



*The Mill*

Spring 2019: Fiction  
Magruder HS Literary & Visual Arts Magazine

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only three things matter:  
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how gently you lived,  
and how gracefully you let go  
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## **LitMag Mission Statement:**

*The Mill* is a student-run publication which seeks to amplify student voices and provide a platform for creative expression. The magazine focuses on experiences and subjects important to its diverse student body, in order to broaden its readers' understanding and heighten their perception of their community.

## **Submission and Selection Process:**

*The Mill* publishes the best Magruder High School student art and writing, judged anonymously by a panel of student editors with staff guidance. Submissions are accepted on a rolling basis, along with work from one local professional per issue (as the featured author or artist). Current Magruder HS students or community members interested in becoming a featured author or artist can submit work to [MagruderLitMag@gmail.com](mailto:MagruderLitMag@gmail.com) for consideration.



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Front Cover:  
**Sour**  
Stefany Rosales De Leon



Back Cover:  
**Japanese Fantasy Cityscape**  
Eliana Choi



## On a Snowy Evening

Henry Chamberlain lived in an old farmhouse halfway up the hill in a small town deep in the Appalachians. It seemed as though somehow, the remote location must have caused Time to lose track of the town, leaving a relic for the few visitors, like myself, who somehow stumbled upon the hidden place.

There was, however, a certain charm and intimacy that the town possessed. Though no one could quite place it, there was something that kept the people of the town from leaving even though jobs were scarce, and the few jobs that did exist paid so poorly that any hope of making a decent living there was all but impossible. Henry Chamberlain was one of those people.

He was not the most talkative of men to say the least. He lived alone in his house and made quite an effort to keep to himself whenever possible. To this day, I am still not sure why he let me in the night of the snowstorm. I had gotten lost that night on my way to visit an old friend. As the snow started to collect on the roads, my car engine began to struggle until it finally gave out just below the hill where Henry lived. I saw that his house was the closest one, so I took my bags out from the trunk and began to walk through the falling flakes and biting wind up the hill to his house. About midway up the hill, my feet suddenly gave out from under me and I slipped, dropping all of my bags; one of which tumbled down the hill, off the road and into the forest.

Slowly, I got up and brushed the snow off. I gathered the bags that were still around me and then made my way towards the forest. It seemed particularly dark that night and it took me some time to actually find where my bag had ended up. As I lifted my bag from the snow and brought my head up, a figure lay just a short distance from me and



caused my heart to freeze for a second before beginning to rapidly pound. After a second I realized that it was just a tree, but in the dark my imagination had gotten the best of me. It was a strange tree with only a few, maybe eight or so, branches that were bent in just a way that gave it the appearance of some great spider laying silently on its back. I found myself still frozen there until I finally came to my senses, and a wave of relief sent me back on my way to the road.

I did not slip on my second attempt up the hill and I soon approached the house. Resting on the gravel driveway under the overhang of a tree's branches was an old car with deep red splatters of rust that began on the hood and spread down the length of the car. There was a light on inside the house, so I knocked. It took a minute but after I knocked a second time, I heard the clicks of locks, and the door slowly opened just enough to see half his face peering out.

"Can I help you?" he asked reluctantly.

"I was hoping you could. You see, I got lost and my car broke down just down below the hill. I could really use a place to..." I saw him looking past me trying to see my car down the hill.

"Uh... c-come in," he said in a suddenly hushed voice as if he was worried someone might be listening.

I stepped inside and was surprised to find that it seemed much dimmer inside than it appeared to be from outside. He began walking down the hall. Catching up to him, I tried to give myself a more formal introduction. He told me his name was Henry, but that was as much as he would say. As we walked through the house, we passed by what I assumed was his living room, though I could swear I saw what looked like bedsheets spread out on the floor. I felt myself tensing up as the thought that he had expected me passed through my mind, but he walked right past the room and led me to a stairwell where we descended and he showed me to a small room in the basement. In the room was a small wooden desk against the wall with a lamp on its corner, along with an old white cloth couch against the opposite wall.

"This is okay with you? It's the best I can do right now," he said.

"Yes, yes. Thank you."

"I'll um... go get you a pillow and blanket," he said as he turned around and made his way towards the stairs.

When he returned, he was carrying a thin pillow in one hand and a plaid flannel blanket under his arm. He laid them down on the couch and asked if I needed anything else. I assured him that he had already provided me with more than enough and thanked him for his hospitality.

-----

I woke up early the next morning and decided that I better go out and find a mechanic to look at my car. I walked up the stairs but did not see Henry around so I assumed that he must have still been asleep. I didn't want to bother him, so I slipped out the door and found a good foot or so of snow at my feet. I had to make quite the effort to trudge my way through the snow down the hill, past my car, and towards what seemed to be a sort of main street. There I found a small, rundown mechanic shop on the corner. I walked to the office next to the garage. Inside, I found an older man behind a counter.

"Good mornin'. Ain't it a little early for something to go wrong?" he said as he

chuckled to himself. I gave a forced laugh in return. "I'm Wilfred by the way," he added. I introduced myself and tried to explain that I had gotten lost and that my car broke down near the hill last night, but he didn't seem very interested in that.

"Where'd you stay then? God knows you didn't sleep out in the snow," he said as he let out another small chuckle.

"The man who lives in that farmhouse partway up the hill was nice enough to let me stay the night at his place," I replied.

"Henry?"

"Yes, that's him."

"Henry? You stayed at Henry's?"

"Yes." He was staring at me with an expression somewhere between dumbfoundedness and disbelief. "Why?" I asked.

"Well, Henry ain't really talk to anybody in a long time. Not ever since his wife disappeared. And you're just a stranger." I wasn't sure how to respond so I just shrugged my shoulders. After a slight pause, he went on to ask me some questions about any noises or smells I might have noticed in the car and so on. After I answered no to all of his questions, he asked me to show him the car, so I led him out into the snow and directed him towards my now half buried car.

"Well, we're going to need to get it into the garage then. I'll go and get some shovels so we can clear a path," he said and left. It was a task that would take until late afternoon to complete. At one point I had seen Henry by the lake just staring out across the water as if he was waiting for something to appear. I stopped, and Wilfred must have seen me looking at him because he paused from his shoveling too and came up to me.

"You know he owns a car?" he said.

"Yes. I did notice that," I said in response to the seemingly random comment.

"But he never drives it anymore. He stopped driving right after his wife disappeared. Same time he stopped talking to everyone. Weird, aint it? But personally, I think he finds a comfort in walkin' though. How could you not? You've got the trees, the lake, and all those mountains to please your eyes. It really is quite a sight."

"Yes. It sure is beautiful around here." I said, but my mind was not thinking about the scenery. What had happened to Henry's wife that Wilfred felt the need to keep on bringing it up? I hated to be nosey, but now I couldn't help myself.

"What is it that happened to Henry's wife?" I asked.

He then told me some story that didn't seem to make any sense about Henry's wife screaming some nonsense into the night. It was, apparently, a story that Henry's neighbors had spread across the town soon after the disappearance of Henry's wife.

After we had gotten the car to the garage and Wilfred had examined it, he told me that he wouldn't be able to finish fixing it until tomorrow. I thanked him and started on my way back to Henry's house. It was dark out now but I took a second to walk up to the lake where I had seen Henry standing earlier. I looked out over the water in hopes that I would see what might have held Henry's attention. All I could see was the dark blue fields of color that met to form the lake and sky. After a minute I continued up the hill. I could see the light coming from inside Henry's house just as I had the night before.



When he let me in, I could tell he had been drinking by his slurred speech and odd arm gestures that made him look like he was trying to conduct an orchestra as he ushered me into the empty dining room. He offered me some soup, which I gladly accepted. It was lukewarm when he handed it to me, but that didn't bother me much. He then poured himself a glass of whiskey as we sat down and asked if I wanted any, but I was never much one for alcohol so I declined his offer.

"Well, suit yourself," he said. I saw my chance, though it really wasn't like me to try to get so into someone else's business.

"So, have you always lived alone?" I asked, knowing well what the answer was. Henry took a second and cleared his throat.

"N-n-no. No, I once lived here with my wife," he replied. "But she's gone now." He took a swig from his glass. I began to open my mouth to speak but something occurred to him and he cut me off. "Someone said something to you didn't they? They told you some wild story and now you want to know what really happened don't you? I know what you're getting at. You want to know?"

"Well uh... yes I would like to know, but only if you don't mind telling me. I understand if you don't want to tell something like this to a stranger." He immediately grabbed his glass and stood up.

"You can stay one more night, but then I want you gone. Got that?" He walked out of the room before I could respond.

That night, I was more determined than ever to find out what he was trying to hide. I waited in the basement room until I could not hear him moving about upstairs anymore. I waited an extra half an hour or so after this to make sure that he was asleep, then I made my way up the stairs and into the living room where the bed sheets were in hopes of find some sort of clue as to what he was hiding.

When I got there, I began looking around the bedsheets on the floor but found nothing. After a few more minutes of looking around the room I finally came across a dust covered envelope on top of the bookcase. In the dark, all I could make out was that the envelope was from Henry and that he had never actually sent it; there was an address on the envelope but no stamp. I took the letter back to the basement room where I could view it with the light on. There was not much else to see on the envelope itself, so I figured I might as well open it. Inside was a letter addressed to the family of Thel. As I read through the letter, I suddenly began to realize that what Henry was trying to explain in his letter must be the same event that Wilfred had told me. Thel must have been Henry's wife!

Henry's perspective of the story had never been told to anyone, unlike the neighbor's rumors that had spread like a virus across the town, taking on different forms as it spread. A virus like the one that starts the full story I have managed to piece together.

As the first leaves turned red and brown almost ten years before I came across the small town, Thel had been infected by a virus. By the start of winter, the temperature had fallen, along with Thel's health. She had lost almost all of her strength and was no longer able to walk, so Henry had laid down some blankets on the floor of the living room to make a makeshift bed. Henry hated to see his wife laying there on the floor, but it was the best way for him to take care of her until she got better. She didn't though; she **only** seemed to become more ill the deeper into winter they got, even despite the weekly visits from their local doctor. Then came the night of the heaviest snow of the year.

Henry sat silently on the edge of a chair next to a sleeping Thel, watching for her every breath, every sweet breath of life that would pass through her weakened body. He remembered when they first embraced in each others arms: that warmth he felt from both her and from deep inside himself. He thought that if only he had held her closer she never would have gotten sick.

A violent cough soon pierced his thoughts and brought his attention back to the present. The cough had managed to barely wake Thel. He caressed her forehead and hair until she slowly slipped back into repose. Henry waited a minute and then carefully rose from his chair and walked towards the window. The flakes of snow fell like thousands of stars from the sky, all crashing towards the ground.

A sudden grotesque cough made Henry jump. Then a barrage of horrid coughs followed in a rapid surge. Henry quickly went over and dropped down next to Thel. He tried to comfort her but was then horrified on finding the puddle of blood on the floor by her mouth that her coughs were producing. Her coughs kept on coming and she let out a terrible gurgling gasp for air.

"It's going to be okay! It's going to be okay!" he said with increasing panic. He sprang to his feet and paced in a tight circle until finally a moment of clarity fell on him.

"Hang in there. I'm going to go get Doctor Thomas," he assured her as the coughs rang out like tolling bells. He grabbed his car keys and ran out the door to his car.

Henry, however, had made two crucial mistakes. The first being that Doctor Thomas was gone for the week on some sort of training in New York. The second being that in his panicked rushing, he had not closed the door to the house. The latter would become one of the biggest mistakes he would ever make in his life.

When Henry finally arrived at the doctor's house, the lights were off inside. He ran up to the door and knocked frantically. He waited, shifting his weight from side to side in anticipation. He knocked again, paced back and forth, knocked again, paced some more, knocked again, tapped his foot, knocked harder, waited, then gave up. He realized that would have to do the best he could to help Thel on his own at least until the morning. He ran to his car and sped off back into the storm.

-----

Thel's coughing had calmed down quite some time ago now and she had fallen back asleep. She wasn't sure how long she had been asleep before a strange hustling sound of footsteps had startled her from her sleep. The room was dark now, but she could hear the wind blowing in through the front door. Her next breath stung her lungs and burst out a cough. At that same moment she heard a scurrying of legs on the floor which soon began to come closer. It was making its way through the halls. Her heart began racing to the point where felt it would give out. Her fever was burning her up. Then through the opening to the room, she saw the silhouette of something, something demonic and spider-like that was panting in quick uneven breaths. She gathered every last ounce of strength she had and burst past it and out the door. She began screaming for help once she had gotten outside. She screamed of some monster chasing after her as she sprinted into the snowy night.

-----



Henry sped down the small road in the white cloaked forest, his car plowing through those falling stars that separated him from his wife. He was almost home when suddenly a strange shape appeared in the distance, standing by the lake. As Henry's car sped towards the figure, it stood up, revealing what Henry could swear were eight long pointed legs. He stared more intensely through his windshield. Perhaps the heavy snowfall had created some weird illusion, but just as the figure was becoming more clear, it pranced off into the forest.

