to feel that it is fictitious
Unfortunately, this is reality and reality sucks
It sucks the air out of her lungs so she cannot breathe
Intubated, restrained, and sedated
How is one supposed to get well after something so serious?
Tumor in her stomach, septic beyond belief
Pale as a vampire, a human having the life sucked out of her
With constant monitors making noises
At every sound you jump
You know she's going to make it
But that little thought in the back of your head
Says she's tired of fighting, you would be
But one day we will be able to say
We made it out of ICU

Janay Major

Her Pocketbook

My grandmother always kept two important things with her: her oval-shaped, dark-rimmed prescription glasses and her pocketbook. Notice that I did not describe the pocketbook. You see, although her prescription frames remained the same, the pocketbook came in all shapes and sizes. It really depended on how long her walks would be. My grandmother did not own a car; she either walked or took public transportation. If she knew that she would be gone the majority of the day, the pocketbook tended to be larger—that way she could carry more if she was running multiple errands. The pocketbook tended to be smaller if she was taking a quick trip not too far from her home.

My most vivid pocketbook memory revolves around the bingo hall. My grandmother did not like paying for the concessions there, so we would go to Wendy's before taking the bus to the bingo hall. They did not allow outside food or beverages inside, which was where the pocketbook came into play. My grandmother would tuck the bag housing my spicy nuggets into the folds of her pocketbook and place her bingo markers on top (trust me, she had a lot of them) to hide the bag. While my grandmother concentrated on the multiple bingo cards laid out in front of her, I dug my hand in her pocketbook, pulling out one spicy nugget at a time not to raise any suspicion.

The pocketbook had everything. You want snacks? You got it. A little thirsty? It was right there. First Aid? Of course! That pocketbook was an extension of herself. She and that pocketbook were prepared at all times. Even when she was bedridden and unable to move, on top of the dresser at the side of the bed sat her pocketbook.

Janay Major

Last Stop

“Go the way you know.” This was one of many life lessons my grandmother instilled in me when I was younger. This piece of advice came in handy once I enrolled in Xavier Prep in New Orleans and had to catch the public bus to get to her apartment on St. Charles Avenue after school. The very first time I had to journey to her via public transportation, she came to my school and waited until dismissal. We then rode the bus together. That was not first time she gave me much needed advice, but I realize now that she was sharing so much more with me.

Almost every day from that point on, if I did not have dance practice or any other after school extracurricular activities, I would get on the public bus in front of my school and ride down Magazine Street. My grandmother would wait at the bus stop beneath the bridge at the corner of Calliope and Magazine Streets. From there, we would walk to her apartment, where I hung out until my mother picked me up. This was our routine for a little over two years.

I rode the bus so many times that I knew what street the bus would stop at before it did. The bus driver would yell out “Next stop . . . ,” and I would finish the sentence with the street name. The day after my grandmother passed away, I found myself standing at the bus stop, unable to break the routine I had gotten so used to. I waited for the bus even though I knew my grandmother would not be under the bridge waiting for me. I remained at the bus stop, as though I was stuck there, until my mother picked me up. A wave of emotions overcame me as I walked away, hoping that my grandmother was at peace at her last stop.

Isaiah M. Odoms

Birthday Joy

25

Primetime

Like roses at my feet

My soul weeps

Another year down

Plenty more coming

Who knows what's looming

26

Oh, what a time to be alive

Loving on the finer things

Embracing my painful past

Thinking of the future

Taking off to Plato

I am no Socrates

But I'm one of the Greats

Isaiah M. Odoms

Deeply Hurt

Damn...
Thought you were the one
Guess I thought wrong

Never thought you would hurt me this way
All of the time I spent loving you
Just for you to turn away
Never would've thought in a million years I'd see this day

When our love isn't the same
Because you hurt me so deeply (deeply hurt)
Brought tears to my smile
Brought pain to my joy (my joy)
Boy, how can I move on
When you're still the one I want

How can I love again
When I'm still in love with you
Tell me where do we go from here
Because I never would've thought in a million years I'd be here
Contemplating loving you again
Choosing us again
Choosing to trust you again

When our love isn't the same
Because you hurt me so deeply (deeply hurt)
Brought tears to my smile
Brought pain to my joy (my joy)
Boy, how can I move on
When you're still the one I want



Skylar Fontaine



Vanessa Ortega

A New Fire

The sun is shining so bright, and I can feel the warmth on my skin. The living room is very clear and shiny, I think. My grandma appears, and I can't believe she's across from me. She looks so healthy and pure. As I look her in the eyes, she asks me if I know why she is here. I reply, "No. Why are you here?" She responds, "Your mom is ready to go. We are ready for her. She is ready." As I am in tears, I reply, "I am not ready. I don't want her to go yet. I can't do this. I am not ready." My grandma responds, "You will be ok. You will be just fine. It's her time and I just wanted to let you know. You will be ok."

