

LITERARY JOURNAL

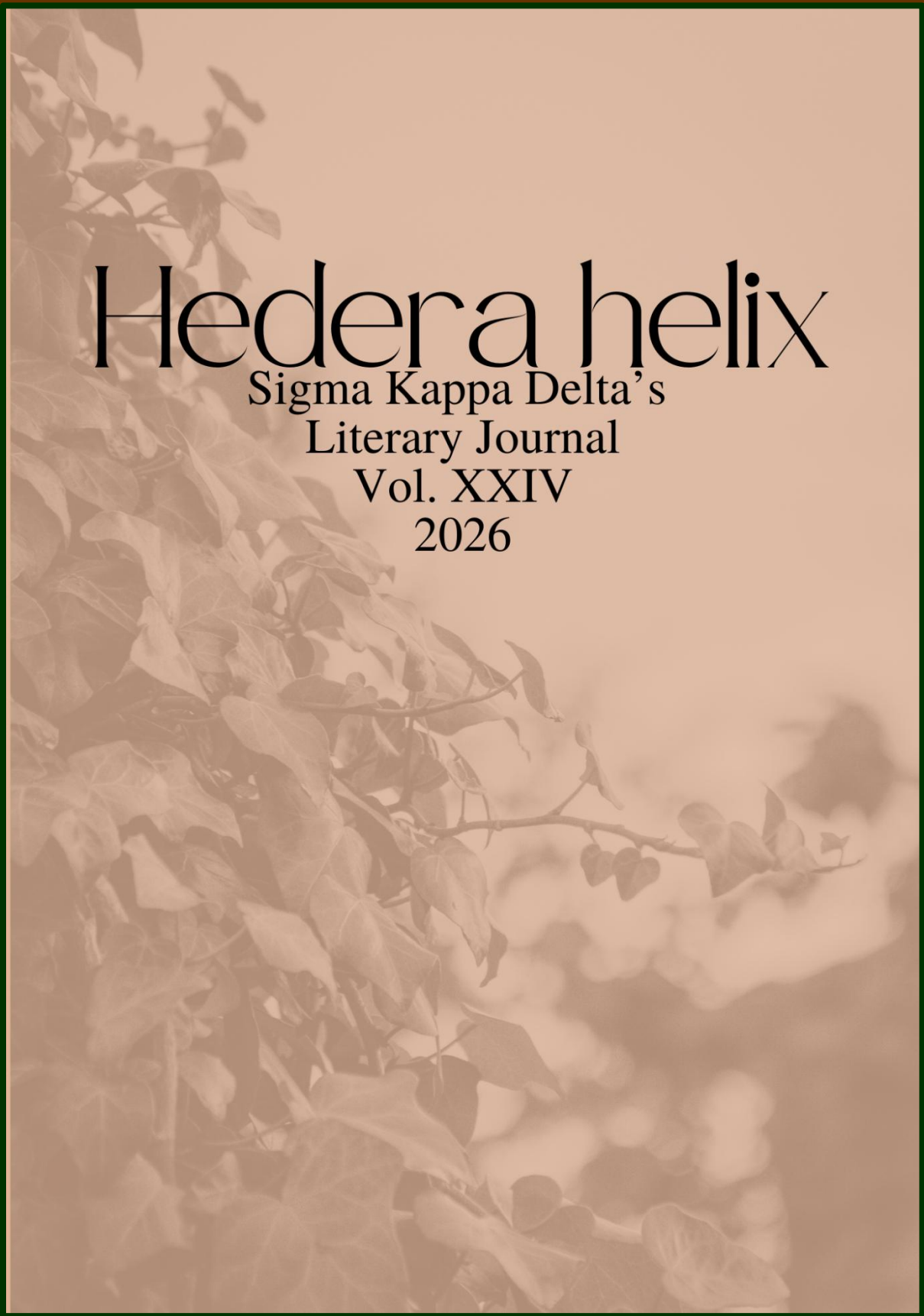
VOL. XXIV

Hedera helix

SIGMA KAPPA DELTA



2026



Hedera helix

Sigma Kappa Delta's

Literary Journal

Vol. XXIV

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Sigma Kappa Delta serves two-year college students who achieve academic excellence in English. Members need not be English majors but must demonstrate an interest and proficiency in literature and writing.

ΣΚΔ offers members opportunities for:

- Scholarships • Awards • Leadership • Competition
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Hedera helix — the scientific name for English Ivy and the national plant of ΣΚΔ symbolizes resilience and individual growth. In keeping with the Greek spelling, we use the lower case “h” for helix.

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“Moving Forward”

Parsa Vard

-BEST OF CONVENTION-

This summer, my mother flew to Iran to care for her father after he broke his leg. The injured leg developed an infection that ultimately led to my grandfather's death. Amidst this tragedy, missiles began to fall from the Israel-Iran conflict. Cell service and internet were periodically cut, families could not communicate with one another, and the people of Iran could not see the news from social media. The news, which had previously been a distant thing that I would never pay attention to, turned into a constant source of terror that meant my entire family could die at any moment. I had no time to grieve the way I wanted. Instead, my only option was to learn to endure through motion. I kept moving forward, focusing on what I could control, turning action into healing, using responsibility as rhythm, and work as refuge.

Most of my family lives in Iran, and when the attacks started, I worried every day that I would lose them. Of all the people I feared losing, my mother was the one whose absence I could not imagine. After her, I feared losing my grandparents, because they were the ones I spoke to most often. Growing up, my mother would call them every weekend so I could talk to them. When the

government cut service for hours or days, the uncertainty and fear felt like a background hum that I could not silence.

After my mom had been taking care of her father for two weeks, she contacted me with the unfortunate news that he had slipped into a coma. Until that point, it had seemed, from afar, that everything had been getting better. But I was confused. How could someone fall into a coma after weeks of being treated with medical care? Unfortunately, I didn't have much time to think about that question. A day later, my aunt posted a black and white image with text in Persian that I could not read. But I knew what it meant before translating it. I sent it to my friend to run it through a translator because I could not face the words myself. I received a call from my aunt's daughter, who is the closest person I have to a sister. She was the only one who had the heart to tell me. Once she finally spoke, I collapsed—I already knew what had happened. Eventually, I asked her to pass the phone to my mom. I asked only one question: Did you tell him how much I loved him?

I was so grateful that my mother had been with him when he died; it meant so much for her to have the opportunity to say her farewell. Before she left for Iran, she had debated whether she should go. Over the phone, I sobbed as I told her how proud I was of her for going.

I often think of a lunch I had with my grandfather in Iran six years ago. We sat at a table in a restaurant with dark walls, half indoors, and half open to the

warm air. The sunlight beamed across the table as my grandfather ordered a salad, just like always. It was then that he told me God had told him he would live another ten years because of his healthy and active lifestyle. He walked, swam, and ate salads. He read and prayed. He believed this wholeheartedly. Because I believe in God, I believed it too. This is why I never feared his death and never worried in the moments leading up to it. This hurts me the most. But the memory also showed me the heart of what I needed to carry forward: my grandfather's bravery. He wasn't scared of any challenge; he would hike mountains, face heights without hesitation, and even had multiple surgeries done with no anesthesia. During the Iran-Iraq War, when families fled town to escape bombings, he stayed behind to guard their homes so nothing would be stolen. That was the kind of courage he lived by, grounded, sincere, and faithful to duty. He always kept moving when times were rough. He would have wanted me to keep moving as well.

The day after my grandfather died, I went to class as if nothing had happened. My body moved through the motions of ordinary life while my heart lagged behind. I had only one way to cope. I had obligations that required presence and energy, so I showed up. I went to class. I finished my internship tasks. I attended club meetings. I helped run live shows. When I couldn't speak with my mother, the busyness kept panic from swallowing me. My father was always consumed by the news from Iran. Four of his sisters, their children, and his mother

were there, and he listened to every bulletin, every update, and carried his own fear. We kept different silences. My schedule kept me moving physically and mentally.

I couldn't control the war or the silence between my calls and messages. All I could do was make a difference where I had the ability: my campus responsibilities, my internship projects, the local shows, and continuous emails that formed the daylight of my life. Responsibility became rhythm, work a refuge, and endurance a form of resolve. My grandfather's death and the fear for my family overseas taught me that I cannot stop the storms on the horizon; I can only tend the garden where I stand.

“Finding Myself”

Alina Oberglock

My time at the State College of Florida (SCF) has been a pivotal chapter in my life. From the start, my hope was always being able to adapt more and gain confidence. Yet my experiences and the people I met there have changed my life far more than I could have imagined. I did not just find a new home; I found myself.

I spent the first eighteen years of my life in Germany. Being shy, quiet, and always doubting myself academically, caused me to be incredibly nervous about continuing to college. After graduating high school, my family and I moved to Florida. Suddenly, I was in a new country, a completely unfamiliar environment, with new people, and a new language. I always knew that moving would mean adapting to big changes. This made me feel unbelievably intimidated and scared. Even though I dreamt of this since I was young, this was still something new to adapt to and meant leaving behind what I have always known to be my home. Little did I know that this would quickly become even more a home than my original home ever was.