-----

Thel was running as fast as her weak body could. She turned her head back as she ran to see how close behind her the creature was. She couldn't see it anymore, but she heard something behind her so she kept running as fast as she could down the hill.

-----

Henry had only taken his eyes off the road for a second to try to see where the figure had gone, but when he turned back around another figure burst out of the snowfall right in front of his car. He tried to brake, but his car just slid across the snowy road without slowing down. He braced himself and closed his eyes. There was a thud against the hood and his car slid some more until finally his tires caught some traction and he skidded to a stop. He ran out of his car toward the figure that laid partially sunken in the snow. As he got closer, he recognized the figure. His heart dropped.

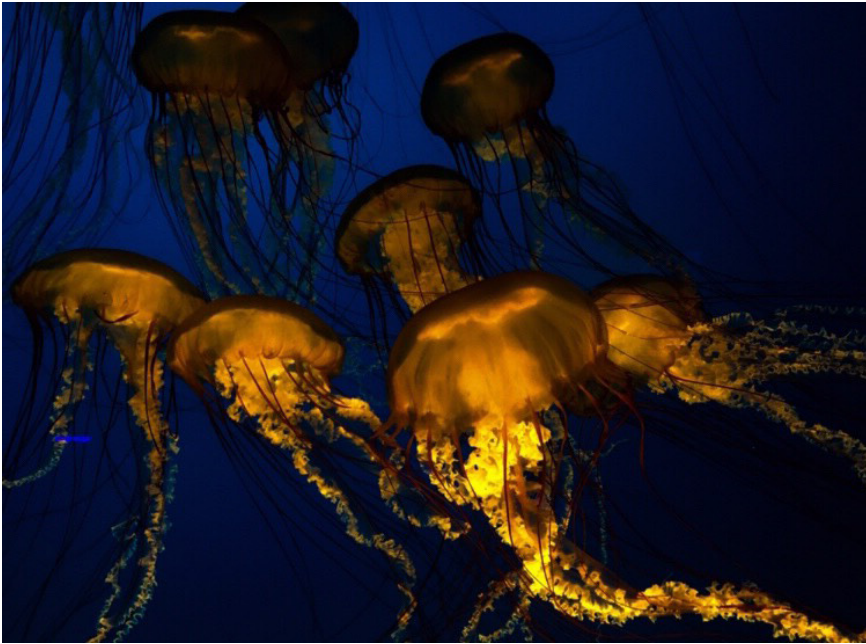
"No no no no no no no! Thel!"

He sunk down next to her and picked up her body in his arms. He held her close against his chest, waiting for a breath. There was nothing. He squeezed her body tighter against his, never wanting to let her go, not this time, not ever again.

He stayed there for a long time, just holding on to her body as the stars fell around them and hit the earth. After a while, he slowly released her body back onto the ground. "It's all my fault," he whispered to her. He couldn't bare to tell people that she was dead and dead because of him. After looking around for a second, he concluded that since the lake was not yet frozen, it would be the best place to hide her body. He carried her over to the mouth of the lake and slid over a small rowboat that one of the families kept on the lake shore. He carefully placed her body down into the boat along with a large stone that was poking out through the snow. He slid the boat into the water, got in and began rowing. When he got close to the center of the lake, he took the stone and tucked it deep into Thel's clothing. He paused, took one last look at her face and then rolled her body overboard. He waited as the stone dragged her body deeper and deeper into the water. He began taking handfuls of water to clean off the blood that stained the boat and his hand. Then he turned around and headed for shore.

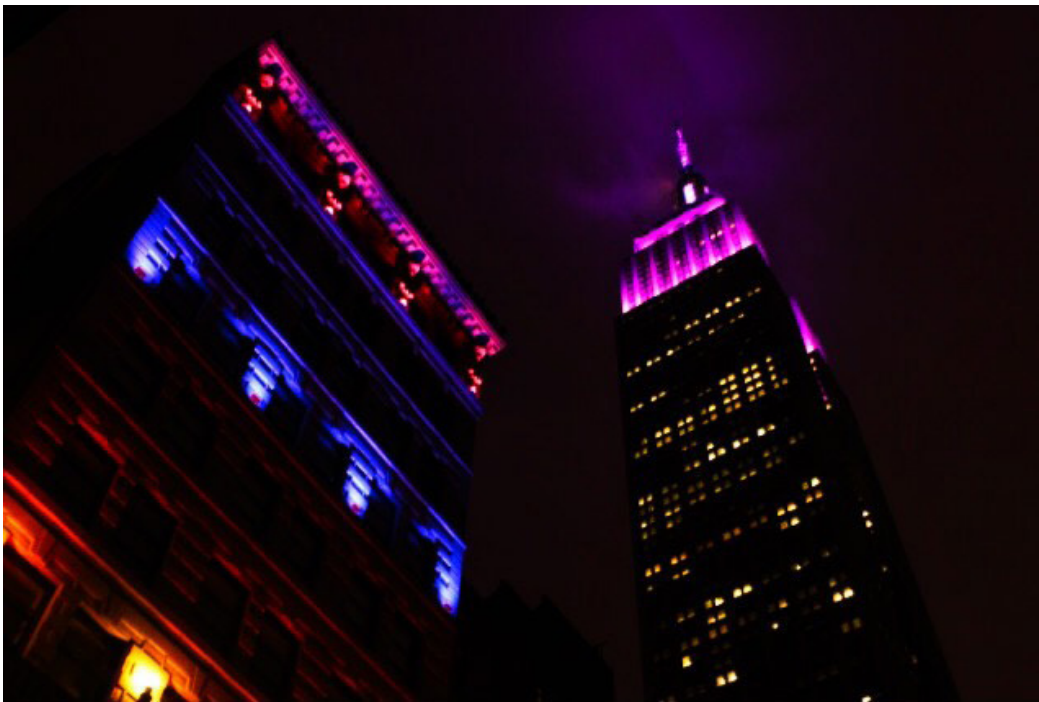
The next morning, a few neighbors had stopped by to see if things were okay, though they never explained the reason for their concerns. Henry told them that Thel had disappeared when he had gone out to look for the doctor. The neighbors then concluded that Thel's fever must have caused some sort of delusion and that she had run off into the night. This came as a relief to Henry. Over the next few months, they searched the forests for her body but it was never found and the lake soon froze over with Thel's body anchored somewhere far in its depths, never to resurface.

# Floating



*Nature is so brilliant, and taking pictures of animals just always seem to turn out nicely.*

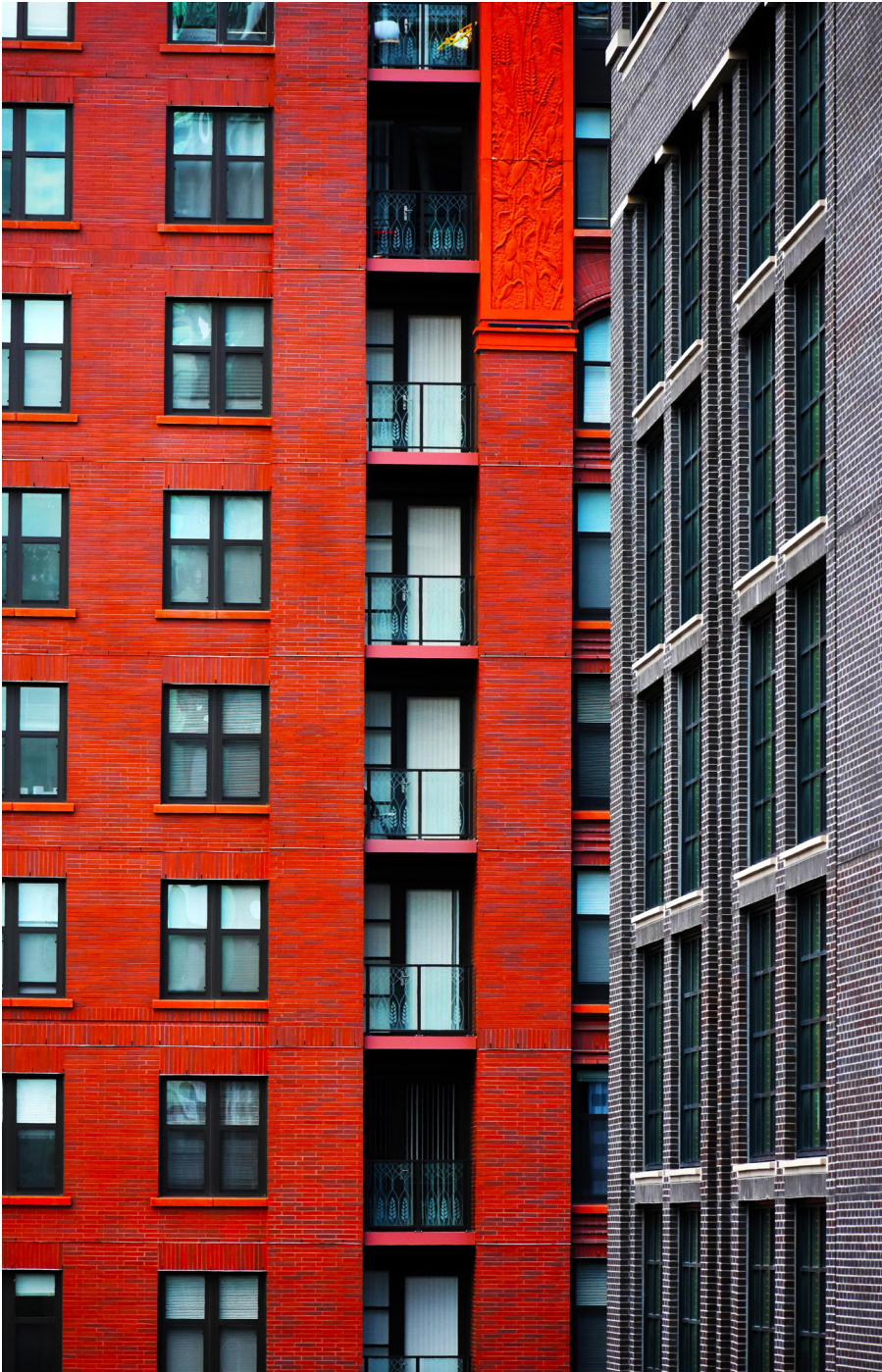
# Luminance



*I grew up traveling to New York City often, and it basically became a second home to me.*



## Grand Park Ave.



*Street photography allows me to capture the contrasts between buildings and take the time to appreciate the art of architecture. This photograph of several city features shows the constant change of a fast-moving environment.*



# 13 Ways of Looking at the Kool-Aid Man

*Note: This poem is a parody of Wallace Stevens' "13 Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." Each stanza is written by a different student, conveying the same Modernist poetry characteristics as "Blackbird" did: imagism, language over meaning, reliance on allusion, and motifs of alienation and disconnection.*

I.

Crack, psh, puff.  
Cherry, punch, strawberry.  
Kool-Aid Man.

II.

The Kool-Aid man cannot return  
the children's love.  
His painted smile falls  
as they drink his blood.  
He ends with a grimace.

III.

From Ophelia's death bed  
with a mixture of Adam's apple,  
moments of innocence  
molded by the Kool-Aid man.

IV.

The elf-king falsely whispers  
promises of iridescent phantasmata.  
The elf-king and the Kool-Aid man  
walk without purpose.

V.

Water made  
impure: Incrediberry  
poisons the well.

VI.

The strike of the hour, booming 'cross Victoria Street  
does not make us fools as  
the Man of the Kool-Aid, booming through the sturdy wall

VII.

They only care about what's on the inside,  
but he feels superficial.  
His personas and flavors  
all artificial.

VIII.

In 2014, preteens dipped  
their hair into cups of Kool-Aid.  
It didn't last.

IX.

He was at Jonestown,  
900 cups of Kool-Aid, man.  
Jim Jones was their Kool-Aid man.

X.

Police arrest a  
big glass jar, charged with  
multiple counts of  
property damage.

XI.

Wood stain, rust  
remover, toilet cleaner,  
dish soap, thirst quencher.

XII.

To be or not to be  
is not the question.  
The Kool-Aid Man acts, not asks.  
To knock on the door where no one  
thirsts  
is an act of nothing.

XIII.

Both he and the raven  
come to the weak and weary.  
Quoth the Kool-Aid Man, "Oh yeah."

Authors: Hanna Bourcier, Jack Hicks, Megan Hu, John Keating, Princesse Keuni, Randy Lindenmayer, Anne Lloyd, Laine Murphy, Bruno Rodas, and Ashton Rose.