I woke up from that dream. I quickly looked over at my mom, and she was sleeping. I was in shock, and all I wanted to do was cry. I didn't though. I told one of my aunts about the dream, thinking if I said it out loud, I would cry, but I didn't. A few weeks later, a deep pain struck my stomach so hard and took my breath away. It was a dark night, and it was very noisy. I felt really warm, and all my emotions flooded through my body. That was what I felt when I realized my mother was going to pass away very soon. I never thought it would be possible to live without her. I never thought I would live without her so soon. I didn't react right away when the doctors informed us that she had stage 4 colon cancer and didn't have long to live. I reacted to the reality two months later, and it was two days before her death. That's how long it took me to react. Her death day, burial day, Mother's Day, and her birthday are all just a few weeks apart. I went through a whirlwind of emotions for a long time.

As odd as it may sound, my mother's passing away created a new fire in me. I felt torn up on the inside, shattered in pieces, alone, scared, sad, feeling hopeless, and broken. I felt like I still had a lot to learn from her, and we didn't get enough time together. I didn't know how to pick myself up. I was worried about my brothers and myself. This was my first big loss. I screamed into my pillow so many times, fell to my knees, sat in silence, went through our pictures plenty of times, listened to her

Vanessa Ortega

voicemails over and over, and I screamed asking God why he took her away from me and what was I supposed to do now without her. I wanted answers, and I wanted her back. Every morning was a reminder that she was gone. One day there was a big fight between my brothers and one of them stated he would commit suicide. I felt shattered again. As I was trying to get in touch with him, he called me back stating that he was ok and didn't do anything. In that moment I was thankful he was alive, and I realized I needed a therapist. So I searched for one and began my therapy sessions.

I decided to begin traveling alone. I went to London, Paris, Rome, Portugal, Hawaii, the Dominican Republic, New York, California, Texas, and Arizona. I connected with so many people and made new friends in each destination. I wanted to live my life to the fullest. I discovered so many parts of myself that I didn't know I had. At times, I was very angry and sad. My therapist helped me through each bad and good time I experienced. Whenever I overcame the bad moments, I was incredibly proud of myself. I learned that it's just a moment. I began to read *Rising Strong* by Brené Brown. She is my hero. I was able to apply what I learned from her in my therapy sessions, school, work, relationships, and any life experience. I learned how to be brave, courageous, bold, and vulnerable. I am still learning, too. Vulnerability is the tricky and hard one for me to achieve. But I have come a long way with it. What I have learned is that being vulnerable is not a weakness. I have learned that you share your stories with people who have earned the right to hear them.

My mother's passing led to my self-discovery journey. I discovered I am capable of living without her. I am living without her and doing all the things that make me happy. I learned this is my journey and my experiences to live through so I can become a better version of myself.



Dirk Valdez

Chloé Williams

Inspired by George Ella Lyon's Poem

“Where I'm From”

I am from two-bedroom houses that house three separate families,
from hand-me-down clothes and bruised souls.
I am from night shifts of a twenty-year-old woman
who tried to make ends meet.
(Too many kids, too little time, too little money.)
I am from frustration that simmered from the passed down
Gumbo pot,
the music of petty arguments
that blended seamlessly with the spices.

I am from the seemingly mundane act of leaving,
from throwing away and take-take-take.
I am from “let go and let God,”
and “hold onto God's unchanging hand,”
from giving up and giving in.
I am from mooching relationships
that end as quickly as they begin
and the absence of emotional restraint.

I'm from legal and non-legal guardianship,
fixing up rooms to feign residency of a school child.
From the grimace of my paternal great-grandmother
that all of her grandchildren inherited,
the anger harvested in the soul of the intertwined families.

Bridges were burned and family was neglected
all around me,
cleansing the spirit
in an attempt to be rid of grudges held.
I am from that mindset—
implanted before birth—
individually planted in hopes of greatness.