In my first full-time semester, I took an American Government class, and my professor helped me step out of my shell. He invited me to join his club on campus and introduced me to the Student Government Association (SGA). Of course, I

joined both. Through his mentorship, I was nominated for the Outstanding Student in Political Science award, which I received at the 2024 Honors Convocation. Meanwhile, SGA became my first real job, where I met my closest friends and, in my second semester, became president. This meant giving presentations, being part of committees, and planning as well as attending campus events, tasks that once filled me with dread. However, it was the best way to get over my fears and start improving myself. Each challenge helped me find my voice, develop teamwork skills and embrace leadership.

Through SGA, I was chosen to be one of six students to represent SCF at the Florida State capitol. We met Representatives and Senators to lobby for the new Parrish campus, which pushed me beyond my comfort zone. This trip made me get into a completely new environment with people I did not know and of such high authority, making me feel unbelievably intimidated. As much as this was an incredible opportunity and an amazing experience, it was completely nerve-racking. However, I successfully made this big step forward in the progress I was hoping to make for myself.

Through my involvement on campus and my dedication to student life, I was chosen to be the feature for the Everyone's College campaign on SCF's website. Seeing the words "Excelling Academically" as the title of my story healed a part of me that I never knew was broken.

Another influential mentor on this journey was my Written Communication professor. He always encouraged me to continue writing and believe in myself and my abilities. Back in Germany, I was always told that my abilities to write essays were not sufficient and would never be. He was the first person to change that view by encouraging me and giving me constructive feedback. He also encouraged me to always keep learning new skills and continue to be curious. Through him I also learned valuable lessons and started to believe in myself. He taught me to embrace curiosity, take opportunities, and no matter what life throws at me, always believe in myself.

I continued seeking growth through other clubs on campus, including the Sigma Kappa Delta Honor Society (SKD). Through SKD, I submitted a photograph that won first place. This unexpected achievement led me to travel to Pittsburgh for the Sigma Tau Delta International Convention. On this trip, I got the amazing chance of meeting new people, seeing a unique environment, and experiencing a city I have never been to before. Through this, I was also nominated for and received the Darlene Wedler-Johnson Award for an Outstanding Student in English, which I won at the 2025 Honors Convocation.

Ultimately, my time at SCF has been an amazing chapter that shaped who I am today. These mentorships, opportunities, and experiences taught me to trust in my own abilities and made me a more confident person overall. When I started at

SCF, I hoped for change, never expecting this much of a transformation. I am immensely proud and grateful for the chance to find myself and to everyone who has supported me along the way.

“A Journey into Sound: *Silent Hill 2 Remake*”

Christopher Sherman

The entertainment medium of video games is beginning to surpass the revenue of both the global movie industry and the music industry combined. According to an article from *Forbes*, in 2022 the video game industry generated a total of 184.4 billion dollars in revenue compared to the music industry’s revenue of 26.2 billion and the global movie industry’s 26 billion dollars in revenue (Astora). Video games are becoming more mainstream as well as a more generally respected platform for storytelling, and in some instances a more engaging entertainment experience compared to movies, seeing as how the experience is controlled by the player. There is much to be said about video games and their position in the entertainment industry; however, rather than focusing on the entire video game industry I will be reviewing one of the many games that is contributing to this massive industry, the *Silent Hill 2 Remake*, which was released October 7th of 2024. I will be taking a closer look into this recent submission to the Silent Hill franchise by reviewing the sound design; more specifically the music and how the developers use it to create an atmosphere of dread and grief, and examining how they use the music to immerse the player in James’ experience of the world, as well as explaining how they use music theory to create this experience.

The Silent Hill 2 Remake begins with a cut-scene showing the protagonist of the story “James Sunderland.” A cut scene is defined by this article from *SubStance* written by Daniel Punday as “the use of animations to provide a transition between major sections” (Punday 84). In this cut scene we see James staring into a mirror in a bathroom where the player later learns is in Silent Hill. James has a somber and regretful expression on his face as he washes his hands. He appears to be going through a period of depression noted by the stubble on his face and clothes that look like they have been sitting in a closet for years and were thrown on with no regard for his appearance. In this moment the subtlety of the sound design starts as an ambient song begins to play in the background, which creates a tension that can be felt immediately, it can be inferred that the music is a direct reflection of what James is feeling on the inside. Vague and distant guitar arpeggios can be heard as well as a synthesizer hammering on two of what sounds like minor chords in a simple but effective progression creating a tense feeling in the player. An arpeggio is simply the usage of the notes that exist in a single chord, for example a C major chord consists of the notes C, E, and G, in an arpeggio these notes are played in ascending order from C then again descending from G. According to an article from *The American Journal of Psychology* a minor chord “is determined and defined and expresses gloom, despair, sorrow, grief; it is mournful, dark, depressing, and doleful” (Hevner 103). Which perfectly expresses

the emotions the developers wanted the player to feel when meeting James for the first time. As James stares into the mirror, he begins to give an internal monologue of why he has come to the town of Silent Hill. His wife Mary had sent him a letter telling him to come and meet her “at their special place”, this town holds significance to both James and Mary since this was the town where they spent their honeymoon together. This is a very endearing moment until James says, “But this can’t be true, Mary died of that damned disease three years ago.”

After this reveal that his wife who passed away had allegedly sent him this letter, he begins his journey into the town of Silent Hill under control of the player where the music becomes more ambient and not as noticeable as it was in the introduction cut scene. The player can hear the droning of two different notes played together which to my ears sound like E and F from a synthesizer, the use of these two notes creates an uneasy feeling within the player seeing as how these two notes are next to each other and are separated by a half-step from one another, this is called dissonance. Dissonance is a non-harmony, or two notes played together that do not mesh well or sound pleasing. The use of dissonance is done intentionally by the composer Akira Yamaoka in the music of this game to emphasize the discomfort James feels in his own skin as well as the world he perceives around him, both he and his perceived environment are not harmoniously compatible.

This is where the concept of dissonance goes beyond just music, seeing as how the ambient music itself is dissonant so is the strife within James who is engaging in what is known in the field of psychology as cognitive dissonance, which is defined as “the psychological discomfort caused by having two inconsistent thoughts. According to the theory, we feel uneasy when we notice an inconsistency between what we believe and what we do” (King 443). James is aware his wife Mary passed away three years ago but he is actively pursuing a lead that comes in the form of a letter from her, he is completely aware of how impossible the idea that his wife wrote the letter is, yet he persists and travels to the town in search of her, blinded by grief and denial. In this instance the composer was using music in a multi-dimensional way: not only was it serving the purpose of creating the feeling of tension within the player, he was also using it as a way to convey how James is feeling on the inside by creating a symbiotic and deeper connection between the player and James, so the player is essentially experiencing everything in first person. What James is feeling is a normal human emotion when it comes to grief. Most people at one time or another have experienced grief, in a way this game is merely a reflection of the common human experience of what it means to be a person and the emotions that are felt when we experience grief. The delusional thinking we can have, the denial we can experience are displayed not

just in the visual parts of the game, but also in the expertly crafted music as well. This all happens within the first six minutes of the game.

The Silent Hill 2 Remake was nominated for multiple awards and won a few of them, one of the awards the game won was for its soundtrack and for good reason, the use of the soundtrack was to not only create an immersive experience for the player with ambient noises of wind howling or even moments of silence. But it was also used to gain a deeper connection to James and create a more personalized connection to him, serving its purpose in the overall narrative of the story. This really exemplifies the importance of sound design in an entertainment medium where the narrative is mostly controlled by the player. Where the immersion not only comes from the eyes of that player but also in the subtlety of the sound design and what is being heard both consciously and subconsciously. This is important in the context of psychological horror where the real terror is not necessarily what is displayed on the screen but is the personal fears of the player and what lies beneath the individual's subconscious.

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“The ‘Indian’ Cycle: How Tommy Orange’s *There There* Reveals a Native History
of Prejudice, Pride, and Division”

Hayden Hill

If someone wanted to paint the “Indian” world, that painting would be a chromatic oxymoron, a canvas split by black and white. To the outsider, a bird's eye view of an “Indian” community might reveal abnormally high rates of alcohol abuse, youth mortality, and sexual violence against women—rates higher than those of nearly every other ethnic group in the United States. Yet through another lens, we witness a resilient culture, a deep heritage, and a powerful sense of community. Often, Native Americans find themselves caught in the grey—caught between these violent factors and a culture so profoundly integrated into their identity that they cannot escape, a culture continuously pulling them into the vortex of tragedy. Drawing from Tommy Orange's 2019 novel, *There There*, and Tecumseh's 1811 speech to the Osages, "The White Men are Not Friends to the Indians," we can see how a native history of prejudice, pride, and ancestral division has fermented into a cruel modern world for their descendants.

Many Americans are familiar with historical tragedies faced by the Native Americans of the past, from the western guerilla wars to the Trail of Tears and other forced relocations; however, often overlooked are modern Native tragedies.