## Japanese Classroom



*This classroom is where I spent most of my summer before freshman year, and to be able to paint it brought many nostalgic feelings. I decided to make this piece a lot more abstract than my other pieces because of the many details.*

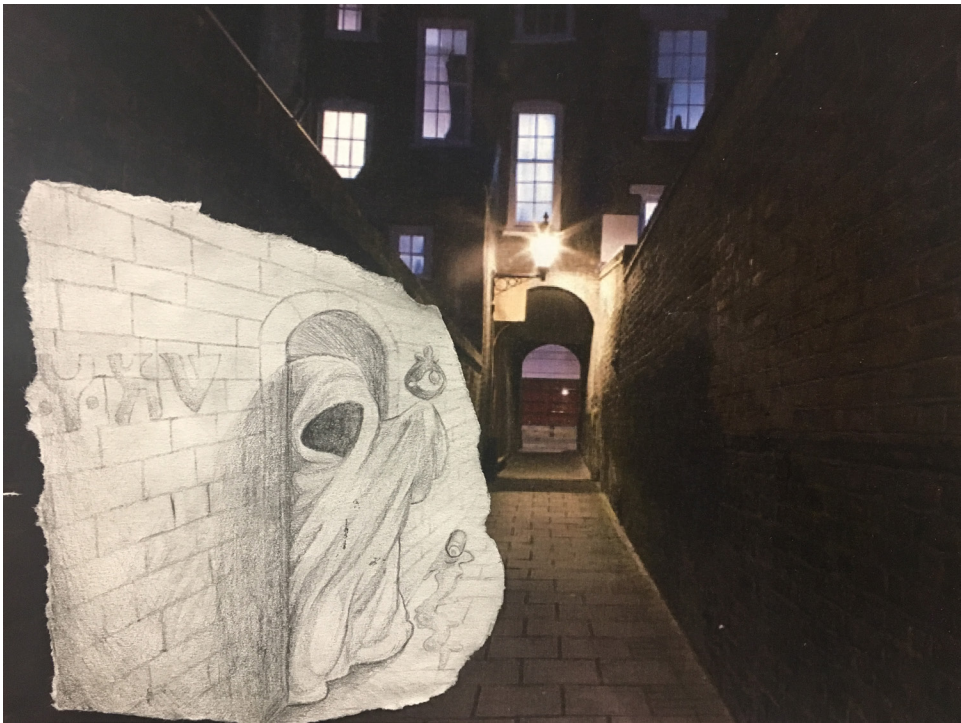


## Kyoto, Japan

*“Kyoto, Japan” was a picture that was taken when I visited Japan. I wanted to showcase the essence of nature through this piece. I think there is a growing lack of appreciation for our world at times, so I would want someone to look at this piece and feel a sense of serenity and appreciation.*

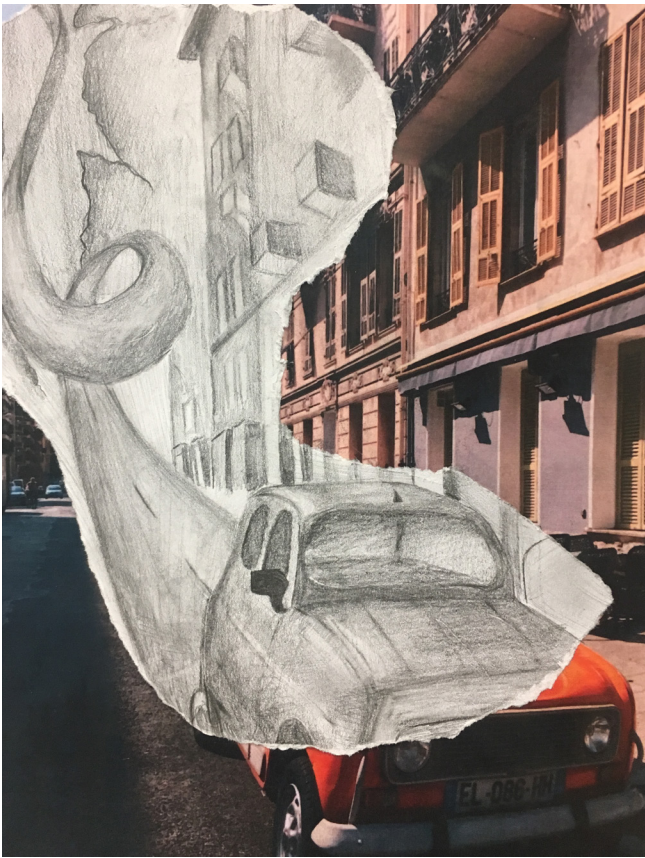


# Entrance



Deepica Premaratne

# Torn Up





# Boy with the Tawny Wings



*I worked with paper cut-outs, white chalk, and navy colored paper--all of which I placed on a background of old wallpaper. The opposing colors allow the image to be inverted and still make sense.*



## Love You.

I was used to being invisible. In fact, I almost liked it better that way. I hid behind my plain tops and my baggy pants and my wrong shoes. It's funny how just a pair of shoes can determine the course of the next four years of your life.

Or at least, they did for me. All I did was grab the pair of shoes closest to me on my first day of freshman year. They were a bright blue sort of color and they added two inches to my height, two extra inches that made me feel powerful and gave me the courage to set foot into an unfamiliar building with people that I didn't know.

I showed up and my friends were chosen for me. I didn't have much of a say in it. It didn't matter that I got along better with the pretty blonde girl in my computer class.

"Do you notice that he spits when he talks?" She turned to me and said, gesturing to our new teacher, "God, this is gonna be a long year."

I laughed, "I know. At least we're in the back. I feel so bad for that one girl sitting right under his nose."

Together, we turned our attention to the girl taking one for the team. Her face was now practically covered in his saliva droplets.

Pretty Blonde and I giggled quietly together. Then, we talked for the rest of the period and this overwhelming sense of security and peace resonated within me. I no longer had to worry about high school not being good for me or that I would be all alone for the next four years of my life. I would be fine.

The bell rang. We rose from our seats simultaneously. She told me goodbye and then her eyes caught sight of my shoes. We locked gazes and in her eyes, I saw sympathy and embarrassment entwined together in that one look she gave me. Then she walked away and the squeak of her pretty, white sneakers against the tiles confirmed my suspicion that her goodbye was a final one.

Throughout the day, I began to attract people who looked more similar to me. The giggling with pretty blonde girls was no more. Instead, I was now conversing with people who also wore plain tops and baggy pants, though they were missing the shoes that told everyone in the hallways what kind of person I was and whether or not I was worth befriending. Rather than receiving that one look that the pretty blonde had given me, I was now receiving compliments from the plain t-shirt and baggy pants people at my school. They loved me for my shoes. They wanted some of their own. I became friends with these kind of people and although I had classes with Pretty Blonde every year for the next four years, she never talked to me again. It wasn't until the Christmas time of my senior year that I finally figured out why.

My older brother brought home a girl from college. She resembled Pretty Blonde in a lot of ways. At dinner, I tried to get a sense of what she was like, but she didn't seem like...anything, really. She didn't say much, and when she did, it was all shallow, on the surface things.

After dinner, my brother and I headed into the kitchen to wash the dishes. We were rather quiet at first. We embraced the comfortable silence that we found ourselves in, except I wasn't in the least bit comfortable with my brother's dinner guest. I'm sure that

as a person she was perfectly fine, but as a person that my brother could potentially love, potentially marry someday, I was having trouble visualizing them together, seeing as how they seemed so completely different from one another.

“So,” I began as I dried the remaining water off of a plate and placed it on the rack,

“Your girlfriend seems nice.”

“My girlfriend has a name, you know,” he replied.

I tried not to show the surprise on my face when it dawned on me that I hadn’t even tried to learn her name and had already forgotten it.

“Yes, well, what do you like about her, anyway?”

He shrugged, “I like a lot of things about her. Where is all of this coming from?”

Now it was my turn to shrug, “I don’t know. She just doesn’t really seem anything like you. I can’t really see you two together in the long run.”

My brother laughed loudly, “The long run? Heidi, come on. This is 2019. Does anyone date with the long run in mind these days?”

“I don’t know,” It felt like the foundation that I stood on was shaking, “I just thought...”

“She’s a beautiful girl, Heidi,” He said at last, “That’s enough for me.”

And there was the magic answer to all of the questions that I had been asking myself for the last four years of my life. I had never had a boyfriend, yet Pretty Blonde from school had already had three. What was wrong with me? Were only the Pretty Blondes beautiful in this world? Or was I just not beautiful enough to be loved by anyone?

Eventually, my brother was called away by our mother, who wanted to know absolutely everything about his relationship. So, his pretty blonde girlfriend decided to give me a hand. We worked in complete silence, seeing as how neither of us had anything to talk about. I used the sponge to scrub the dishes clean and she observed, tapping her long fingernails against the countertop as she impatiently waited to dry them. Then, once I felt like the dish was clean enough, I handed it to her and she did a sort of eager jump, almost as if I was handing her the most exciting thing that this night had to offer.

The cycle then repeated itself. The water was so loud and so endless as it washed away what was left on each dish. I watched, mesmerized, while my brother’s girlfriend did everything she could to keep herself from losing her mind. She ran her fingers through her hair and then she twirled locks of it around her finger and then she flipped it behind her shoulder. She was in the middle of tying it up into a ponytail when I handed her the final dish to dry. She quickly allowed her hair to fall and accepted the dish with gratitude.

After she dried the last dish, I moved to retreat from the sink and our eyes locked. She subtly took me in, all of me and then, her eyes met mine again and in them was that same look that Pretty Blonde from school had given me four years ago. It was a look filled with pity, like I needed to be saved by someone. What was it that they were trying to save me from?

“You know, Heidi,” She smiled softly at me, “You could be so beautiful if you tried.”

Then she walked away. For the first time in my life, someone had told me exactly what was meant by that look. I was pretty enough to be beautiful someday, if I just...tried. The plain t-shirts, the baggy pants, and my horrid, horrid shoes were what was holding me back. My own, unique, individual style that I loved was the thing that was keeping me from being beautiful in the eyes of the pretty blondes that pitied me. If I just tried, then I



could achieve the one thing that every person wants in this world, to be beautiful, but not for themselves. To be beautiful enough to be loved by someone else.

I watched as my brother wrapped his arm around his girlfriend and led her to the front door. She slipped onto her feet the most exquisite sandals that I had ever seen and they highlighted her perfectly painted toenails brilliantly.

She looked up at him expectantly. He leaned down and planted a delicate kiss against her forehead. Then, they headed into the night together and as he pulled the front door shut, I could still hear the delicate clip clop of her shoes dancing against my driveway.

I abandoned the kitchen and walked in the direction of the front door where my shoes rested innocently against the wall. My shoes, made by my favorite brand in the whole world, were strong and sturdy and they gave me a sense of safety and security and they made me feel good and they made me feel like me, but they were not beautiful.

I asked my dad if tomorrow we could go shoe shopping. I told him it was time for a change and he was alright with that.

So, I grabbed my former favorite shoes and took them up to my room with me. I opened up my closet door and tossed them back into their shoebox and the shoebox was shoved into the very back of my closet, never to see the light of day again.

As I'm looking back, I'm trying to remember when the love that I had for myself had stopped being good enough and when I had decided that wearing my favorite shoes on my feet was less important than squeezing my feet into a pair of sandals in search of love from a world that has so little of it to give.

Mariely Rodriguez, Andrew Hernandez, Eli Mayer

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## Monsters



## Date Night



*The inspiration for “Date Night” sort of came from my love for the synthwave music genre in terms of aesthetics (like the colors). It also came from my love for art with slight “scary movie” vibes. This piece was actually supposed to be just an observation piece, but I thought that would be boring.*



# Gary Steinman



Gary Steinman is a writer who has always adored magazines and writes everything from articles to social content to video scripts. He is currently the Director of Content for the gaming company Bethesda Softworks. He has contributed to and managed many magazines, and has written for top companies like Bethesda Softworks and Ubisoft.

Interview by Ashton Rose, edited by Meghan Kane

## Which came first, playing video games or writing?

Writing. I mean, I played games as a kid, but video games were incidental to my career path. I had always wanted to be a writer and I had a passion for writing, but it wasn't always coupled with the discipline that you need to actually write a novel, for example.

For me, the joy comes in finishing a piece of writing. It's like there's an urgency to put things down on the page, but the true satisfaction comes when you step away from the page. You know, I had a fear of writing even as I had a desire to write, and I still have that to some extent, which I think is healthy. I don't trust a writer who is too in love with their voice, too in love with their turn of phrase, and can write too easily. I've worked with writers like that, and as an editor, they are the toughest to edit because they just become wedded to their turns of phrase, and their writing tends to go absolutely nowhere. When I was going to college in New York in the early nineties, magazines were still a thing. Not just a thing, but the thing. I had a passion for magazines, and I always wanted to be a magazine writer. I would spend time at the newsstand; I'd read magazines about things that I had no interest in just to study other people's voices. I'd look at mastheads and try to picture where I would be on that masthead. At the time, magazines were the local community. This was before forums, before the internet, before social media; magazines were the virtual community of the time, the shared language, the thing that you discuss.

A lot of my early work was in financial news, which was exhausting and dreary and not at all for me, but it was still exciting and got me published in magazines. I worked for a year for at a magazine called Working Woman, which was a lot of fun. I worked as a fact checker for Barron's, which is one of the most exhausting jobs you can imagine, especially pre-Internet. I worked for a magazine called Selling, and the irony there is that they couldn't sell it, so it folded.