Chloé Williams

Diana R. Moore: The Malleability of Reality

The metallic scent of blood clung to Diana's skin like a designer fragrance. The blood splatter had been washed away years ago, but the scent still sat heavily in her nostrils. Sometimes, the blood would come back and stain her skin again like it never left—her mother's blood smeared across her flesh like a poor attempt at an abstract painting. And she'd scrub her skin raw until her blood mingled with the blood of her mother.

Diana inhaled sharply, gripping the messenger bag on her lap tightly between her arms. She glanced at her surroundings, taking in the faces of the other passengers on the bus. She was on the bus, not in her childhood home. There was no blood on her; *there was no blood.*

With another, more normal inhale, Diana turned her head to face the window that was at her back. The weather was grim, a deep gray sky encompassing the world beneath it. The weather channel had said there was a seventy-five percent chance of rain; Diana didn't have an umbrella. She hoped the rain would drown out the smell of the blood.

The bus came to a jerky halt. The intercom announced the stop's name, and the front and back doors opened. Diana was the only passenger who stood, taking her exit through the closest door. She stood at the bus stop, staring back at the passengers who happened to be looking through the windows. She wasn't quite sure why she stayed there; she didn't need to catch the next bus that picked up at this stop. But she felt tethered there. The bus doors closed after a few moments.

She stared at the nondescript man sitting toward the back of the bus. Feeling her stare, he locked eyes with her. There was a

Chloé Williams

brief moment of eye contact before he made a face and awkwardly turned his head away. Diana blinked three times in quick succession before she walked away.

Diana always managed to make people uncomfortable with her staring. Her father said it was creepy and uncanny. Her mother said it was simply impolite but expected from a child. However, Diana was now twenty-six years old. She should know not to stare at people. She pinched the skin of her hand as punishment.

Another inhale with a prolonged exhale. A sharp inhale and a sharp exhale.

Diana looked down at her feet as she counted each step she took. After fifty-two steps, she made it to the pharmacy. The bells on the door sounded as she opened it. She flinched, reaching her free hand up to cover her ear. The people in line looked toward her. She ducked her head, gripping the strap of her messenger bag as she got in line.

There was a lot of noises all at once. The pharmacist in the back was filling up pill bottles; the worker in the front was asking too many questions; the kid waiting alongside his mother was whining; the speakers overhead played today's top one hundred hits. Diana huffed, growing agitated. She just wanted to leave.

"Can I help who's next?" The worker called after some time had passed. No one responded. "Hello! Ma'am, can I help you?"

Diana looked up from her feet, realizing that the worker was talking to her. She hadn't moved from her spot, even as the line shortened. Her face went hot, and she panted out a quick breath of embarrassment. She stumbled up to the counter, tripping over her feet.

Chloé Williams

“Hi, yes. Hello, I’m here to pick up a prescription for Diana Ruth Moore.”

The worker typed her name into the system. She shook her head, “I’ve not got anything for you, Diana. Come back tomorrow.”

“But I—” Diana paused, widening her eyes. She fiddled with the strap of her bag. She took a deep breath. “No, I’m all out. I called in for a refill two days ago. They said they would send it through.”

“Well, Diana, I don’t have *anything for you*,” The worker enunciated, speaking as if she were talking to an incompetent child. “Call us tomorrow before you come in. Have a good day, Diana. Can I help who’s next?”

“It’s *Annie!*” Diana snapped, her feet glued to her spot. She took two steps back. “I’m sorry. You’re right. It’s Diana. You’re right.” She pinched the skin of her hand again and awkwardly shuffled her way through the doors. The bells rang again as she exited. She stood with her back against the brick wall, staring blankly up at where the sky should be. But all she saw was empty, black space. The air in her lungs pressed harshly against her chest each time she breathed. She swallowed, trying to figure out how she could stop the pain of her breathing.

It was completely silent. The rain pattered softly against the pavement, but Diana couldn’t hear it. She couldn’t hear the honking horns of the cars speeding by. She couldn’t hear anything. It was *silent*.

Diana gasped. The sound of the world around her rushed back in, making her wince at the sudden intrusion. The sky gently reformed itself.

Chloé Williams

Diana pinched the back of her hand and began the four hundred steps toward her apartment complex. And then up and up and up and up the four flights of stairs. She didn't like using the elevator. It was too small a space. Her father said that she had a presence that was overbearing and intimidating and that her presence slithered down the throats of everyone in the room and suffocated them. Her mother said that she made every room she stepped in feel like home.