This scarcity of contemporary Native American texts is why novels like 2019's *There There* are so unique. *There There* places itself in modern-day Oakland, California, exploring the generational and individual traumas of several Native American characters, including the gangbanger Octavio, his accomplice and friend Tony Loneman, and Jackie Red Feather, a grandmother ostracized from her grandchildren. From birth, the tragedies of their forefathers haunt these characters, ultimately leading them to form their own individual tragedies, perpetuating a cycle of torment.

While an introspection into modern Native experiences can provide us with many insights, it would be imprudent to disregard the roots of this tragic cultural tree. In his 1811 speech to the Osages “The White Men are Not Friends to The Indians,” native leader Tecumseh presents a call to action—a call for tribal unity against the European colonists. This speech is not only a prelude to the struggles faced by future “Indian” tribes against the Europeans, but it also presents a failure to unify. This failure to unify reveals a deep cultural division between differing native groups—a division born from pride—a division partly responsible for the current conditions of modern Native American communities.

A central storytelling element in *There There* is the brotherly relationship between Octavio Gomez and Tony Loneman, two characters who, while only cousins, form a familial bond from their interceding tragedies. Octavio was born

into a loving family, a love that is soon torn from him as gunshots from a nearby shooting tear through his father. This moment is Octavio's Native tragedy, a curse that catalyzed him from a curious boy into a drug dealer. In contrast to Octavio, Tony Loneman started life in a less than admirable position. Birthed from an alcoholic womb, Tony developed fetal alcohol syndrome, a syndrome which, to the other children, was not a byproduct of his mother's poor decisions but only a byproduct of his Native American heritage. This social rejection led Tony to a breaking point, with him punching one of his bullies in the face, a decision leading to his ejection from elementary school—a decision that formed inside Tony a deep animus when looking at his own face “staring back at me like a fucking villain” (16). Tony and Octavio's brotherly bond is not only a relationship for the reader to latch onto, it is also a contrasting emotional symbolism. Tony internalizes the prejudices of a misunderstanding society, keeping inside himself a ticking timebomb fueled by self-hatred. In contrast, infused in Octavio is reactionary destructive pride. Not a pride born out of reaction to prejudice, but a pride born out of a love for his family.

Tony was molded in a womb of “Firewater” and by the preconceptions of others. Tony, who seemingly fated for tragedy, comes to an abrupt acceptance regarding his nature, cementing his decision to rob the pow-wow: “He wants to laugh at them staring at him. It's a joke to himself about them... Tony's just an

Indian dressed like an Indian” (234). Tony’s acceptance of himself in a different story and in a different culture would have given him an escape route. However, as a Native American in Oakland, California, there is no escape. Tony could only watch innocents die in the crossfire, eventually bartering his only possession, his life, to stop the violence.

Unlike Tony, pride molds Octavio Gomez. This pride, though, is not born of hate; instead, it is born from a deep familial love. Haunted by the inability to save his father, Octavio is a man who has nothing to lose but family. Out of this desperate love for his cousins, Octavio’s plan to rob the pow-wow is set in motion: “This is how we make it... right Octavio? Octavio nodded his head. Then he picked up the tequila bottle. ‘Let's Drink,’ he said.” (92). The plan went off without a hitch, and with fifty thousand dollars in hand, Octavio turned to the slaughtered Native American families who, through the barrel of his plastic gun, Octavio passed the bullet of tragedy to, from his father to them. This tragedy loops back to Octavio as his cousins shoot him in the back. In his final moments, Octavio would find an even greater despair than the loss of his father, a betrayal, and the loss of his family.

The world did not fate Native Americans for this cycle of oppressive tragedy. This suffering and its subsequent coping methods are all derived from the greatest Native failure: the failure to unify. Tecumseh’s 1811 Speech to the

Osages, “The White Men are Not Friends to the Indians,” highlights this failure: “Brothers,--If you do not unite with us, they will first destroy us, and then you will fall easy prey to them. They have destroyed many nations of red men because they were not united.” Tecumseh’s prophecy came to fruition, and 213 years later, many Native American tribes still haven’t found meaningful common ground; tribes remain just as divided and isolated.

Following its trend of character symbolism, *There There* places Jackie Red Feather as the representative of this Native division. Jackie Red Feather is a grandmother divided from her grandchildren, divided from her sister, and divided from her culture. Jackie's early life could be described as a modern nomad, moving from place to place for survival; her only attachments are her mother and sister Opal. Unknown to Jackie or Opal, their mother has cancer, and in a final bid to leave something to her children, their mother pins her hopes on the Native American occupation of Alcatraz Island: “Mom... What are we doing? We’re going to be with our relatives. Indians of All Tribes” (48). Their mother, persuaded by the dream of Native unity, gave her last moments to the dream of resistance; however, that dream failed as it did 213 years ago, sucking the family into the vortex of tragedy, with only Jackie and Opal able to escape its maw. An escape however, did not warrant a better life; the girls returned to their nomadic wandering, moving from the house of a rapist to public housing. Moreover, with a

baby soon to come, what chance did the homeless Indian girl have to move beyond her forefather's tragedy?

A cycle of tragedy formed around prejudice, pride, and ancestral division has, for 529 years, entrapped Native American culture, abducting Native children from birth into its vortex of misery, swallowing them whole with the tragedies of their forefathers shown in Tecumseh's 1811 speech to the Osages, "The White Men are Not Friends to The Indians," and the novel *There There* which uses its assorted cast of seemingly human characters to express this cycle. Through Tony, Octavio, and Jackie, we glimpse the forms this cycle can take on the individual level.

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“Desperate Deceit: Analyzing Anderson’s ‘I’m a Fool’”

Gina Peduto-Sly

Deception is as old as humanity, and with the advent of the Internet and social media, deceit has become pervasive in public and private lives, in politics, and even in the news cycle. Every story gets its spin, and for every objective truth, there is an ‘alternative fact.’ However, prevarication is not a new phenomenon, and Sherwood Anderson probes the pervasiveness of deception in a story set in the post-World War II about a nineteen-year-old boy working in the horse racing world. On his day off, the swipe impulsively pretends to be a wealthy racehorse owner’s son to impress a young lady. Unfortunately, when he realizes he loves her, he is too ashamed to tell her the truth. His deception not only costs him a future with her, but he also fools himself throughout the story while blaming others for his mistakes. In “I’m a Fool,” Anderson uses dramatic monologue, irony, and symbolism to explore the role and ramifications of deception in an adolescent boy’s life on and off the horse track.

First, Anderson masterfully uses dramatic monologue to illustrate the swipe’s deception of himself and of others by narrating his inner thoughts and dialogue. The story is told from the perspective of the swipe looking back at the circumstances with regret, saying that when he thinks of his own foolishness, “I

want to cry or swear or kick myself” (Anderson 1). Still, he struggles to take full responsibility for his own actions and ends the story blaming the man in the Windsor tie, saying “I’d smash him for fair” (11) because jealousy makes him lie “to pass myself off for a big-bug and a swell” (11). The swipe blames the man in the Windsor tie for his own jealousy because he is the epitome of everything the swipe wishes to be and therefore resents, even while he scorns the man as arrogant and ridiculous. Throughout, the author deftly has the narrator vacillate between relating the events of the story and making direct or indirect statements that show how he feels about the role he has played in losing a girl he loves to his own deceitful actions. From the outset, this dramatic monologue style shows the boy’s inner conflicts and his bafflement with himself, as well as overt instances of him deceiving himself. For instance, after digressing from the story to complain about a smaller neighborhood boy taking his work, he says, “But never mind him” (Anderson 2). Then he says, “But that isn’t what I want to tell my story about” (3) after bragging that he would “lie and lie” (3) about owning horses to impress men at bars. These small side stories and his disjointed narrative style reveal his character by inadvertently revealing his inferiority complex. Ultimately, his inner thoughts show him to be deceiving himself even while he is confused about his behavior. Thus, Anderson masterfully uses dramatic monologue to show how his pattern of self-deception ultimately costs him the girl he loves.

Next, Anderson effectively uses irony to emphasize the considerable role deception plays in this young man's life. From the outset, the swipe tries to convince himself that the racetrack is a better education than college, saying that boys who "go to high schools and college, and never steal anything, or get drunk a little, or learn to swear....don't know nothing at all" and, ironically, that "they've never had no opportunity" (Anderson 2). His poor grammar and ridiculous examples of knowledge betray a deep resentment for respectable and educated people, and his inferiority complex about his station in life is on full display. Clearly, he is deceiving himself about his feelings and trying to convince himself otherwise. Furthermore, the swipe detests the successful looking man with the cane and the Windsor tie saying, "It made me sick to look at him," but in the next breath states, "I like to be a man and dressed up, but not to go put on that kind of airs" (4). While detesting people who show off, he also tells himself to "put up a good front" (4), thus Anderson shows the swipe's hypocrisy and self-deception in a masterful display of verbal irony. Further, the very traits he despises in most people, he admires and is attracted to in Lucy. Likewise, Anderson utilizes irony in the relationship between the swipe and his best friend Burt who is an uneducated black man working with him at the track. Though Burt has an even lower social status than the swipe does, the boy admires him and says he "taught him a lot of valuable things for any man to know" (Anderson 2). Rather than recognizing the

implications of his own social status due to his friendship with Burt, he deludes himself with fantasies of adventure and romantic brotherhood. The bitterest irony is that the swipe ultimately believes that Lucy likes him for himself and does not care about his social status. Thus, Anderson uses ironic effects throughout the story to emphasize the swipe's deception of himself and others.