**“** *You don't have to be a starving writer. You can use your writing and you can make a good living and do exciting things and see the world.*



Image provided by Gary Steinman

## How do you tackle new formats when given them, like screenwriting?

In facing anything there is a pattern of fear and existential dread, and then at the same time you have to summon the grandiosity to approach it. You have to commit to the act of creating something out of nothing, because the scariest thing is the blank page.

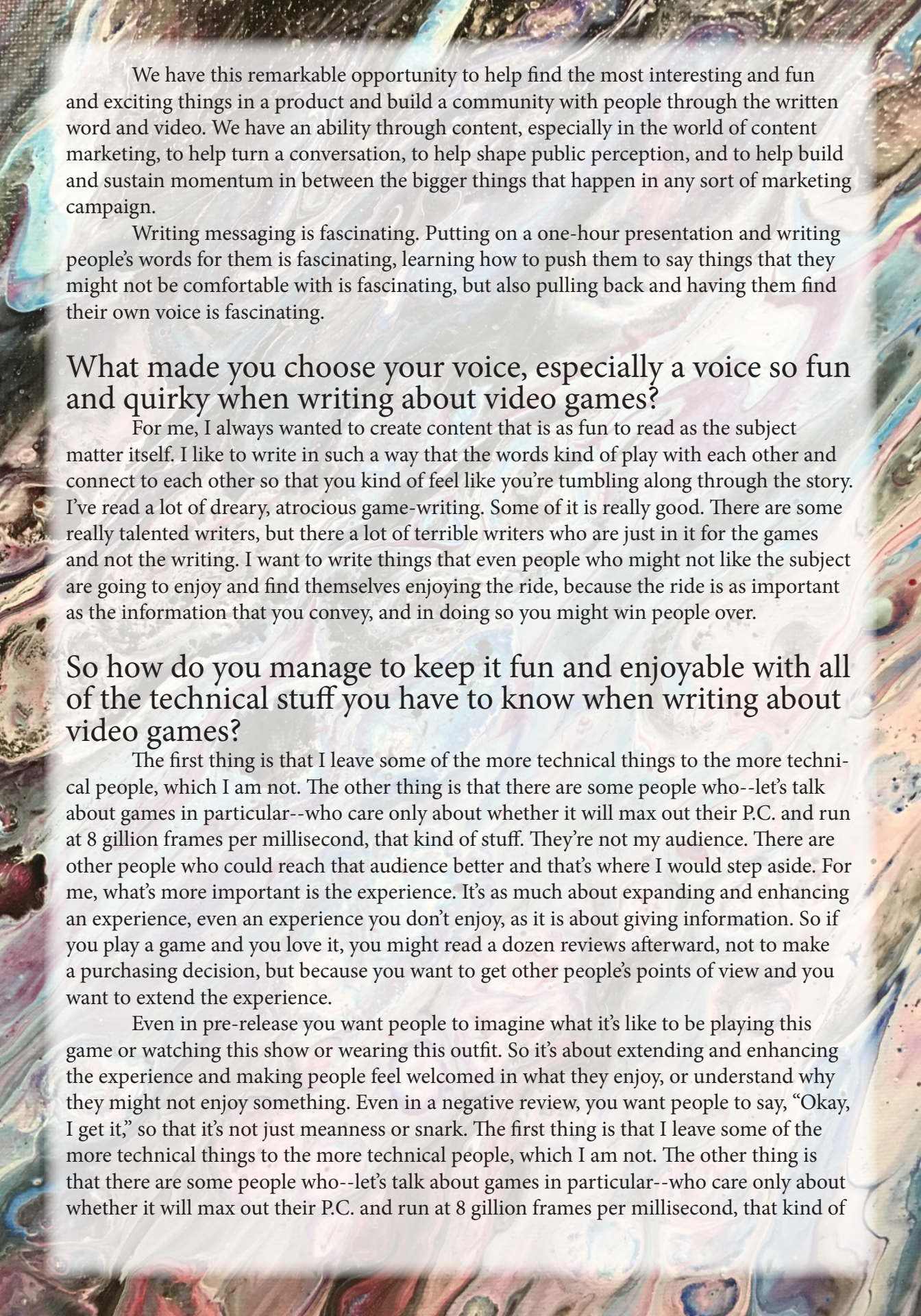
It's also a lot of study and preparation, and that to me is the core of all writing. Whether you're writing fiction, a 50-word article, or a 3,000-word cover story for a magazine, it's about knowing what you want to say, getting there, and then saying it, and allowing yourself to be edited and listening to the feedback you receive. A big lesson is embracing the editing process and learning to love to be edited.

The first time I wrote a video script, I sat there and grabbed about five other video scripts from agencies that have done it before and I looked at the formatting and started with the structure. I knew I had a vision for what I wanted to convey, and I looked at the structure, and I played with it, and then I found the right people to help me refine it.

## What kind of freedom do you have with the writing you do (writing for clients)?

It's funny because the boundaries given to me also offer me immense freedom in many ways. The freedom comes in embracing the challenge of writing within a set of requirements, especially now that I'm in-house. I look at it like, how do I find the truth of a product that I'm trying to sell? How do I enhance it and bring it life? How do I take product details or a feature of a product and make it funny and exciting? The same went for when I was working in gaming magazines. It's like, yeah, you could bring a level of cynicism and jadedness to the table, but how do I find the fun and joy in it while not diminishing my genuine criticism?





We have this remarkable opportunity to help find the most interesting and fun and exciting things in a product and build a community with people through the written word and video. We have an ability through content, especially in the world of content marketing, to help turn a conversation, to help shape public perception, and to help build and sustain momentum in between the bigger things that happen in any sort of marketing campaign.

Writing messaging is fascinating. Putting on a one-hour presentation and writing people's words for them is fascinating, learning how to push them to say things that they might not be comfortable with is fascinating, but also pulling back and having them find their own voice is fascinating.

## What made you choose your voice, especially a voice so fun and quirky when writing about video games?

For me, I always wanted to create content that is as fun to read as the subject matter itself. I like to write in such a way that the words kind of play with each other and connect to each other so that you kind of feel like you're tumbling along through the story. I've read a lot of dreary, atrocious game-writing. Some of it is really good. There are some really talented writers, but there a lot of terrible writers who are just in it for the games and not the writing. I want to write things that even people who might not like the subject are going to enjoy and find themselves enjoying the ride, because the ride is as important as the information that you convey, and in doing so you might win people over.

## So how do you manage to keep it fun and enjoyable with all of the technical stuff you have to know when writing about video games?

The first thing is that I leave some of the more technical things to the more technical people, which I am not. The other thing is that there are some people who--let's talk about games in particular--who care only about whether it will max out their P.C. and run at 8 gillion frames per millisecond, that kind of stuff. They're not my audience. There are other people who could reach that audience better and that's where I would step aside. For me, what's more important is the experience. It's as much about expanding and enhancing an experience, even an experience you don't enjoy, as it is about giving information. So if you play a game and you love it, you might read a dozen reviews afterward, not to make a purchasing decision, but because you want to get other people's points of view and you want to extend the experience.

Even in pre-release you want people to imagine what it's like to be playing this game or watching this show or wearing this outfit. So it's about extending and enhancing the experience and making people feel welcomed in what they enjoy, or understand why they might not enjoy something. Even in a negative review, you want people to say, "Okay, I get it," so that it's not just meanness or snark. The first thing is that I leave some of the more technical things to the more technical people, which I am not. The other thing is that there are some people who--let's talk about games in particular--who care only about whether it will max out their P.C. and run at 8 gillion frames per millisecond, that kind of



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**We have this remarkable opportunity to help find the most interesting and fun and exciting things in a product and build a community with people through the written word and video.** ”

**What led you to working at Bethesda Softworks and sticking with them?**

One of the scariest things about being a professional writer in this era is that publishing is no longer a controlled-access thing. I mean, it's always a struggle finding a job, moving up through the ranks, getting to where you want to be. My point in saying that is that in many ways I "made it" in magazines. I was an editor in chief, I ran multiple magazines. It was very exciting and it was always my dream to do that. To redesign magazines, to launch magazines, to run an editorial team, to create a voice for the magazine as a whole, that's all very exciting, and then the internet came along. In the early days of the internet, we would look down on these up-and-comers. Oh, they're running around doing their little website stuff but we're print--and then it just shifted, and I was kind of in a bit of a career panic because I was worried about being a print dinosaur. And even though I clawed my way into online media, the rise of social media and the way search works has diminished a lot of online media as well.

It wasn't an easy transition, but I had some good friends at a company called Ubisoft in San Francisco, where I lived at the time, and we had been talking for a while about them creating their own blog, because what would happen is a lot of these companies were bringing their own content in-house. People were starting to come more directly to these companies for information, rather than magazines and sites. So I did go over to Ubisoft and I built their blog and some of their content marketing stuff. I was there for a couple of years, and I had some close friends at Bethesda and they wanted to do something similar. So I left San Francisco, I came here and have been here for four years now. It's been exciting because here I've been able to do things I never thought I would do. I'm creating more video content, I'm scripting stage shows, I'm hosting some events on occasion, scripting panels and that kind of thing. So I'm taking the skills I've developed as a writer and helping with messaging and building programs.





I'm using writing to do things I never thought I would do. It's challenging and exciting and daunting, but it's keeping me on my toes. So I plan on being here for a while because it's keeping me challenged and not letting me be complacent.

## How do you continue to deal with the anxiety of the blank page?

Preparation. It's all about preparation. You're writing in your head all the time, that's why you're staring off into the distance sometimes. You might right now be thinking, "That quote was good, I'm gonna put this here, maybe that's the lede to my story." So embrace that, because it's all about preparation.

Before I ever write, 80% of the time I have it mapped out, and then the next struggle for me is coming up with the right lede. Because without that, I feel like I can't connect it together. I want to bring people in with the right thing that tells them what they're going to read, and why they're going to read it, and why they might want to come on this journey with me, whether its 50 words or 5000 words.

So for me personally, ledes are very important--the right opening sentence or paragraph or three paragraphs to convince readers to come with me. And then once I'm prepared, and even overprepared, and once I have the right intro sentence or lead, then it starts to come to me. Then it's actually fairly easy. That's my process, and it is a lot of overpreparation and a lot of notes and a lot of mapping out where I want to go and what I want to do.

**“The skills you develop as a creative writer, as a journalistic writer, will help you in such a broad range of fields because so much of what we do is storytelling.**

## Is there anything you want to say to young journalists?

I'll get back to the journalist thing, but I wanted to say, specific advice to any writer, is that you can make a living writing. And it might not be the writing you think you want to do today, but it might keep you doing the things you want to do as a career. The skills you develop as a creative writer, as a journalistic writer, will help you in such a broad range of fields because so much of what we do is storytelling.

If you're in marketing like I am, how are you creating stories? How are you making stories? How are you finding the voice of the product? How are you helping people refine their message? What are you doing on social media?

So there are jobs for writers that aren't necessarily the jobs that you think--that aren't the obvious ones. So much of marketing is writing, there are a lot of creative agencies and advertising agencies.

If you're in marketing like I am, how are you creating stories? How are you making stories? How are you finding the voice of the product? How are you helping people refine their message? What are you doing on social media?

So there are jobs for writers that aren't necessarily the jobs that you think--that aren't the obvious ones. So much of marketing is writing, there are a lot of creative agencies and advertising agencies.



In terms of journalism, I was never a hard-core journalist. I was more of an entertainment writer and reporter and feature writer, so I don't want to talk too much about hard-core journalism, but all journalism really is the pursuit of the truth. It's not the pursuit of both sides, that's where our media is failing.

They've gone into this kind of "both-sides-ism," which has elevated what is clearly sometimes a wrong side. It's the pursuit of the truth, and that even applies to entertainment writing, where you're not necessarily exposing what's happening on a movie set as much as saying hey, here's something cool that you might like. What's the truth behind that? Why is it cool, why might you like it, and how can you genuinely express that? Even in corporate writing, the writing I do now that exists primarily to help sell a product to our audience--I'm not lying to the audience, I'm finding the truth and I'm enhancing it and bringing it to life. So find your truth, know it, and be willing to embrace it and express it. And then use that to find the truth in other things, even if you're doing it for a client. And especially if you're doing it as a real, hard news reporter. Just tell the truth.

## Tell me a story about a fun/memorable moment in your career.

Fact checking, I said earlier, is one of the most painful and terrible jobs, and I was a fact checker for magazines pre-Internet. I was working with an author when I was at Working Woman magazine, and the author used a phrase that she attributed to Tom Wolfe, "as Tom Wolfe said such and such..." and then the copy-chief flagged that and said, "Did Tom Wolfe actually say or write this? Gary, can you check this?" So I called the article's author and I'm like, I don't see a reference to this anywhere, I don't have time to read all of his books, which book did you get this from. And she's like, "oh, it was from The Bonfire of the Vanities." And I'm like, "are you sure?" and she's like, "I'm sure." I went back to the copy chief and he said, "I don't think it was in that book." So I spent that weekend reading that book and I couldn't find it in the book. She's like, "Well, I'm sure it's in the book." So then--this is in the fax era by the way--I called Tom Wolfe's publicist and asked, "Do you know if Tom Wolfe wrote this phrase?" and she said, "I'll check."