Her apartment wasn't much, really, mainly one big room with a tiny bathroom. Her couch pulled out into her bed, and her kitchen was her dining room, living room, *and* closet. Both her bathroom and kitchen taps drip-drip-dripped constantly with unmatching rhythms. The shade over the ceiling light was too dark, and the window was blocked by the building in front of it, darkening the room even more. The television in the corner hadn't been turned on since she moved in a year ago, and she never closed the frig door all the way.

Diana placed her messenger bag on the counter next to her empty pill bottles. In a fit of anger, she threw the bottles one by one into the frig door.

"Stop that, Diana. You can't do that, Diana. That's not nice, Diana," Diana muttered, going to retrieve the bottles and throw them away properly. She stopped halfway bending down. She felt the unmistakable feeling of eyes on her. She took a paranoid glance around the room, eyes landing on the window in front of her couch.

The window was always opened. She didn't bother with blinds or curtains, and a crack in the window kept the air flowing. Besides, no one lived in the apartment right across from hers, to her knowledge. It wasn't as if anyone was looking into her room.

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Still though, something felt off. Diana walked slowly toward the window. Each step echoed. She grasped the window ledge, looking down into the alleyway beneath it. There was nothing there—no trash, no people, no rodents. She looked back up to the window in front of her. The room was still pitch black.

Thunder boomed; Diana jumped, staggering away from the window. She turned around abruptly and walked back to the counter.

“Okay...” Diana said aloud, running her lithe fingers through her hair. She looked at the clock on her kitchen stove. It was almost time for her virtual therapy session. She rolled her eyes and huffed.

She hated her therapy sessions. It was the same thing over and over and over. It’s been sixteen years; she understood how psychologically messed up she was after witnessing the vicious slaughter of her mother. Maybe she wouldn’t log in today. She felt fine for the most part, not counting her moment on the bus or her moment in the pharmacy or her moment just a few seconds ago by the window.

Fine. It was decided: she wouldn’t go to her therapy session today.

Diana shrugged off her sweatshirt and threw it unceremoniously on the tiled floor. She’d get around to picking it up at some point. She entered the small bathroom and flicked on the light, going to her sink. She turned the tap on and splashed her face with a handful of water.

Immediately, the scent of metal flooded her senses. Diana gagged, choking on a breath. She smeared the water over her face, trying to clear it from her skin. She threw her head upwards, staring at the reflection in the splotchy mirror. Staring

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back at her was a bloodied face with her blonde hair in clumps atop her head. A gash gushed blood down her cheeks, sliding into her gaping mouth. Her brown eyes stared back at her in utter terror, and her hands were raised in a defensive position. Diana looked at the bloodied hands. She had put up a fight, but it wasn't good enough. She didn't stand a chance.

“Annie . . . Annie, don't look,” the reflection croaked, her voice choked by her undiluted panic. Diana took a step back, and the reflection wavered. The woman was gone, and the only person in the mirror was Diana.

At noon, Diana was sitting in front of her laptop at the kitchen counter, waiting for her therapist to begin the session.

Her name was April, and she pretended to care better than any other therapist Diana had ever had. Her only issue with April was that she remained focused on Diana's “daddy issues.”

“I think today is the day that you are finally able to open up about what I want you to talk about. I think you are emotionally ready to talk about it. I think you've shut out this memory for so long that you felt you were unable to dig it back up. But we've—no, you've—made so much progress, and I think you're ready to discuss this,” April said, her microphone cutting in and out. Diana stayed silent, slightly annoyed at how much April apparently *thinks* about her. “I want to ask you a question. Is that okay?”

“Okay,” Diana replied.

“How did you react to the news of your father getting the death penalty for the brutal murder of your mother? You were only sixteen years old; that's big news for a sixteen-year-old—for anyone. And to learn that you were going to lose your father six years after losing your mother . . . How did that make you feel?”

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The only thing Diana could hear was her heavy breaths. The sound of her breaths scraped uncomfortably against her eardrums. She could feel the oxygen travel through her nose, into her chest, and out again.

*How did that make me feel? How did that make me feel?
How did that make—*

Diana slammed the lid of her laptop shut and crossed her arms over the top of it. She sat there for a moment or two before going to the couch and pulling out her bed. Without even fixing the bed or turning out the light, she decided it was time for her to go to sleep. A nap was the perfect antidote to the poison of her thoughts.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw her father. He stood there proudly, hands behind his back. He always wanted to be in the military, but he'd been rejected—something about failing a psychological evaluation, who knows? He was extremely mentally stable, really. It's not like he killed his wife in front of their only child or anything. Truly, he was Godsent. Or maybe it was that he had flat feet? Yeah, *that* was his major flaw.