Finally, Anderson uses symbolism to convey the role and ramifications of the swipe's deceit. The horses symbolize innocence and simplicity, and though they represent purity and are bred and trained to perfection, they are also corrupted by deception because some of the races are fixed. The swipe says about an owner that "sometimes he was out to win and sometimes he wasn't" (Anderson 8) because the swipe knows that in the first race, the owner will have the horse "go like an oxen hitched to a plow" (7). Thus, the owner makes the bettors think the horse is slow, so they unwittingly increase the purse by betting against him, and then the horse unexpectedly wins the second race and takes the larger winnings. This is outright cheating, and the swipe knows it, going so far as to take advantage of this deception himself by giving inside information to Lucy's brother so that he can win the next bet. By participating in the cheating, the swipe aids in the corruption of the horseraces, and his dismay at this moral failing is revealed when he unconsciously protests "I never cared about that" (Anderson 8). The swipe reveres the horseraces as an honorable profession, but it has turned out to be

steeped in corruption and deceit, so it is only natural that the swipe lies to himself and others. Throughout the story, the author also uses people as symbols. Whereas the man with the Windsor tie symbolizes social respectability, Burt symbolizes social freedom. As a black man of that time, the swipe states that Burt “doesn’t have much chance to get to the top” (Anderson 6). Indeed, Burt does not have the social expectations placed on him that the swipe does, so the swipe associates Burt with freedom and the independence to live solely for himself with no pressures of respectability or success. However, because of the swipe’s social and financial insecurity, he lies to Lucy and claims to be the son of a rich racehorse owner, thus ensuring that he will never see her again. Unfortunately, his pattern of deceit has cost him the girl. Thus, Anderson effectively uses symbolism to further illustrate the swipe’s habit and consequences of deceiving himself and others.

In “I’m a Fool,” Anderson effectively explores the role and results of the swipe’s deception of Lucy and of himself. Unfortunately, even though he states he is a fool, looking back on losing Lucy has not given the swipe any clarity regarding his own role in his misfortune, so he continues to blame others throughout the story. Anderson effectively uses dramatic monologue to reveal the swipe’s true character, irony to contrast his thoughts and actions, and symbolism to further explore his inherent conflicts with himself. The swipe seems unable to be truthful, even as he has intermittent bouts of self-awareness and insight. Unfortunately, for

all the young man's agonizing, he ends his story none the wiser, and thus, "I'm a Fool" is an apt title. Though the story is humorous and pathetic, it can nonetheless act as a cautionary tale for a modern-day society that refuses to be honest with itself but instead chooses to blame others for its every mistake and misfortune.

Work Cited

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“Caught in the Crosshairs”

Garrett Britnell

Joyce Carol Oates’ “Life After High School” is a study of the effects of societal pressures, their impact on a young man caught in the crosshairs between identity and conformity, and how they affect the town of South Lebanon when these social constructs come to a head in the most perturbing of ways. The character of Zachary in particular is a phenomenal exemplification of Oates’ message, a man torn by societal constructs and pressures. In “Life After High School,” Zachary’s lack of belonging and its resulting disillusionment ultimately lead to his death.

Zachary’s desire for belonging leads to his desperation for Sunny. Zachary drives this point home almost immediately, blowing $\frac{2}{3}$ of his college savings on a ring for Sunny: “This was his “college fund,” or had been—out of the \$3,245 saved, only \$1090 remained” (61). This event shows just how driven Zachary is to fit into the social constructs of South Lebanon. The social stress of the situation was so heavy on Zachary’s head that he blew his college fund to fit in. While attempting to propose to Sunny, Zachary insists that he “can love enough for both” (100); she has already denied him her affection, but he is so misconstrued in his attempts to conform to society that he insists she is for him. This encounter was not the first instance of him trying to propose to her: “Sunny’s only concern was that she could

send Zachary away without her parents knowing he was there” (91). Sunny’s parents knew of his troubles, and she wanted to protect him from a potential conflict with her parents. It is evident that the struggle to belong has driven Zachary to extreme measures to conform; taking massive and even criminal risks to get into this relationship. By blowing his college savings for an engagement ring, bargaining for Sunny’s love, and even returning to her house after an initial rejection, he shows just how much his will to belong has impacted his headspace (which is portrayed in this case as his efforts to engage with Sunny).

Zachary’s inability to belong leads to his lack of community. Zachary is so distanced from social norms that he is regarded as having only one proper friend: “Zachary had often discussed them with Tobias Shanks, who’d been his friend, you might say his only friend, since seventh grade” (39). His lack of community is further synthesized by the fact that most people in South Lebanon High School considered him to be unapproachable, “his aloofness and impatience with most of his peers would be remembered as antisocial, a “loner”” (23). His deviance in personality and social behavior compared to his peers left him isolated. He also struggles to belong religiously, as it is shown in the story that “Most of the students were in fact practicing Christians, of Lutheran, Presbyterian, Methodist stock” (15). Zachary was a Lutheran that frequently held a spot in the church’s pews: “He’d been baptized Lutheran, and never failed to attend Sunday services with his

parents at the First Lutheran Church” (38). However, just a few sentences later, he is shown to have some struggles with his faith: “Zachary Graff’s frowning young face, the very young set of his beefy shoulders, drew the minister’s uneasy eye; it would be murmured of Dr. Graff’s precocious son, in retrospect, that he’d been perhaps too serious” (38). In a school where the majority of students were practicing Christians, having uncertainty or misunderstanding is likely taken as vulnerability, and this directly ties into his ability to belong. With one friend, no approachability, and a highly uncertain religious standing, he has no community to speak of.

Ultimately, Zachary’s desire to belong leads to his demise. After his second rejection, Zachary runs away in despair: ““No! no! go away! no!” –and the spell was broken, the boy gaped at her for another moment, then released her, turned, and ran” (101). In this encounter, there is another detail that shows the extent of his disillusionment and desperation to belong: “Sunny saw Zachary Graff’s face which was pale and clenched as a muscle, and she heard his voice which was the voice of a stranger, and she felt him tug at her so roughly her arm was strained in its very socket” (101). He is so frantic that he physically assaults Sunny. The rejection leads to a loss of hope in Zachary, and a personal epiphany that he will not belong no matter how hard he tries. With no other options in his headspace, “he’d committed suicide by parking his car in a garage behind an unoccupied house on

Upchurch Avenue, and letting the motor run until the gas tank was emptied. Death was diagnosed as the result of carbon monoxide poisoning, the time estimated at approximately 4:30 A.M. of April 1, 1959” (104). His suicide shows just how disillusioned he ultimately became from the social norms of South Lebanon and his own, ending his life being the ultimate statement to the extent of his situation.

In “Life After High School,” Zachary’s lack of belonging and its resulting disillusionment ultimately leads to his death. By the end of the story, Zachary has thrown himself into mental conflict, destroyed his moral compass, and isolated himself to the point that his only option is - in his eyes - suicide. Zachary’s story is just a cautionary tale of the extent somebody can go for the sake of conformity or belonging in a community. This situation is relevant in modern culture, as a highly conformist society and culture like the United States does not give much leeway to people who fail to fit into the societal molds of the culture. Joyce Carol Oates makes a statement with “Life After High School” that is a call to action, a call to question and ponder the impacts and facets of a conformist society.

Work Cited

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529.

“BEWARE – THE DEAD HAVE TAKEN EARTH (& SHOW NO SIGNS OF
RETURNING IT) (or, IN WHICH CARRYING THE WEIGHT OF ONE’S OWN
GRAVE IS ITS OWN KIND OF PURGATORY)”

Amelie Banks

OPHELIA OPINES ON THE SEEDS YOU CAN BUY
FROM HER SPOT IN THE GREENHOUSE LOT
SHE STRAIGHTENS HER SUN HAT WITH HAND HYPOTHERMIC
& DEADHEADS THE PANSIES IN PASSING

COUNT DRACULA’S OUT ON THE CURB
THE ONE OUTSIDE THE SINCLAIR
HE’S SMOKING A SHREDDED-UP CIGARETTE
& KEEPING HIS CAPE FROM THE DUST

JEANNE D’ARC AIMS WITH CARE & A QUIET PRAYER
IN A PAINTBALL GAME IN THE PARK
WITH CLOAK TRAILING SMOKE SHE STIFLES A CHOKE
& FIRES OUT INTO THE FRAY

SCHEHERAZADE STANDS UNDER A SPOTLIGHT
IN A PRODUCTION OF INTO THE WOODS
SHE NARRATES & WEARS A FAKE MUSTACHE
& THE CROWD CRIES ENCORE, AGAIN

THE ARCHAEOPTERYX AMBLES AROUND
FEATHERS A BRAMBLE OF BONE & BLACK DUST

IT'S SQUABBLING FOR SEEDS WITH THE REST OF THE RABBLE
THE PIGEONS & DOVES & CARRION CROWS

THE GRAND DUCHESS ANASTASIA NIKOLAEVNA
NEARS THE BACK OF THE BLOCKBUSTER LINE
SHE HOLDS A NEAT STACK OF THE CENTURY PAST
& BLEEDS ALL OVER THE FLOOR

IT'S A SEVENTEEN-YEAR-CICADA SUMMER
WHEN THINGS COME UP OUT OF THE GROUND
THE DEAD & LOST & EXTANT NO MORE
OUT OF THE WOODWORK LIKE WEEVILS
WITH EYES A DAGUERREOTYPE GLOW

BECAUSE CARRYING THE WEIGHT OF THE DIRT
SHOVELED OVER COFFINS & HEAVY IN POCKETS
IS A LIFE-AFTER-DEATH IN-BETWEEN REST STOP
A TRANSIENT STAY ERE WE TOO TURN TO GRAVE DIRT

“Sp/lit.”