So we were ready to print and we still had that thing attributed to Tom Wolfe. I said, "I think we have to pull this because I can't guarantee that he said it," and the editor in chief overruled me. She said, "No, I trust my writer." At the time there was a famous language columnist named William Safire who wrote for The New York Times Magazine, and he noticed that it was in this article, and he questioned whether it existed. So then my editor came back to me and said, "How did you let this pass?" and I'm like, "I didn't."

A day or two later I finally got a fax from Tom Wolfe saying, "I sure wish I came up with that, but I didn't come up with that." And it was a handwritten fax in beautiful handwriting. I think I threw a stapler, I was so annoyed. Not at anyone, in privacy. It made me realize how much I hate fact checking but also how important it is. That definitely was one of those moments where I'm like, "What am I doing with my life, why am I doing this, shouldn't I be writing a great American novel instead?" But at the same time, I was working for a magazine and it was still my dream.



# Fallout 4 – Behind the Score with Inon Zur

Published on Bethesda.net by Gary Steinman September 22, 2015



Judging from the strange sounds coming from the yard next door, Inon Zur's neighbors would be forgiven for thinking their neighbor's half-mad.

"I walk in my garden and basically hammer on things," Zur says. He's also been known to use a cello bow on a garden chair – which, he tells us, produces a sound that's "shrill as hell." And if those same neighbors happen to peek into Zur's house, they might even catch the composer at the piano... but it won't be like any recital they've ever seen. "I cruelly exploit the piano by hitting the strings with open hands and even biting the strings," Zur laughs.

It's all in a day's work for the multi-award-winning composer. Having written and produced the scores for the Fallout series starting with Fallout Tactics, Zur returns to Fallout 4, bringing his unique and evocative sounds with him. And, once again, Zur will do whatever it takes to create the distinctive soundscapes that are such an integral part of the Fallout experience. Even if it means occasionally disturbing the neighbors.

## WARMING UP

Keep in mind that Zur isn't just seeking inspiration from his patio furniture. The combination of non-traditional instruments with traditional melodic orchestrations has become a signature element of the Fallout score. While there are recognizable melodies – including the main theme (more on that in a bit) – Fallout 4's score is more about adventuring through soundscapes, Zur explains. Working with the team at Bethesda Game Studios, Zur crafts unique soundscapes to fit the different environments. "In this way we provide a different musical experience that is not necessarily very thematic but is something very memorable," Zur says. In other words, it's about signaling to the player where they are,



why they're there, and helping reinforce the emotional dimensions of the Fallout 4 story.

But what specifically does that mean in terms of the Fallout 4 score? And how is it different from previous Fallout scores? For Zur, it's about capturing the humanity of the game. From his first meeting with Audio Director Mark Lampert and Game Director Todd Howard, Zur felt that this game – more than any previous Fallout – is a very personal story. Which is why Zur suggested having the piano play a prominent role in the game's score, as he felt the piano could capture the more personal nature of Fallout 4.

"I have a very nice grand piano at home, and I recorded myself playing the main theme," Zur says. Todd's first reaction was mixed: He liked the idea of the piano, but he found the actual sound to be too bright, bordering on harsh. Todd and Mark wanted something warmer. "So I created a combination between a real piano and an electric piano sound," Zur says. "A sound that is really round and not bright at all but very lush." When Zur played this for Todd and Mark, both of them immediately knew this was what they wanted. "So following that lead on, there are multiple times that I use this," Zur says. "You also hear it first in the main theme. This is not a mistake or just a random choice. The piano will stay with us throughout the whole score."

#### SENSE OF PLACE

A uniquely modified piano sound is all well and good, but what about that shrill-as-hell garden chair along with all the other banging around? It's just one of the three major elements that constitute the soundscapes of Fallout: classical instruments; electronic instruments; and a non-musical instrument or an ethnic/primitive instrument. The goal, Zur explains, is for players to hear a particular combination of these instruments and know where they are. "For example, in some parts of the game we decided that the right feel would be more orchestral, but the lead instrument is low accordion," Zur says. "Other areas, I sampled myself playing this unusual improvised ocarina, which gives all this airiness and shrillness."

Wait, back up a second... accordion? Yep. It was an idea that came directly from Lampert. "Mark always has these... thoughts," Zur says. "Sometimes he will ask for an instrument that I wouldn't even think about." Having worked together for a long time, though, the two of them have developed a deep and trusting relationship – one in which Zur is able to deliver the music he thinks works best based on Lampert's general direction, and one in which any feedback or fine-tuning is met with open arms. So when Lampert suggested the accordion to help define the sound of a particular area, Zur was willing to give it a try.

"It was really funny," Zur recalls. "I mean, we're talking very serious music here. We're talking the Commonwealth. "It was really funny," Zur recalls. "I mean, we're talking very serious music here. We're talking the Commonwealth. Some of the cues have English and Irish elements to capture the color of the Commonwealth. The accordion, though, is a French and Eastern European instrument that to many sounds happy and almost quirky. But guess what? This unique, low accordion sound became one of the signature points of the score. So you never know! It just takes trust."



## FROM DESPAIR TO HOPE

Speaking of trust, one of the most recognizable elements of the Fallout score is the main theme itself. Which had us wondering: what makes it such a power and effective way to bring people into the Fallout world?

“I originally composed the main theme for Fallout 3,” Zur says. “We basically use two chords. That’s to reflect the dualism in Fallout: the despair of war – but also the hope for the future. In Fallout we’re always torn between the despair and the darkness and all the dangers that are lurking in the world, and the hope to build a better world.”

To capture this duality, Zur took two keys and combined them together. “What we’re getting basically is this minor chord leading to a major chord – or a major chord that almost acts like a minor chord leading to a major chord. These two chords combined – always the minor and the major together – give us this bittersweet Fallout feel.” It’s this dualism – the somber sounds of a minor chord leading the bright optimism of a major chord – that defines the Fallout theme. “It’s the signature of Fallout,” Zur says. “You start from the bleak and you go to the hope. Very simplistic but works like a charm every time.”

## THE JOURNEY AHEAD

What else can fans look forward to when they hear Inon Zur’s score? “For me, again, the most important things are: where are we in the story, and where do we really want to take the player during this journey? We can definitely create a lot of emotion, and emotional twists. We can definitely influence the player, in order to support the story, with music. But we’re mainly talking about feel. We try to attach a soundscape that will support the emotional aspects of an area.”

That’s why the unique combination of instruments is so important to the Fallout 4 score. “I’m trying to create something that sounds fresh,” Zur says. “Something that sounds like the beginning.” When players first emerge from the Vault, they begin a new journey. They see a world that’s been destroyed – which is represented by the percussive “non-instruments.” But as players explore the open world, they also see nature all around them – represented by the more musical but primitive instruments. Meanwhile, the emotional aspects of the game are supported by the orchestral sounds.

It’s all about the joy of discovery during a long journey ahead. Which is exactly what Zur is looking forward to when he plays Fallout 4 on November 10, 2015, when the game releases globally on Xbox One, PlayStation 4 and PC. Just like Zur explores his own garden, finding natural sounds that fit the game’s score, he plans to wander through the wasteland simply discovering what’s out there. “Probably the first thing I’m going to do after starting the game is just walk,” Zur says. “The younger players, they might look for enemies and seek out attractions... This will come if you want it or not. Let me soak it in. Let me see what’s around. Let me discover.”



# Far Cry 4 - Meet Pagan Min

Published by Gary Steinman on UbiBlog (blog.ubi.com) by Gary Steinman June 9, 2014




And just like that, Pagan Min has arrived. But after his undeniably chilling introduction to the world, we can't help wondering: Who exactly is this disarmingly charming psychopath? Or, perhaps a better question: Is the villain of Far Cry 4 actually crazy at all? And is he even a villain, for that matter?

We still have much to learn about Pagan Min ahead of Far Cry 4's worldwide release on November 18, but we were able to pry free some intriguing insights into the charismatic character. Before we reveal a bit more about the man behind the pink suits and bleached hair, check out this video in which Far Cry 4's main character, Ajay Ghale, meets Min upon his return to Kyrat, the country of his birth.

Quite the reunion, indeed. But while Ajay might not fully recall Pagan Min, that doesn't stop the man from being positively giddy about their meeting. "Pagan Min gets a genuine feeling of glee when he sees you," says Executive Producer Dan Hay. "Like, Yes, you're here! We're going to have so much fun! You and I, we're going to [mess things] up. It's going to be amazing!"





As the video shows, there's a strong connection between the two. Pagan Min immediately recognizes Ajay. He knows Ajay's family. And he's even organized a party for Ajay. "That's not what you would expect from a first contact with an antagonist," says Technical Director Cedric Decelle. "Usually it's a kill and survive situation. But he's super happy to see you – while around you there's cars on fire and people dying."

Of course, nothing about Pagan Min is predictable. The self-appointed ruler of Kyrat escaped from his underworld roots, took on a new identity, and set his sights on the nearby failed state of Kyrat. He quickly aligned himself with the Royalists – but after a few months of bloodshed and betrayals, the young Min seized the throne for himself and began a reign of terror against all who opposed him. He built his Royal Army with a mix of loyal militia from China and Kyrati locals, then proceeded to rule with an utter lack of respect for the deep-seated traditions and culture of Kyrat.

A few decades later, Pagan Min remains as unpredictable and quirky as it gets. He loves flash. He's got a flair for fashion. He's equally at ease in his signature pink suits as he is covered in the crimson spatters of someone else's blood. He's enamored with Bollywood. "He's a super-interesting character," Decelle promises.

### SO COOL HE'S HOT

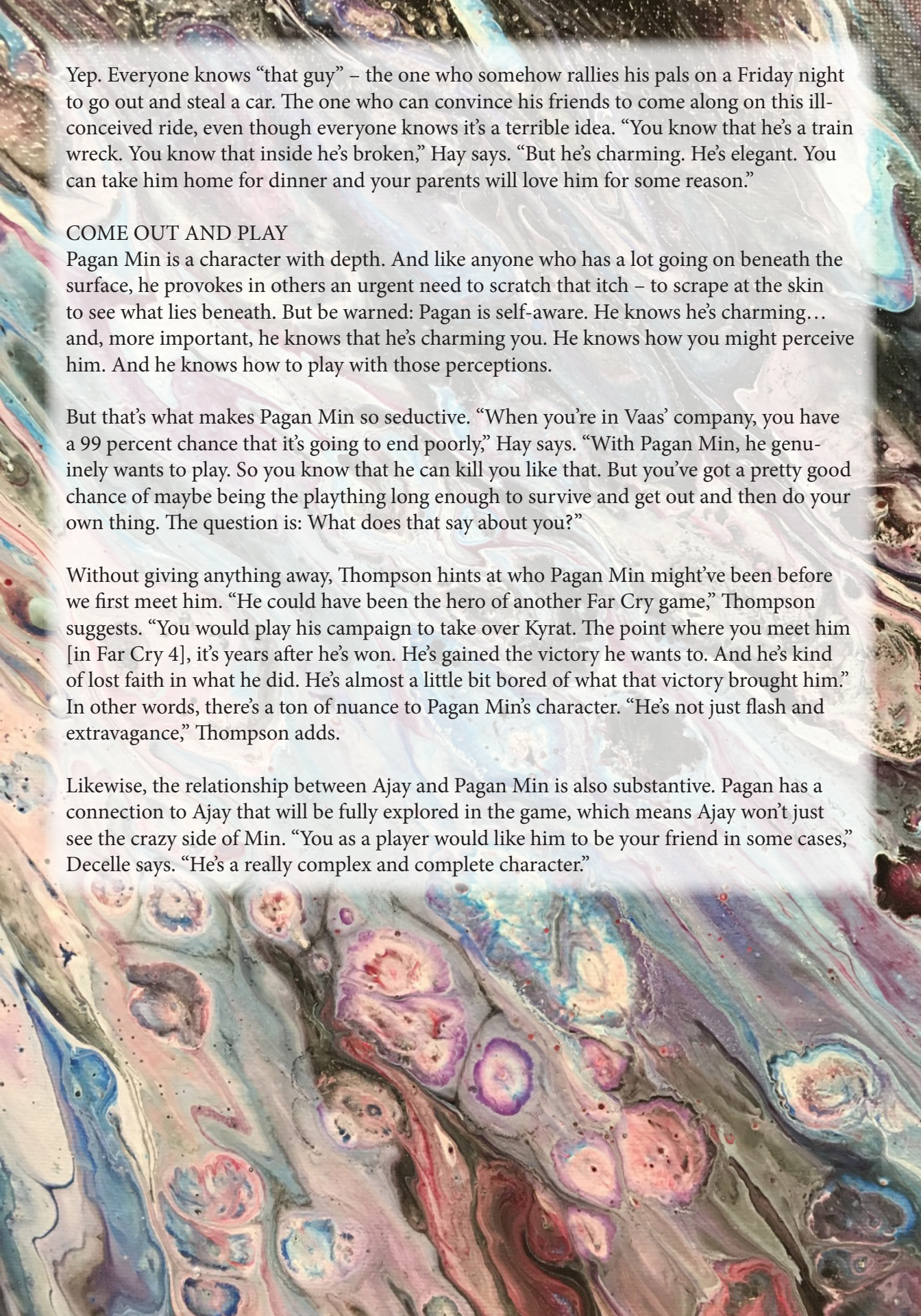
Naturally, comparisons to Far Cry 3's scene-stealing Vaas will emerge. But aside from appearing on the box art of their respective games, the two characters couldn't be any more different. Whereas Vaas had an animalistic ferocity and predatory nature, Pagan Min has an effortless charm. "It's this weird, uncomfortable refined elegance," says Narrative Director Mark Thompson. "The things that he's doing and the subjects that he's talking about contrast with the style that he does it in."