He stood in the corner, muttering about how he was disappointed in Diana and how she would never amount to anything and how she would never be the woman her mother was.

Diana wished he'd just shut up.

She stayed curled in bed from noon to nine that evening. She didn't sleep any, however. Her father was no longer in the corner, thankfully. Diana wasn't sure when he left, but she was glad he was gone. She thought that she'd never have to see him again after he was arrested when she was ten. But then she had to see him again for his final trial when she was sixteen. He was

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sentenced to death, and he'd been on death row for the past ten years. Quite frankly, he could stay there for the rest of eternity, and Diana would continue to move on with her life.

A wail sounded through her apartment. Diana jolted upright, eyes going directly to the window in front of her. A woman stared back at her from the supposedly vacant apartment. Her bloodied hand pressed against the window. Her green eyes were wide and frantic. Diana stared back unwaveringly. The woman shook her head vigorously.

“Please , , , please help me. Please,” the woman cried. Diana gently laid back down and looked at the ceiling. *Don't look, Annie.* The woman screamed again, constantly crying for someone to help her. Diana covered her ears, confused. Her mother didn't scream for help. Her mother didn't have green eyes, either.

It had to be her lack of medication. It *had* to be. It would explain her earlier “episodes.” This, however, was new. She'd never imagined her mother as a different woman. She'd never imagined how her mother would scream because her mother didn't scream *at all*.

Brutally murdered and dismembered, and her mother only worried about Diana.

The screaming stopped after a few more minutes. Diana waited a little longer before deciding to take a shower to calm down. When Diana sat up in her bed, she glanced toward the window. The bloodied handprint stayed pressed against the opposing glass. Chills ran down Diana's spine. Her heart felt clenched in an iron fist. She was frozen with fear, sweat gathering along her hairline. She held her breath.

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“It’s just the lack of medication playing tricks on you,” Diana muttered, swallowing nervously. She got up from the bed and walked to her bathroom, being sure not to look at the window again.

Diana stood still underneath the scalding hot water. The handprint was ingrained in her head. No matter how many times she tried to blame it on her lack of medication, she couldn’t quite believe it. She’d run out of medicine before and never had something like this happened. It was always just her father or her mother—never some random girl who didn’t even resemble her mother, never a murder unlike the one her mother endured. Diana gripped harshly at the roots of her brown hair.

“You’re fine; *it’s* fine,” Diana whispered, squeezing her eyes shut. She took in tiny, panicked breaths. “Nothing happened, nothing happened, *nothing happened.*”

She got out of the shower and dressed herself. She looked in the mirror and rubbed her hands over her face. “Nothing happened, nothing happened, nothing happened.”

She repeated the words to herself for a while before making her way into the kitchen where she prepared a turkey sandwich. She sat at the counter and dutifully ignored the window. “Nothing happened . . . ”

Diana took small bites of her sandwich, her gaze set on the frig door that wasn’t shut. The only sound in the room was her disgustingly moist chewing; she’d put too much mustard.

With half a sandwich still on the plate, Diana remained on the only barstool in the apartment, watching the time on the stove move from nine something at night to six something in the morning. Her neck was sore from how tensely she sat. But she had not looked out of the window since the night before.

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After brushing her teeth, changing her clothes, and grabbing her messenger bag, Diana made her way down, down, down, down to the entrance of her apartment building. The rain puddles from yesterday had evaporated, and the sun was beginning to creep over the horizon. She started to count the four hundred and fifty-two steps to the bus stop. Before she could get past three, however, she heard someone call after her.

“Excuse me, ma’am!”

Diana turned around, looking at the police officer. There was a group of them. She didn’t even see the sheer number of first responder units in front of her building. She blinked three times.

“In between the hours of six last night and four this morning, did you happen to witness anything suspicious?”

“Um . . . ” Diana paused. “No. Nothing happened, nothing happened at all.”

“Are you certain you didn’t notice anything?”

“Positive,” Diana snapped. She huffed out a breath. “Excuse me now, I have to go before I miss my bus.”

“There’s no bus for hours . . . ” The officer said, his voice fading into the background. His words didn’t even reach Diana’s ears as she turned away, counting the four hundred and fifty-two steps to the bus stop before taking a seat on the bench. It was just her, and it would be just her until eight when the bus came. She took in a deep breath, smelling the stench of that old blood.

Nothing happened, nothing happened, nothing happened.
(Or at least she could pretend for just a little while longer.)

Calliope
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