Lily Carter

What does it mean to be
of 2 different cultures?

It means

Getting to bring a cultured food to a
culture festival. *It smells, people think it's weird.*

Getting to put your ethnicity on your
FAFSA. *Can be a disadvantage.*

Getting to put a country's flag in your Insta
bio. *People might judge and hate on you based on that.*

Getting to inform others and be proud of your
heritage. *You don't even know half of it yourself.*

But it also means

Explaining to people why you aren't
white. *Sometimes it's fun to not be white.*

Never feeling like you
fit in. *You stand out so much, actually.*

Not being American
enough. *You are American.*

Being too
American. *You are Asian.*

Watching one part of you hate the other

part of you. *You'll never be one or the other.*

You're you

But you aren't.

“Life”

Jameson Chawner

craw**L** from the crib

skip **I**nto school

woebegone **F**rom work

gasp at the grav**E**

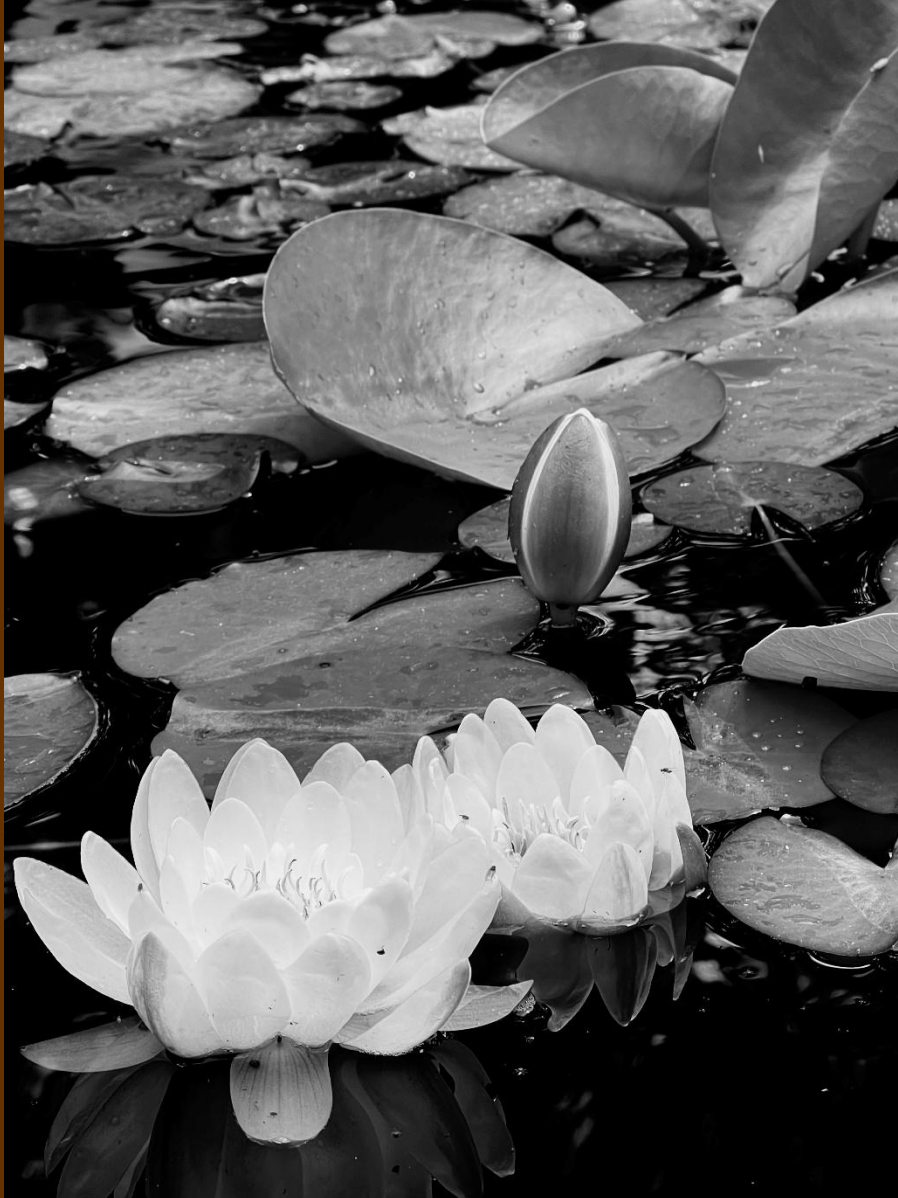
“Trapped in Paradise”

Jennifer York



“Ode to Monet”

Samantha Ragsdale



“Journey Raine”

Whitney Johnson



“Ears to Hear, and Eyes to See”

Olivia Ferrara

“Hey Elizabeth! It’s Emily.”

Elizabeth shifts her head in my direction, but her eyes do not follow. In a few moments, she returns to the toy on her plastic tray.

I stroll past her and reach the bright yellow notebook holding today’s schedule. I’m not offended by her lack of warmth; she’s four, prime time for learning how to have an attitude.

Of course, her reaction could also be because Elizabeth has cerebral palsy.

Like neurological snowflakes, no two cases of CP are the same. For some, the condition is invisible, and you wouldn’t know they had it unless they told you. But for Elizabeth, support is vital. She cannot walk, she cannot chew well, her movements are uneven and jerky, and she has never spoken a day in her life.

Still, I’m at her house five times a week.

“60, 60, 30 of tube feed at every meal, and try the graham cracker and yogurt by mouth if she wants a snack. Can you remember that?” Elizabeth’s mom, Maddie, says in a rush.

“Yep, I’ll remember.”

Maddie shuts the kitchen faucet off before snatching her purse and indigo water bottle. This is her long day, and soon she'll be at work listening to people's trauma and guiding them off the edge until the sun goes down.

"Oh!" Maddie exclaims. "And practice getting her to stand while she's on the floor, okay? Do you remember how to press on her knees to keep them in place?"

I smile and nod. I've worked here for months, but Maddie's yet to give up on quizzing me. I don't blame her; Elizabeth experiences a lot of turnover when it comes to caregivers.

"I'll keep her steady."

Maddie exhales and lifts her lunch out of the fridge before kissing Elizabeth's head.

"Have fun! Mommy loves you!"

She dashes out the garage door and leaves me and her daughter to our routine.

"Alright Elizabeth, it's about time to leave the stander."

The stander is the device that positions and holds her legs upright. I bend low and overlook the many onyx straps holding Elizabeth in place. Secure and comfortable, the stander lets her play with ease.

Elizabeth's eyes drift toward me, but do not reach my face. Her right eye likes to wander and stares past my cheek.

Since the start of my time with Elizabeth, I've taken note of how people act when she's around. I've watched some suggest she's not all there. They gawk at her from afar while their hushed voices imply her mind is broken. Several refuse to look at her at all. I've seen her ignored many times because of her stiff motions and quiet nature.

But those people are not here.

Living with her. Caring for her. Feeding her and handing her toys. They don't know her favorite shade of violet is lavender. They don't know she refuses to eat steamed carrots unless they've been slathered in butter and honey.

But I do, and I have made it my mission to understand her.

"Would you like to get out of the stander, Elizabeth?"

She stares at me the same as before. I know she heard me and understands what I said, but her processing time is slower than your average child.

Eventually, she grows bored of staring into space and returns to the zebra car in front of her.

I chew on my lip and give her two extra minutes before taking her out. The indirect communication isn't terrible, but I need more.

I pick Elizabeth up and carry her to the playroom. The cozy walls are painted with butterflies while the suncatchers sparkle with opalescent light. Underneath the bay window, a child-sized bench stands engulfed by a sea of dolls, cars, knick-knacks, and animals.

“Mmm,” Elizabeth vocalizes.

“Mm,” I repeat before placing her on the woolly carpet. She stands on her tiptoes as I clasp her knees tight. She may be unable to stand or walk on her own, but she’s improved at balancing with a bit of help.