After all, it takes a special kind of lunatic to stab someone in the neck with a pen while dressed as a dapper gentleman, only to complain about getting blood on his shoes – never mind the fact that his face is covered in gore. And it takes a powerful man to pull this off while surrounded by soldiers who don't so much as flinch as their comrade falls – but jump at the smallest gesture from Min.

"And then when he looks at Ajay and makes eye contact and he tells you that he'd recognize those eyes anywhere, it's one of those moments where the hairs on the back of your neck raise up," Thompson says. "You're like, [Oh, god]. How does this guy know me? What's he going to do with my eyes? Why don't the guys with these guns stop him doing whatever he's doing? He must be powerful and he must be important."

And therein lies one of the biggest differences between Vaas and Pagan Min. Whereas Vaas is a hothead – a man of quick action and quicker reactions – Min is too cool for school. "If you take him back to the root of being on the schoolyard, he's not the bully," Hay says. "He's more like that friend everybody has that they know is bad for them and that they know is going to end up in jail."





Yep. Everyone knows “that guy” – the one who somehow rallies his pals on a Friday night to go out and steal a car. The one who can convince his friends to come along on this ill-conceived ride, even though everyone knows it’s a terrible idea. “You know that he’s a train wreck. You know that inside he’s broken,” Hay says. “But he’s charming. He’s elegant. You can take him home for dinner and your parents will love him for some reason.”

### COME OUT AND PLAY

Pagan Min is a character with depth. And like anyone who has a lot going on beneath the surface, he provokes in others an urgent need to scratch that itch – to scrape at the skin to see what lies beneath. But be warned: Pagan is self-aware. He knows he’s charming... and, more important, he knows that he’s charming you. He knows how you might perceive him. And he knows how to play with those perceptions.

But that’s what makes Pagan Min so seductive. “When you’re in Vaas’ company, you have a 99 percent chance that it’s going to end poorly,” Hay says. “With Pagan Min, he genuinely wants to play. So you know that he can kill you like that. But you’ve got a pretty good chance of maybe being the plaything long enough to survive and get out and then do your own thing. The question is: What does that say about you?”

Without giving anything away, Thompson hints at who Pagan Min might’ve been before we first meet him. “He could have been the hero of another Far Cry game,” Thompson suggests. “You would play his campaign to take over Kyrat. The point where you meet him [in Far Cry 4], it’s years after he’s won. He’s gained the victory he wants to. And he’s kind of lost faith in what he did. He’s almost a little bit bored of what that victory brought him.” In other words, there’s a ton of nuance to Pagan Min’s character. “He’s not just flash and extravagance,” Thompson adds.

Likewise, the relationship between Ajay and Pagan Min is also substantive. Pagan has a connection to Ajay that will be fully explored in the game, which means Ajay won’t just see the crazy side of Min. “You as a player would like him to be your friend in some cases,” Decelle says. “He’s a really complex and complete character.”



# Quiet as a Mouse



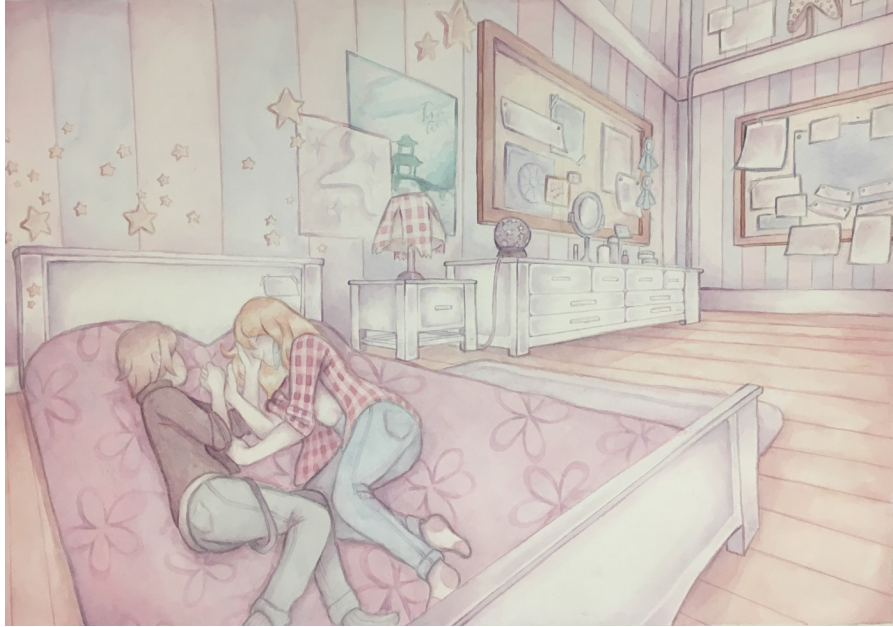
Vanessa Graham-Yooll

# Skeleton Study



## Before the Storm

*My piece “Before the Storm” was inspired by a game called “Life is Strange.” In this piece, I was investigating two-point perspective and watercolor techniques. I chose very pinkish colors because it’s my favorite color, and I wanted this to have a sweet and warm feeling.*



Alicia Moreno



## Girl Holding Doll

*I based “Girl Holding Doll” off a portrait of some Victorian children I found. I like things that are spooky, and dolls are pretty spooky. The girl and doll have opposing features--the girl has brown eyes and brown hair with rosy cheeks, while the doll has blue eyes and blond hair and unnatural blush.*



*Author's Note: This piece was written as an in-game story book for a video game of my design, and describes the origins of a race of people as according to their religion.*

## Origin of the Doccathis: An excerpt from *The History of the Lenninae*

The great city of Bal, in the exquisite rainforests of Ballantre, was a beauty to behold. Its people, the Lenninae Elves, had spent decades cultivating the trees that they might support such a city; many more decades building it. Houses balanced on tree limbs wider than rivers, bridges of vines connecting them, forming a vibrant and friendly community in the sky. At the very center of it all was the temple to their patron god Gariel, who was said to be half-elf and half-crow.

This temple was a home to all the crows of the region, where they were given the utmost respect. The Lenninae believed that Gariel could see through the eyes of each crow in the world, and therefore knew all. Gariel, preached a love for nature and animals above all; favoring simplicity over physical wealth.

Doccath had been an outsider to his people for years, an elf who favoured the clink of golden coins in his pocket over the whispers of nature. The wood-folk had ostracised him, leaving him on the jungle floor under their great treetop city to fend for himself; his greed had angered the god, crows crying with outrage every time he passed.

For years he went about his life, anger boiling under his skin, which paled every day the great city cast its shadow upon him. It was a decade to the date of his exile when a trader stumbled upon him on the path to Bal.

"How doth the sun shine, stranger?" The traditional greeting of the Lenninae surprised him, though his face remained stoic.

"No sun shines down here." Doccaths eyes darted across the trader cynically.

"What do you want of me?"

"No introduction? My name is Aila, I have lost the path to Bal; I'm looking to trade with the elves."

"The elves, the Lenninae, do very little trading, Aila." His voice was rough from years of nonuse, a hiss at best, hard and bitter. "They cast me out for such blasphemy." He

spit at her feet, forcing her to retreat several steps, eyes narrowed.

"The elves hold strong the beliefs of Gariel, you should of course know." She gestured to her own ears and then to his, which came to a significant point.

"I lived among them, yes, but I could never be like them."

"Ah." She did not seem thrown by this



announcement, persisting in her sales. "Well, since you claim to trade, you interested in working for some coin?"

"I have not seen a human in ten years. Why do you come now?"

"We go with the profit in my country, and the demand for goods from the Bel-lantre province is high in Girvan."

"Such as?"

She cast her eerie, black eyes across the jungle, bathing in the greenery.

"Snake skins -- we make armors of them."

The snakes of Ballantre were sacred to the Lenninae, as they were children of Gariel. Though they reached thirty lengths long, and were capable of spitting venom just as far, they did not attack the wood-folk.

"Is a serious crime to kill the Kossiris. You are aware of this, yes?"

"Buy your way away from here, friend. It is only a crime to the elves." The dark in her eyes shimmered violently, but Doccath did not see; visions of elegant palaces and mountains of gold swam before his own eyes.

"Very true, you will take me with you when you go?"

"Bring me one of these 'Kossiris,' these snakes, and I will do so."

Doccath, set off to do just that. It was only a thousand paces out he found one, coiled around one of the greater supporting trees of the city. The Kossiris, extremely large even for the breed, eyed him lazily, barely loosening its grip on the trunk. Above him, crows landed on the branches one after another, training their black eyes on Doccath as he drew his knife. Under his breath he muttered insults to the trader and god alike, cursing the difficulty of his task.

The Kossiris did not stare as the crows did, but the serpentine face was eerily expressive, sad eyes peeking out from furrowed brows. The Kossiris slid slowly down the tree, turning its back on him for a moment to tend to a nest of massive emerald green eggs. 'A mother,' he thought. 'Perhaps this is why she is so docile.' As if hearing his thoughts the Kossiris turned away from her eggs, settling into a deep, unnatural sleep at the base of the trunk she previously wound about.

Still, too focused on his dream of wealth, Doccath did not consider it strange. Instead he huffed a sigh of relief, and crept quickly toward the slumbering beast. As he moved closer, so did his audience, intelligent eyes capturing every angle from the trees. The eggs, startlingly bright, drew his attention. 'They will be orphaned, a fate I of all should think horrific.' Memories of his own mother dying flooded through him. 'Perhaps this is not the best of options, I might find another way.'

Yet, once again, he succumbed to the tantalizing visions of silk robes and silver platters. Doccath shook his head, attempting to clear thoughts from his doubtful mind. With new resolve he marched forward, slit the belly of the Kossiris, and set to work on emptying it of muscle and organs. "This will pave my way to a better life, it is too late for regrets," he reassured himself.

Once the snake was just its skin, he placed the head atop his own, dragging it with all his effort, and began the procession back to Aila, crows following the whole way. She stood precisely where she had as he had left her, a statue amongst the branches flowing in the wind. Her eyes followed him, and he got the feeling that though she hadn't



moved a pace that she had seen every detail.

“I have your snake skin, let us go.”

“I can see.” Her voice was tightened, coarse. “You disappoint me still, Doccath.”

“I never told you my name.” His green eyes became slits, “Who are you, honestly?”

She frowned, then closed her eyes. Her hair receded into her scalp, ears lengthening to a point sharper even than his. The crows who had followed Doccath perched on branches around her as she shifted.

“You.” Anger rushed through him. “Ten years and still you torment me?”

The body of the trader had disappeared completely, leaving a towering elven body sporting the dark eyes of a crow and feathers lining legs which ended in talons. Gariel splayed his wings, which stretched five lengths on either side, and his crows perched along them.

“Doccath,” his wings fluttered with agitation, causing the crows lined on them to caw irritably. He trained his eyes on the man who had let his greed take a life. “You had an opportunity to redeem yourself in the eyes of myself and your people; you let gold get the better of you again, you have not changed a bit.”

Gariel looked towards the canopy of the jungle, towards the city he had founded with his people. A crow lifted off his wings, and when it returned it was followed by hundreds of Lenninae, sliding down vines to answer the call of their god. Once they had assembled he spoke again.

“I offered you a chance at redemption Doccath, yet here you stand wearing the skin of my Kossiris for a headdress. You would have traded her for gold and abandoned the people who raised you.” The voice of the god was harsh, like the grating of tree bark.

“Those people abandoned me ten years ago at your behest, I owe them nothing.”

“They gave you everything you needed, Doccath, and you rejected it for coins and riches.”

“I spit on their idea of needs, your idea of needs. You offer no comfort like wealth does. Am I to be content eating mushrooms and taking orders from a bird the rest of my life? More the fools are they, when they could feast on boars and wine like the rest of these isles. Life without luxury is nothing at all.”

This only enraged the god further, though he remained collected. The Lenninae were solemn, eyes trained on the towering god with corvid wings and feathered legs.

“This is your last chance to reconcile with me and the people, Doccath.”

Doccath, furious at the spectacle that he was being made into, instead spat on the god. It evaporated on contact with Gariel’s chest; who now hovered over the clearing; massive wings beating, a poisonous green glow about him.