I gaze at her, watching her mouth, her brows, her eyes.

“Are you ready to play, Elizabeth?”

Being an impatient 4-year-old, she loses the desire to humor me and tries to jerk herself from my grasp.

I sit her down and dump some magnet animals on her mini bench. We gradually work through matching the alligator’s scaly head to its neck and the elephant’s scruffy tail to its bottom. She always likes to save the elephant for last, and gives a small, crooked smirk when I say the word “bottom.”

I have nannied other children before, but no kid fuels my spirit like Elizabeth. I love taking the time to observe her awkward, rigid fingers as they clutch a marble or push a doll down a slide. She doesn’t let the irregularity of her

movements or the difficulty it brings stop her from thriving. She has a fire in her belly, and I hope to feed the flames.

Checking the time, I see it's already 2 p.m.

"Shoot," I mutter. We're supposed to be at speech therapy in twenty minutes.

"Sorry kiddo, but we'll come back to this later."

I scoop her up and bustle around the house to grab the diaper bag and shoes. Within five minutes, we're packed in my car and on the road.

I skirt around corners and soar through stoplights. The drivers here are always aggressive and cranky, so being the slowpoke is not an option. Besides, that would make me late to Elizabeth's session, and I won't let Maddie's 9-hour shift mean nothing.

In my rearview mirror, Elizabeth keeps her focus on the world above. She always admires the vibrant cerulean sky and looming cotton clouds when we drive along the street. I wonder what she ponders during this silent gap between activities. Given the intensity of her gaze, it must be a lot.

I pop into a parking spot and take her through the treatment building's towering doors. Inside, heaps of children rest or frolic while waiting for other therapists. Some are autistic, some have down syndrome, some aren't disabled but

still need a helping hand. Divided by ability, they come together in their desire for play.

“Hey friend! Are you ready to head to my room? I’ve got some new games to show you!”

The speech therapist, Lindsey, is a tall blonde woman with massive curls and a sincere grin. She takes Elizabeth from my grasp as we follow her back into her office. While strapping her into a special play chair, Lindsey looks toward me.

“How is she doing today?”

I take my place next to Elizabeth on the admiral rug as Lindsey finishes buckling her in.

“She’s been well. Lots of playtime and a full belly. But I haven’t figured out how to get a clear yes out of her.”

“Ah,” Lindsey says as she examines her numerous bins for toys. “Still no luck?”

“Nope. I know she can hear and understand me, and she’ll shake her head sometimes. But I’ve yet to see a definite yes. I’m missing something, and I don’t know what it is.”

“Well, hopefully our work today can give you some ideas.”

Lindsey places two toys in front of Elizabeth and starts chattering. I watch as she plainly explains what the toy is, what it does, and then asks Elizabeth if she'd like to use it. While we receive two head shakes this way, there's no certain yes.

"Great work today, Elizabeth!" Lindsey exclaims as the hour of play ends. "I'll see you two next week."

"Thanks!" I call out before weaving through the building with Elizabeth in my arms. While passing through the parking lot, Elizabeth keeps her eyes on the trees, a contemplative look on her face.

Once home, I grab Elizabeth and take a minute to embrace the outside. Maddie's house is surrounded by sprawling maples that arch and bend under their own weight. Flowing from her front door is a river of sidewalk lined with swirling wild grass and dancing rosebuds. The soft spring air rolls past us as the clouds rearrange themselves and let sunlight stream through the branches above. I inhale the scent of pollen and citrus. The world is good.

"Mm," Elizabeth says.

"Mm," I repeat.

She keeps her eyes on the blooming greenery as I pull her back inside. After therapy, it's time for more floor play.

"Okay Elizabeth, maybe we can pin the tail on the elephant's bottom again."

She huffs and holds her head up to look around, her whole body tightening in response. This is a common occurrence thanks to her CP, so I shift my position and sit her in front of the bench anyway.

“What should we play with now?”

I undo the magnet animals for reuse, but she pays them no mind and stares off toward the window.

“Alright then.”

There are a few toys in that direction, so I put the animals away and reach for a set of wooden ice cream cones.

“Do you think you can pick up the green one?”

Slowly, she lifts her hand and plasters it onto the mint ice cream scoop before sliding it off the bench. I pick it back up and set it straight, but she repeats the action before slumping her body against mine.

“C’mon Elizabeth, we have to sit right,” I gently press my palms into her legs to prompt her body to correct itself. “Do you want to play with your light-up penguin instead?”

While I search for the monochrome toy, Elizabeth squirms until she flops onto her back. I set the penguin in front of her and sigh.

“Maybe you want to be on your tummy.”

I roll her over and press play as the toy shakes from side to side and sings about Antarctica. It holds her attention for a second, but soon she strains to get away, looking increasingly frustrated.

“Elizabeth, what’s wrong?”

She uses her shaky arms to push herself up and onto her back again as a deep frown settles on her face. Elizabeth’s expressions are generally muted, but I know this look all too well: the calm before the storm.

She shuts her eyes and clenches her fists as she starts to cry.

“Elizabeth...”

I place her on my leg while she scrunches up and whines. The minutes inch by, but my rocking and patting bring no relief; she’s trying to tell me something, and I don’t know what.

“Do you feel sick?” I touch her head and cheeks, but her temperature is normal.

Elizabeth’s cries transform into sobs as tears slip down her face. The sound rings through my ears and reverberates across the room. It’s overwhelming.

I must understand her.

I take Elizabeth by the torso and sit her up so she can look at me. The weeping echoes out, but I persevere.

“Elizabeth,” my voice is tender and calm.

She sobs, escalating into a wail.

I pull her up and haul her into the illuminated kitchen. The change of scenery calms her sorrow long enough for me to catch a thought.

“Elizabeth,” I reiterate, “I have a question for you.”

She sniffs. I’ve rekindled her interest.

“You don’t want to be in the playroom right now, do you?”

Eventually, she gives her head a shake.

“Okay... do you want to play in your stander again?”

The frown returns and with it another tempest of tears.

What am I supposed to do? There’s a piece missing. A pearl I’ve yet to find. I think of how Lindsey spoke with her, kind and clear. Then I think of all the things we’ve done today: Stander. Snack. Animals. Car. Therapy. What could have possibly made her upset?

The incandescent sunrays poke through the kitchen windows and fleetingly steal Elizabeth’s attention.

With that, a flame sparks in my mind.

“Elizabeth, do you want to go outside?”

Her growing sobs wind down, but I’m not satisfied.

I need confirmation.

“Elizabeth. Do you want to go outside? Look me in the eyes for yes, or shake your head for no.”

She pauses.

Slowly, and with great effort, Elizabeth brings her brown eyes to mine.

We stand there, taking each other in. Face to face. Shoulder to shoulder. In this moment, we are perfectly aligned.

In this moment, we are the same.

“Okay,” I say, my heart racing, “I hear you. Let’s head through the garage door and take the stroller for a walk.”

The world around us glistens as the day descends to dusk. A speckled ladybug bumbles past the trail, looking for a place to rest. Elizabeth sticks her hand out and reaches for the tall grass as the breeze pulls the stalks to her fingertips.

“Mmm,” I hear her coo.

“Mmm,” I echo.

We continue our stroll through the peaceful woods and revere its beauty together. Until I bring her back for dinner, and then to bed.

The next day, I arrive at Maddie’s house again.

I come in through the garage door. Maddie's scrubbing the dishes while on the phone about medication for her daughter. A few feet away, Elizabeth plays in her stander.

I walk past the yellow notebook and bend to her level.

"Hey Elizabeth, it's Emily."

She smiles, turns her head, and meets my eyes.

“Caverns of Endel”

Rachel Waters

A droplet of water trembled on the tip of a spear of rock descending from a distant dark ceiling. It finally fell, a small glittering facet of diamond before it vanished.

Far below, black rock slick against his bare feet, Soren fought to suck in air. Harsh voices and heavy footfalls echoed, chasing him. Too close. Gasping, he glanced around desperately. Buildings of the same material under his feet and above his head stretched away in lopsided formation. No home, no refuge.

Silence hovered like fog over a hot spring. The mines had swallowed up every able-bodied person just as they did every day. No one to help him.

The mouth of an alley yawned ahead to his right. He grinned and pushed himself, bounding forward. If he could make the alley, he'd lose them in the maze of narrow streets beyond. Almost there –

Something hard and blunt struck him in the back of the legs. Soren stumbled, hands and knees slamming into unyielding rock. *No!* They'd take him, drag him down to the mines.

He scrambled up, panting, throat tightening. Hands grabbed at him, grasping his collar. He lunged forward. An iron grip jerked him back, throwing him to the ground. He lay still, fighting to breathe. A foot slammed into his ribs. Eyes squeezed shut, he gasped, curling in on himself.

The sound of flesh against flesh, muffled, drifted somewhere above him. Strong, but gentle hands lifted him and set him on his feet. Soren wobbled, glancing up into his rescuer's face. Dark eyes, crinkling at the corners, watched him with friendly concern.