“Very well. Since you cannot learn to respect the creatures of the forest, you will become one.” Gariel gestured toward the Kossiris, still atop Doccath’s head, and it was enveloped in the glow the god emitted. The skin came to life, swallowing the man whole. The scales contorted to allow humanoid arms, the face flattened to show a human mouth.

In the blink of an eye the flesh and serpent had melded, scales embedding themselves into Doccath’s skin as he screamed. The scream was guttural and pain filled, contorting with his body into that of the creature that enveloped him. The skin had complete-



ly covered Doccath in seconds, leaving a serpentine man in their place.

A powerful wave of calm and sadness swept through his mind, attempting to drown out the greed. ‘My children,’ whispered the wave, *‘care for my children.’* Doccath shook his head violently, as if to oust the intruder.

“What have you done to me?” his voice was an indignant hiss, far raspier than before. “What is inside my head?”

“Not what, who. She will heal your poisoned mind.” Again, called forward by his words, the soft, strong wave rose, smothering the flames of hatred as fast as they could ignite. *‘Do not leave them orphaned.’*

“I’m a freak.” The words were jumbled, newfound fangs causing him to stumble on words he had known for years.

“No, you are my Doccathis. This is a lesson you needed to learn, be thankful you still have your life.” The crow god landed, stirring up fallen leaves as the Lenninae hung on every word. “The one that you killed was the mother of all Kossiris, now they are orphaned.”

Upon these words Doccath was finally overwhelmed by her spirit, his own grief for his mother forcing an opening for remorse. The serpent man was silent for a while, before speaking in a hushed voice. “She let me kill her?” It wasn’t really a question, he knew now that his god had been testing him.

“She gave her life that her children would not have to. Kaliphet, mother of the Kossiris, will be remembered as a martyr. Take in her spirit, Doccath, that we might all learn from her unselfishness.”

The Lenninae murmured in agreement, several daring to look Doccath in the yellow eyes, which he lowered in shame. All too late he felt remorse for his actions, pity and warmth for the mother who had been willing to give up everything for her kin.

“I did not think of anything but myself. For that I am deeply ashamed. I beg the forgiveness of my people, our patron, and Kaliphet. Allow me to serve, to atone in any way!”

Gariel eyed him suspiciously, but seeing genuine remorse he relented, turning to the head priest of the Lenninae.

“Gather your most faithful, Priest Herrek, and I will offer them the option to become a Doccathis. The Doccathis will build their own civilization on the forest floor. This society will be a twin to Bal, and the Lenninae and Doccathis will forever be kin. Doccath, you will be responsible for fostering this society; let the spirit of Kaliphet guide you in this.”

“I will, father Gariel. I shall give my all to this society, and to the Lenninae.”

*‘We will, Doccath, we.’*

“Aye, we will.”

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And so the Doccathis grew their own society on the floor of the forest with the help of the Lenninae. They grew in population and trained to be protectors of Ballantre, warriors of Gariel. They lived side by side with the Kossiris, and though the other races of Nerus were prejudiced against the Doccathis, the Lenninae never disliked them; always treating them as the family they were.



## Gibson SG



*The Gibson SG is my personal dream guitar, and so I decided to bring that into my art with this piece.*

## Kitsune



*I remember the kitsune mask in a video game from when I was a child, and it was one of the first pieces of Japanese culture I appreciated.*





## Gerald the Gargoyle



*I made Gerald in stages, started off building the rock and let my mind run free with the creature I wanted sitting on top of it. The idea is that he is carved out of rock like most gargoyles are, but there is actually a life inside it, which shows through the eyes. I'm also in the process of building his daughter, but she's not ready yet.*





## Not Ready

Do you ever  
get the feeling  
that something  
went horribly,  
horribly wrong?

That you should have  
never  
let him go,  
you should have  
fought  
until you couldn't fight  
anymore,  
until your body sagged  
and your bones cried out  
for you to fall down  
and just  
stop.

That you made  
the biggest mistake  
of your life,  
and now your heart  
won't pump  
and your lungs  
won't pull  
and your brain  
is disintegrating.

That you'll die  
without him.

*Stop.*  
*Think about it.*  
*About him.*

It was never about  
*him.*

It was about the warmth  
of his smile  
and the security  
of his arms  
and the purpose  
it all gave you.

And really,  
letting him go  
was the best thing  
you could ever do,  
and though your soul  
screams  
for that warmth  
again,  
you're not  
quite  
ready.



# Blossom





## Excerpt from *Last Step* series

Ever since I was younger, I've always had weird experiences with mirrors. I've told Dad once, how I'd always seen images in the mirrors that supposedly weren't really there, scenes from someone else's eyes, and voices from someone else's ears. I remember Dad and Papá connecting eyes across the room, something of anguish in their eyes, like a secret from the past.

Papá said, "It shouldn't be a problem." Though his voice was different from its usual cheer, now only a distant look.

"Your mother had weird experiences with mirrors too," Dad confessed, and like every other time Mom was brought up, he refused to look at me.

"Really?" It was hard to get them to talk about Mom. Her name was Morgana Aika, from what I'd heard from my friend, Mirai Jassillo. Apparently she was a warrior for the Kingdom, and she connected Chîa Empire with Siera, stopping a long and bloody war. But something happened. I could never find out what exactly, but Mom fell into a coma, bedridden in the infirmary. I've never heard my mother's voice, never seen the color of her eyes.

A knock, Mom's caretaker's voice came through, it was higher than normal, frantic. "Sire?" Dad's head whipped to the door, calling an affirmative to enter. The woman came in, no words were said, but she connected eyes with Dad and he ran out of the room with her. Papá cursed, ran to the door and stopped.

"Mirai's coming over. Go wait for her." And he ran out after Dad and the caretaker.

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I was sitting on my bed after leaving Dad's office, kicking my feet back and forth, bored. So I did what I always did to pass the time, I turned to the mirror and waited, my own reflection staring back at me for a few solid seconds before the image twisted, distorted, and faded into black.

Every time, the same pattern. Normal, images twisting, then hallucinations. I would always stop to watch them, as weird as they may be. Always weird visions, always only me. Normally the images played from behind someone else's eyes, going about daily life with the most unnatural things. Sometimes, the person (I believe it was a girl), would be holding some kind of machine in her hand that lit up with a single touch. She would walk along light paths where another machine would radiate noise and speeding across dark pathways, faster than any horse or wolf.

But this time, the vision wasn't in this new world, but in my own. It started at the streets of Siera, the image staring down the sight of a dark black wolf. It's golden eyes, the telling feature of a werewolf, staring back, disgust was obvious on its face. The wolf seemed to have some kind of familiarity to it, though.

There was a warbling sound, loud and the image jerked, from the wolf to a group of people, their images hazy and non-descript. More distorted voices, a jerk of movement, then a clear bang rang out from the static.

I jumped at the surprisingly clear sound, the image jolting then...red. Not like when the



mirror turns black, since the vision hadn't ended. But all I could see was bright red, shining in the light.

"Amé?" Mirai's voice, as clear as the bang—gunshot?

I couldn't tear my eyes from the glass, the expanding pool of red. Static ringing in my ears. Brown boots landed in the puddle of red, a knee dropped down as well, then a voice; unlike the normal static I always heard, was clear. Clear, frantic and pained.

"Gramps, quick!"

Wait, that voice—"Dad?" The image twisted then—gold. The mirror was covered by a golden cloth, Mirai standing next to the frame, one pale hand on the sheet, her golden eyes showing worry. Her light hair had been tied back in a fishtail braid.

"Are you back?" Mirai questioned, her voice softer than it normally would be, somehow more serious.

I stared at the gold cloth, willing it to fall down and look at the images again. Maybe, somehow make sense of it. "...Yeah."

Mirai sighed, removing her hand from the sheet, leaving it to hang at her side. Her face a mixture of worry and disappointment. "Amé, you need to tell your parents about this."

"I did!" I said, sitting straight up on my bed, hands clasping the end board, "They said it was like Mom."

"Queen Sylvia?" Mirai glanced skeptically at the cloth-covered mirror and back to me. "Want me to ask Mamá and Papá?"

"Yeah," I said. Mirai's parents were Aunt Korinna and Uncle Derrek. The two had never been tight-lipped about my mother. Most of what I know of her, I had heard from them.

"Can you ask them if there was a shooting in the Siera Markets?" At her confused look, I elaborated, "When Dad was younger."

"Does it have anything to do with your hallucinations?"

"I think it might." My mind went back to the images, thinking of the best way to explain it. "You know how normally my visions are in a different place, right?"

Mirai nodded as she moved from her place at the mirror to sit on the bed beside me.

"Well it wasn't in that different place this time." I glanced back at the cloth covered mirror, remembering the Siera Markets clearly.

"And you saw the Siera Markets this time?" Mirai's voice was skeptical, disbelieving. "Amé we live next to the Markets, and there's nothing weird about them."

"Wait, hear me out," I said. "It was the same person, I think. She was in the Markets with a werewolf, Chía-born. There were people there too, I couldn't see them clearly but there was a gunshot and she was bleeding out."

"I shouldn't believe you," Mirai said finally, staring at the wall with an expression of strong contemplation that really shouldn't belong on an eight year old's face.

"Shouldn't?"

"All of your other hallucinations, I wouldn't believe. They're too unbelievable." Mirai shut her eyes tightly, sighing. "But this one sounds possible."

"It--" Mirai held up a hand and I stopped, then she pinched the bridge of her nose. Mirai's golden eyes shifted to me, finally. And when she spoke, it was as if she was making one of the biggest decisions of her life. "I'll ask."



“Really?”

At her nod, “Thanks, you’re the best!”

“Don’t make me regret it.”

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“What did they say?” I said when Mirai walked into my room the next morning. I had been sitting on the window ledge, leaning against the window and curtains.

“Apparently,” Mirai started as she closed the door behind her, “there were a lot of shootings years ago, normally from wolf hunts.”

Wolf hunts, that sounded right, in the vision there had been a wolf at the beginning. But it was a person that was shot, not the wolf. Then Dad’s voice.

“Not a wolf being shot,” I said, wringing my hands as I slid off the ledge. “Did Dad ever find a person shot instead of a wolf?”

Mirai pondered the question, tapping her chin pensively, then, “At least once, probably more, though. I know Papá said Queen Sylvia got shot when they first met. I’m pretty sure he said Uncle Lucius found her.”

If the vision was of Queen Sylvia, my mother, wouldn’t the other visions be her too?

“I think my visions are of Mom.”

Mirai blinked, then twice. “...What?”

...I said that out loud. I sighed, too late to turn back now.

“I think I saw when Mom and Dad met, that shooting.” When I said that, something clicked, “That must have been why that wolf looked so familiar, that was Uncle Derrek!”

Mirai’s face was blank, a bad habit she caught from Aunt Korinna. She stared as I continued muttering to myself.

“Hang on, I’m lost.” Mirai held up her hand in a ‘stop’ gesture. “So you’re saying your hallucinations are real and of the Queen’s life.”

“Well when you put it that way,” I started, “that’s exactly what I think.”

“Oh, God,” Mirai exhaled. “Fine, say I believe you. What are you going to do?”

“Watch more?” I suggested.

“Well, wait to hallucinate when I’m here.”

I asked, “Why? You don’t trust me?”

“No.”

-----

Mirai dropped down onto the mattress, giving a gesture towards the mirror with a quick: ‘what are you waiting for?’

“You, apparently.” I mumbled before staring into my reflection. The room faded, leaving only black, before it turned back to the same seen. The wolf—Derrek—my mother, the patrol, then the horribly loud gunshot once more. I winced, but kept my eyes on the seen. Red dripping to the rocks below, a puddle forming. A few mumbled words, then a curse, followed by a boot—brown, bottom soaking red. The same words--Dad shouting out for Gramps.

This was where Mirai brought me back last time, everything new yet old.

A few more static words, frantic, and the vision faded to black, similar to that of the beginning, Yet it didn't fade back to my reflection, just stayed an unnatural black. It couldn't be over...

What next? I thought, urging it forward. What happened next? The black flickered, static imaging before it became light again, The vision no longer outside and a pale white ceiling shinned down. The image shifted, downward. The room looked more like the palace's infirmary than a home.

A few cots were around the room, along all the walls but two. Each bed separated by a pale white curtain. One of the non-bedded walls housed a counter, sink, and shelves holding hundreds of various herbs. The other wall held a cabinet with more herbs, I couldn't see that much more of the room decor.

There was a man, though, standing at the counter, sliding a few open herbs back into their respective jars, then placing the cleaned off bowls and mashers in the sink. An echo of static, quick, mumbled voices as the man turned, and it felt like he was staring into my soul, even though I was just a spectator.

The man's lips turned up in a kind smile, more static murmurs before the man's expression shifted to one of fatherly concern, and boy did I know that look by heart with how much Dad and Papá use it.

The image moved, tilting to the right and I saw someone move the curtains to the side, another man--teenager--sat on the other cot. His dark black hair and blue eyes as something easily forgettable. Like the elder, he was unfamiliar to me. But his stance, the way he sat with his feet on the side board, hands propping up his chin, it was familiar. And when he opened his mouth, and I didn't hear static, "Not many would take a bullet for a wolf."