“Will you be alright, lad?”

Soren nodded, ignoring the bruises he felt forming.

“Name's Ander,” the man stretched out a hand.

Cautiously, he took it, “I'm Soren – thanks.” He inhaled and what felt like a hot blade shot through his chest. Black spots danced across his vision. Ander's steadying hand landed on his shoulder.

“Easy, there. I've got a place. But we'd better move along before your friends recover.” Crouching, the man turned his back to Soren, “Come on – You can barely stay on your feet.”

Soren sniffed, blinking away the darkness, “I don’t ne –” Another spear of pain to his ribs wrenched a whimper from him and cut down his pride. Grimacing, he clambered onto Ander’s broad back. The man rose with ease and set out with a smooth stride.

Soren looped his arms loosely around Ander’s neck. Lulled by the aches and pains, and the gentle pace he relaxed.

He woke with a start as he was set on a pallet of blankets. Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, he looked around. He was in a room carved out of stone, one of countless others that pocketed the walls of the caverns. Three pairs of strange eyes examined him with curiosity.

Someone’s hand – Ander’s – squeezed his shoulder. “Soren, welcome.” He nodded to a lean dark-haired man, “There’s Kell –” then to a freckled boy who didn’t look much older than Soren, “Lyal...and Dara.” Graceful and nearly as tall as Ander, the young woman smiled in a way that warmed Soren’s insides, even if they were a little bruised at the moment.

“I hope you’ll stay with us for as long as you wish.”

The image of the dark, damp crevice he sometimes slept in came to his mind. What if he didn’t have to go back to that? He swallowed, “I –”

“You’re safe here,” Ander knelt at Soren’s side, expression sobering. “We work together to keep ourselves free. The mines can’t take us – and we won’t let them take you.”

In an instant, he was a member of this close knit group. Numbed, he processed Kell’s greeting and Lyal’s excitement. Dara’s warm smile never faltered, only grew. Ander stood over all of them, proud and tall.

Immediate acceptance, but Soren couldn’t accept it. All of them had some worth, something that made them valuable to each other. Ander, the solid rock, the energy of them all. Dara, the glue that held them all together, always considering their needs. Kell’s sharp mind kept everyone hidden and safe. Lyal’s ingenuity put plans into reality.

What did Soren have? What could he offer? *Nothing*. When they realized he was useless they would cast him aside. He wondered why they hadn’t already.

But – he would make himself valuable. And with Kell and Lyal’s latest plan, he had the perfect opportunity.

Holding his breath, Soren squirmed through a narrow passage, wincing at the twinge from his barely healed ribs. He didn’t spare a glance around the

chamber; he'd seen it many times before. A deep channel zigzagged across the rock floor. At its bottom, a river of bubbling water steamed, feeding a hot spring out of sight.

Ander motioned to him from the far side. Crouching, Soren added to the pile of rocks shoved against the wall. Normal and harmless in appearance, Lyal explained that when exposed to heat, they would combust in a loud explosion. An explosion that would shake the mines below.

The distant taps of miners' tools had stilled. The workers had left the mines in a mass exodus as they did at the end of every day. No one would be hurt, but it would be a warning. They weren't just hiding anymore, they were fighting.

Soren stepped away and Ander poured the oil. He gripped the flint but didn't strike it, only stood still, brow furrowed. "I don't like this," he stared down at Soren. Something flashed in his eyes; something Soren didn't understand.

"No one'll be hurt. Kell and Lyal, they wouldn't be wrong," Soren swallowed. *Would they?*

Shaking his head, mouth drawn in a tight line, Ander struck the two pieces of flint together. A spark flared, fell and ignited the glistening oil. The stones began to burst, splitting open. Gripping Soren's arm, Ander backed away.

The flames licked up the cavern wall. Veins of dark cracks spread and climbed. The ground shook beneath Soren's feet. Chunks of rock plummeted down. Ander's hand pulled Soren towards the far wall. He squeezed his eyes shut and shielded his head with his free arm.

A sharp sound above pulled his gaze up. With a cry he knew Ander wouldn't hear, Soren lunged forward. His shoulder collided hard with Ander's back, and he felt the man stumble.

Sharp pain lanced through Soren's head, white light exploded behind his eyes. His world spun into darkness.

Strong arms held him up, his cheek pressed against leather. A strange sense of familiarity swept over him. A fierce ache pounded through his head. Soren inhaled, coughing. The chest under his ear rumbled and a firm voice broke through the confusing tangle in his mind. Ander.

Forcing his gritty eyelids open, he caught a glance of Ander's face, strangely pale and worn. When the man met his gaze, some of the lines smoothed out and he smiled, "Thank the Creator! Couldn't know if you'd wake up again."

Soren swallowed. Memory swept through him, and he grimaced, “A-Are we trapped?”

“Not for long now. You’ve been out several hours at least,” Ander’s smile faded. “I won’t have you taking a knock like that for me again.”

“Can’t promise that.”

Ander shook his head, frowning, but his eyes smiled, “It’s my job to protect my family.”

Family. Soren grinned. He found himself leaning into Ander’s chest. And it wasn’t his imagination that Ander’s arms tightened a little more around him. Warmth bloomed in his chest.

He had found home. In a dark, stuffy cavern and in the circle of caring arms.

“Ordinary: A Starfall Short”

Kirby Synder

“Light given, she became the beacon.

Melody remembered, she became the hymn.”

—Dedication to Astraea on the starlit Cavern

Once upon a time, the Astrarium sang a song of warm reverence. He knew better than anyone else, because it was her voice that sang along with it. A Goddess born to breathe song into the universe. He had almost forgotten her voice, but as he crouched before the basin, he could hear it clear as day. A warmth filled him as he thought of her, as he thought of Astraea, now born as Auroralili.

The sound echoed, as if she were in the cavern with him, as if she were kneeling before the basin herself. He could feel it, the ache that comes with realizing that it was possible that she’d never remember him...she’d never know him the way he knew her.

Sunlight filtered through the hazy entrance that he’d opened to get to the Astrarium, and when it landed on one particular glyph, he froze for a moment. How fitting that it was the rune that he associated with her. He could feel the

silence pulse through him, striking a cord so deep within him that it made his heart ache for her, for all the things she stood for...for all the things he loved about her.

He could feel the silence as if it were pulsating through him, striking a cord deep within that made him desperately miss her. Sinking to his knees before the basin, he remembered a time when the old gods would gather at the thread walk, and make the pilgrimage to the starlit cavern and gather around it, waiting to be bathed in the celestial waters.

“They say the holy water’s water down...”

The thought came to him like a lyric from a hymn, a hymn that he had sung beside her, long ago. He doesn’t speak the words, knowing that they would never mean the same thing to him again. He could recall her voice, soft yet vibrant, leading the hymn as the room filled with their music.

His body shook softly as he let out a bitter laugh. He could feel himself unraveling without her, as she was what kept him from falling into the darkness.

“Sanctified bullshit...” he muttered. He hated that she had to fall so the gods could stay hidden. But his hand reverently stalled on the basin—his church, his holy grail.

She stood barefoot in the starlit current; it was as if the river had been waiting for her. Her eyes were closed, and her arms lifted to the sky— not in arrogance, but in a

quiet communion that he was privileged to witness. The water lapped at her ankles, as if it could feel her soul—could know her reverence.

He watched from the shadows, dread filling his soul as he watched her with nonchalance—at least that is what he wanted to believe. “You’ve been chosen, haven’t you?” His voice trembled as his shadows wrapped around him. The thought of her falling so that others may rise made the dancing shadows pulse in protest.

“Indeed, I have been,” she murmured as she turned in the direction his voice had come from, her eyes opening. “Step out of the shadows—I can’t bear to see you hide from me.” She knew he could see the storm dancing in her eyes, even from where he stood. “Don’t make it harder than it must be.” She loved him, so seeing him in so much pain... feeling his anger pulse in the space between them...it was more than she could bear.

The love he felt for her pulsed beneath his skin, through his veins, deep into his heart. The anxiety building in his chest threatened to take over him. Their world demanded that she be sacrificed, and there was nothing he could do. The gods might have forgotten the ache of love, but he hadn’t. She was his world, and he was hers.

The basin had grown cold, and the glyphs had fallen silent. What lingered between them was not shame—it was betrayal. She was his, yet she gave herself

over to the gods, letting herself be erased from their world. Yet he rose—because he wouldn't stay silent. Not when it came to her.

His heart ached as he—begrudgingly—turned from the cold obsidian basin. He wanted to stay wrapped in the space that held her memory. Unaware of why the basin had awoken, but as the shimmer faded away, he knew one simple fact—she was awakening. A chill ran through him as his feet touched the stone—he needed to hurry. He had always known Auroralili, even before she'd known herself. From the moment their eyes met, he knew; she was his Astraea. He no longer knew who he was without her—only that she was what was holding him together—allowing him to breathe. Yet, even though he knew that, he also knew that the proximity was the only thing holding him together.

“A pool of stars,
is what she gives,
so they may live.”

Her voice sang through him—words that reminded him of a time long past. The echo of her memory curling around him, as if her light was keeping him upright, even though she wasn't with him...even though she didn't remember him.

"Our colors will fade eventually..."

The lyric settled in his core—heavy with the grief and desperation that came with missing her. It was true, in the way that stars are true. As it settled in the air, the Threadwalk shimmered before him. The melody of the hymn drifted across the stones, enchanting the path into being. He stepped forward and sighed—the ache of walking it without her deepened the hole she’d left behind.

“China’s Strength and Legacy”

Emily Adams

Katrina tore through the night,
a howl too wild to be tamed.
The house trembled under its fury,
but China,
her body broken,
her spirit still rooted in the earth,
stood beside me.
We braced together,
her presence
like an anchor in the flood,
but the storm,
relentless,
pulled her away,
like a breath held too long.

I called her name
into the roaring winds,
but the waters swallowed my voice,
and she was gone.

Still,
in the stillness that followed,
her power remained—

not lost,
but reshaped,
woven into the fabric of the world,
like the fight,
like the pups,
like the love we carried through the storm.

Her legacy—
it's more than survival.
It is a strength
that never fades,
a fire
that no wind can extinguish,
a love
that lives on,
even when the storm takes all.

“Hell in High Water”

J. Phillips

Torin was six when the first wave of bombs hit. The First Wave. That’s what the world remembers it as.

Torin was a First Wave child. A Christian daughter.

There were threats of a Second Wave when he got kicked out. He could only be the perfect daughter for so long.

Before then, he often longed to be a salmon. Fighting against the stream. But he went wherever the current took him.

Even when he had to be a tomboy and then a lesbian. He didn't try to cause problems. But he did. Turmoil followed him through every class, down every street, in every room. He wished he’d done it on purpose. He wished he learned how to finish fights instead of surviving them.

A salmon against the current. Trying to fill a hole, scratch an itch, sheath a knife.

Torin knew he was taxing back then. His parents tried to beg, barter, and chide him into being a better girl. A different girl. He could see their worry under the resentment. But conforming was not an option. Neither was being a girl.

There were risks with telling them of course. But he thought maybe it'd mellow out. Maybe they'd be too focused on his older brother getting involved with troublesome boys from school. Something they couldn't afford.

But Torin greatly overestimated his desirability. With his brother and two younger sisters, he wasn't needed.

Getting tossed out with only a bag of his belongings was the beginning of the nightmare. Looking the way he did.

A fish out of water, flailing towards the jaws of a bear.

He had cut off his hair. Always wore his brother's clothes. And his body was already changing. He looked the part.

A mentally ill girl. A gay boy. A transgender freak.

Any of which could get him killed.

Torin sought out a women's shelter first, just to get refused. Same with the homeless shelter. When he searched for men's resources, he was struck with dead ends or hostility. The nearest queer center was miles upon miles out and had a history of animosity towards trans men.

There was nowhere to go. No one to help him. He spiraled.

Torin doesn't remember the details of that night. The Second Wave. But he knows he got his hands on every drink and illicit substance he could.

The bombs didn't hit close to him in reality, but he swore he felt them.

He felt them shake the ground. He saw their clouds of destruction blaze and contort in the distance. He heard shattering glass and people screaming.

At some point he ended up on his back in a ditch, looking up at an oil-spilled sky. He saw colors that didn't exist. He saw God. He became God. That's the only explanation he has for why he didn't die.

And then there was Calum. An older boy Torin barely knew from school. But a reputation followed him.

He was an ass. Constantly starting fights. Manipulating people. A control freak.

But on that night, after sarcastically asking "What the hell happened to you?" Calum listened as Torin babbled on about his troubles, how he was *stuck*.

And Torin in turn listened as Calum lamented over his struggles to connect with people, his social isolation.

This is limbo.

Torin stayed with Calum, because where else was he supposed to go?

They crashed and burned into each other romantically and sexually, because who else did they have?

This is limbo.

Torin considered and trusted Calum's opinions on him being a man.

He could be a man with long hair.

He could be a man with a high pitched voice.

He could be a man with wide hips and a large chest and softer features.

He was already a man, so why change anything?

This is limbo.

Torin weaned himself off the stash of testosterone he had before stopping altogether. He cringed every time he noticed a part of himself reverting, but he figured he'd get over it. He told himself he didn't need it. This thing, this substance, this hormone he spent years of his life longing for, working towards.

He gave it up for the only person he had to rely on.

This is limbo.

He told himself over and over again. For months. Years. It went on and on. This was punishment for giving in to his freakish nature. It was misery. But at least it wasn't true hell.

And then he got pregnant.

A fish out of water, mouth gaping, while also sinking to the darkest depths of the ocean.

Torin went to Calum, expecting understanding, hoping for a ride to a still-standing clinic.

He didn't expect the denial and dismissal. His complaints were met with shouts, and his shouts were met with violence, and when he called out the violence he was told to "man up."

This is hell.

Torin was lost in it for weeks. Nauseous and desolate and ashamed.

He questioned and berated himself.

How did he let this happen? How did he let himself get stuck with someone he hardly knew?

His guilt and agony festered until he thought he could be rotting from the inside out. But within it, something else grew.

Perseverance. Bitter and wrathful perseverance. It clamped its maw tight around Torin's heart and refused to let go. Everything was turned towards getting out. And there was patience in his resolution.

He took note of what days Calum tended to drink into unconsciousness.

He used those days to work out the combination to the safe in the bedroom closet. Where Calum kept his pistol. He had learned lockpicking from his brother.

He also took the time to learn how Calum's solar-truck worked. He'd only ever seen a few in person, but there were hundreds of videos online showing how they worked.

They became popular after the First Wave. It was all about innovation and advancements then, desperate attempts to keep the focus on the resilience of America. All while doing what America does best.

Retaliation. Military and civilians alike in the crossfire.

One retaliation to another and so on. Until the Second Wave. It left the northern half of America desolate and the south struggling to adapt. And America ceased to exist. It became New America, as banal as that is. New America was supposed to be an era of peace and restoration. Only time will tell if that holds.

Torin wasn't sure if he wanted their restorations. He had always wondered what America looked like without the Americana. How quickly would the wild take back its home? How far would the flora spread? What fauna long thought dead would reveal itself? How long would it take humans to rip it all away?

On another day with Calum unconscious on the couch, Torin took the gun. He stood over him for a while, thinking. He could kill him. But would this world still hunt down a victim trying to know peace? He could kill himself. But that's not an option, not after all this.

So, Torin left Calum there. He took the keys off his person and took the truck, and he drove. He drove for hours. And hours. Not quite making it out of state boundaries.

He drove until the hunger-induced nausea made the road warp and blur. He stopped at one of many looks-rundown-but-still-functions gas stations. As soon as he hopped out and slammed the door, he felt the tension.

Across from him, a taller and skinnier man cursed aloud to himself as he filled up a gas can, some spilling out. Beside him, a shorter man with a gut rubbed at the back of his neck, sweat beading on his forehead. Lastly amongst them was a woman, elbow propped on the hood of an old station wagon as her other hand fanned herself. She wore colorful blurs of makeup smudged across her face. An attempt at normalcy.

The shorter of the two men eyed the truck as soon as it pulled up.

Torin stayed silent. The man studied him while stepping closer, hand resting on his holstered pistol, "Ya know those solar-trucks come in real handy these days." He drawled casually.

The woman stopped fanning herself, hand resting atop her chest as her brows knitted together with distaste, "Westley, don't bother him."

The man whipped his head around to look at her as he exclaimed, "I don't wanna get stranded out there!" Before looking back at Torin.

Torin had his own cocked pistol in hand by then, pointing not at the man in front of him, but at the overflowing gas can.

"Try me," he snarled. The other man stood still, eyes wide. Torin continued, "I'll drag us all to hell."

He imagined it so clearly. One explosion leading to another. Fire and shrapnel consuming everything around them. A part of him begged for a reason to pull the trigger.

He already felt the fire around him, but it was temperate. He smelled crimson-hued iron instead of gasoline. He was a tiger shark. Itching to bite. To flood his senses with warm water and blood. To bite down with razorblade teeth. Swallow all their sins whole.

Surely, that was something only God could do.

The chipper ring of the gas station door caught Torin's attention. He stiffened and tightened his grip on the gun. Out of everywhere else in the world, his brother just happened to be at the same gas station.

"Dallas!" Torin barked.

Said man startled, staring at Torin. It took seconds for his eyes to widen with recognition.

"The hell are you doing?" Torin asked.

"Uh..." Dallas blinked, gaze shifting between Torin, the gun, and the three other people before gesturing with a bag in hand, "Snacks."

A beat passed. Then Torin gave a nod, lowering his gun but not fixing the safety. "Get in the truck."

Dallas strolled towards him, voice flat even as he asked, "Are you kidnapping me?"

"If that's what you want to call it."

Torin kept his gaze on the three strangers. They stared back at him as he hopped into the passenger's seat. Torin ordered Dallas to drive, and Dallas didn't complain.