Okay, remember when I said he was forgettable? I take it back. Not only could I hear the man's voice, I recognized it! That was Dad's voice, but...he looked nothing like Dad. Maybe this was some relative of Dads? But Mirai said Dad was the one who saved Mom. Maybe this wasn't Mom, then?

But he carried himself just like Dad.



## Reynard



Marly Johnson

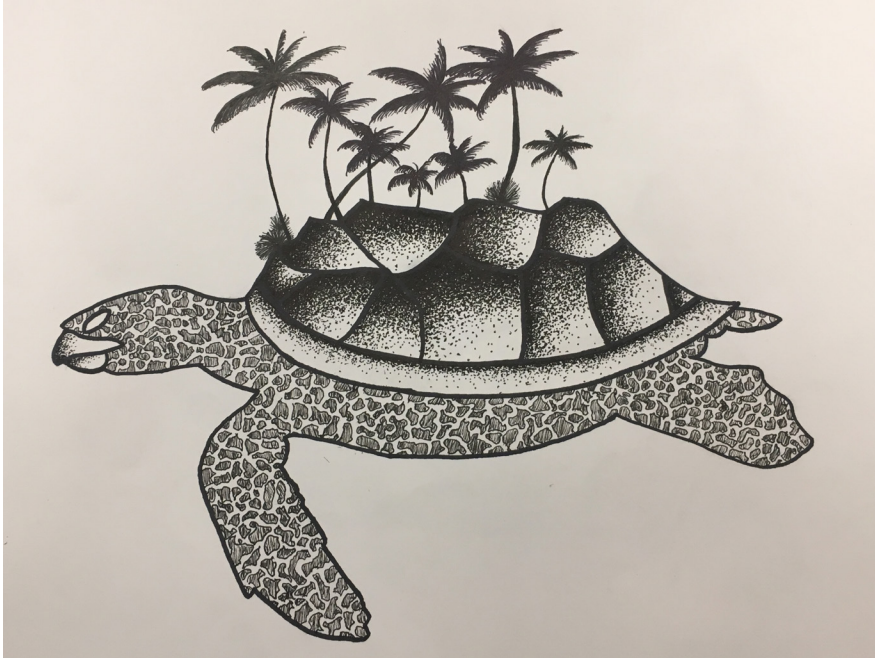
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## Lola the Cow





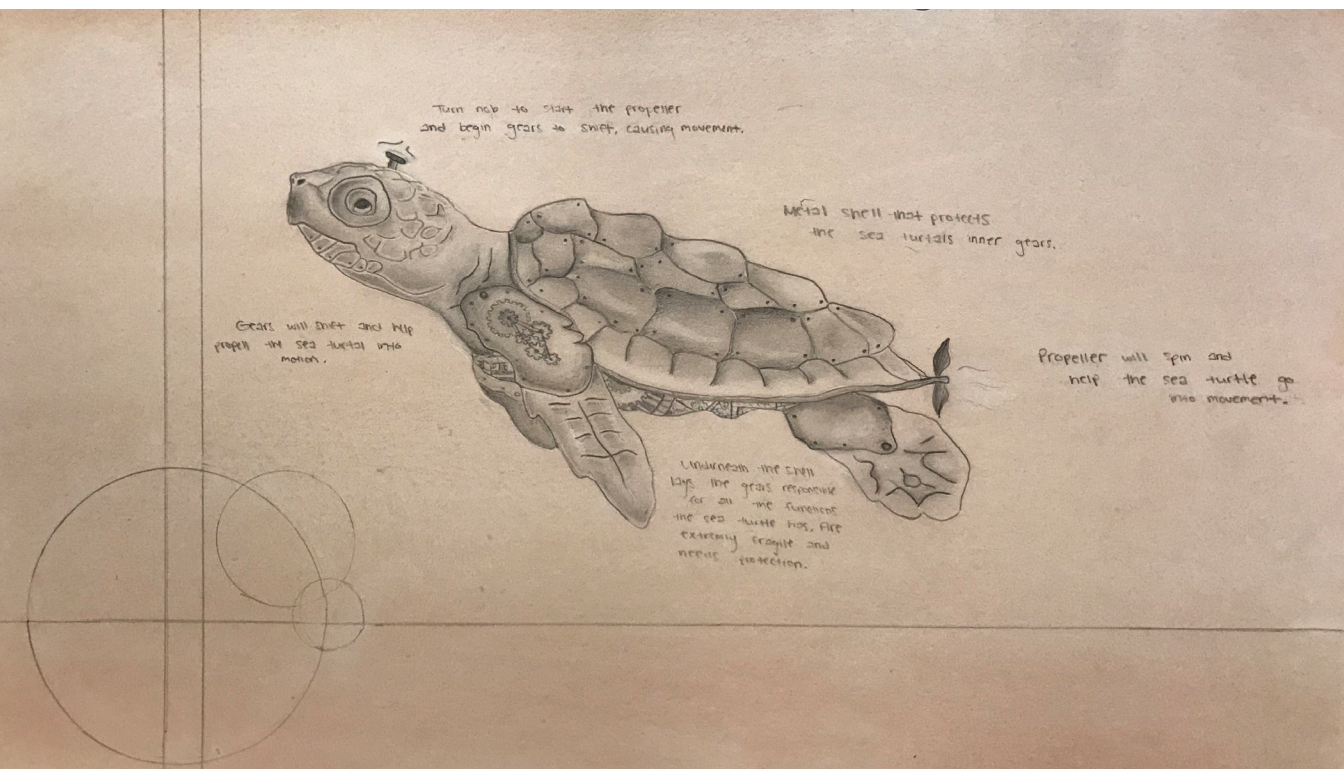
## Galapagos



Aleksia Qesari

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## Mare Turtles







## Driven, Or Just Drive

I've always wanted to get out of this town.

Well, it's more than that. I've always yearned for a different life, one not so restricted by the laws that bind my own. It would be a fresh start, a new adventure, a better world. However, I know it's only the allure of the unattainable, ever present and irrational, that misguides the mind in an impossible loop of imagined possibility that some supernatural force will whisk one away. These dreams of another world are hopeless, but I can settle for another town.

I've always lived in this town. Between my birth and now, my parents have stayed put, and I know more about this town than anyone should. I know Maurice, Edward, and Harold—the shopkeepers on Midwich Street. I know which trees in Cedar Grove Park are actually historic and which ones were planted later as a facsimile. I even know the specific spout on the Old Toluca Fountain that stops and weakens the flow on the eastward side. To an outsider, this information may be invaluable, but I can't value it.

I used to like knowing more about the town, back when I could know more about it. As a kid, I had a friend named Benjamin. My mom would drive me to his house, and we would spend hours outside exploring the woods with Ben's neighbor, Hanna. The woods seemed vast and secretive, two of the most exhilarating things to a child. The three of us—Hanna, who led our expedition while espousing every detail of the new boy for whom she felt puppy love; me, who attributed imagined stories and possibility to the sur-

50 The Mill

rounding sights; and Ben, who would always trail the group with his unending courtesy, even in the company he knew best—especially enjoyed this exploration for providing the hope and freedom of youth away from parents’ prying eyes. Our paths were winding and aimless, but we somehow always knew the way home.

You see, I’ve been reflecting on those journeys recently. I’ve been feeling a bit hopeless and lonely, and I often long for the awe and camaraderie I employed in my youth. I don’t know how it all ended, but I guess I just stopped visiting Ben, and my schoolwork dominated my mind. Wanting to rectify my loneliness, I decided to finally attend my high school’s Homecoming dance in my senior year and find someone with whom to connect. My mom insisted on driving me, so I’ve been sitting with my head against the car window and realizing that the woods of my youth are the same woods that currently line the right side of the high school.

A woman in security uniform drove ahead of us as my mom made her way to the school entrance. Coming to a stop, she wished me goodbye and reminded me not to do anything foolhardy. After reassuring her that I wouldn’t, I followed the short, straight path leading up to the doors. They had already opened, but only to host a coat check. I joined the third line from the left, trying to recognize anyone in the mass of students accumulating just outside the school. My search came up fruitless, so I just stayed in line.

Once the parent volunteer checked my coat, I migrated to a spot a little removed from the rest of the students. I wanted to talk to some of the new arrivals with whom I shared a class, but my nerves overcame that desire. In fact, I began rethinking my purpose for coming here. Homecoming is a time to meet up with established friends, not to meet new ones. Here, it would be wholly inappropriate to form bonds. So I resolved not to.

“Hey, James!”

A ray of light shone through the dark cloud of my isolation: Hanna. She dressed in a simple sky blue dress with an embroidery of white lace. A smile adorned her face; she was truly happy to see me. Hanna’s happiness sparked joy within me as she continued. “I didn’t know you were coming to Homecoming!”

I guess I hadn’t announced it. “Yeah, I just wanted to come out and support the school a bit, I guess.”

“Well, that’s great!” Hanna donned a thoughtful expression. “Hey, do you think I should take the next step with my date tonight? I’m trying to get multiple opinions.”

“I mean, tonight should be the night for it. Go ahead.”

“Thanks!” Hanna gave me an appreciative smile, and I realized that I appreciated seeing someone I knew, for once. Maybe my life wasn’t that lonely, but for what other reason would I feel so displaced, hoping for any form of escape from reality, even among the peers that should understand me best? Before I could take the time to ruminate, the congregation of students started forming lines to finally enter the school building.

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I took a look at the time on my phone. 8:00. An hour into the event. I had just been hanging around the foyer, listening to whatever songs the other students requested from the DJ. I couldn’t find Hanna or Ben, but I did find the place where bags of chips were being handed out. I’d had five, and right now, I felt too tired to think. I was utterly bored.

Finally, a familiar voice broke through that boredom. “So, I really appreciate the



time you spent with me tonight!”

I looked over at Hanna, who was talking to another girl I knew from science. Her name escaped me, unfortunately. Fortunately, the brown-haired girl donned a soft smile, so she must have been happy with Hanna. More quietly than Hanna, the brown-haired girl replied. “Oh, it was no problem. This is a lot of fun. I hope to go out again sometime.”

“Oh, definitely! That would be a metric tonne of fun! Though, the night is far from over! We should enjoy all the rest of it!” Hanna pumped up the conversation with her ever-present enthusiasm, but then she looked around and whispered something to the brown-haired girl. As she whispered, I moved to walk over to the two girls, but before I made a step, the brown-haired girl nodded, and their lips were locked. My pause only lasted a second, but in that second, someone began applauding from the other side of the foyer. The only appropriate thing to do was to join, so I did, in tandem with the rest of the Homecoming attendees—at least the ones in the foyer. To see Hanna in a genuine relationship, finally, made my heart jump up and circle around in the air.

As the kiss broke and the applause died down, everyone pretty much went back to what they were doing before. It was a moment of freedom in an otherwise dull school-sponsored event, I realized. Again, I moved to walk over to Hanna and her girlfriend and hopefully get some enjoyment out of the three hours left in the night. However, I was stopped again, this time physically. I looked over to see my other longtime friend.

I began, “Hi, Ben.”

Ben smiled softly, and my hope to hang out with someone for the night burned brighter. Ben was kind, and careful, and courteous. He was the perfect friend with whom to spend a dance, even if I hadn’t seen him in a while.

Ben tugged at my arm, leading me to the school’s back doors. “Hey, can I talk to you outside?”

“Sure, Ben.” I walked along with him into the courtyard that rested behind the school. The night was cool and dark, except for the lights blazing from the neighborhood on the other side of the forest. I breathed in the calm and tranquil mood of the night. “So, what do you need?”

Ben coolly responded, “Can I use your phone? I lost mine recently, and I need to call my mom and tell her to pick me up.”

“So you’re not staying?” I cringed at the disappointment evident in my voice.

“Yeah, sorry. It’s just that Homecoming has really been boring so far. I don’t think it’s worth it to stay.”

“Okay.” I handed him my phone. “Just, when you’re done, I want to call my mom too. Okay?”

Ben formed another soft smile. “Yeah. Thanks, man.” And he left, and I awaited his return.

Time passed, crickets chirped, motion appeared in the windows of the school. The DJ’s music didn’t reach out into the night; here was the sole domain of the sounds of nature. I assumed a relaxed position against the school wall, for at least I knew who I could talk to, if I wanted. And as I looked out upon the nearby neighborhood, I realized, with the placement of the forest, that it was Ben’s neighborhood. Nostalgia for earlier times

surged through me once again.

But I continued to realize that Ben's neighborhood was the neighborhood near the forest and the school. Meaning that, if Ben wanted to, he could have just walked home. And how long had it been since I had last talked to Ben? I knew that change, even in personality, was sporadic, perhaps impulsive. As a final confirmation of my fear, I checked the analog watch that I had received as a birthday present a few years ago.

8:45.

I cursed over the sounds of the night. I had trusted Ben, who, by now, was someone that I barely knew and someone that was probably far away from here. My curses upon my naivety rang through the air. I had no way to call home, and one less person to call a friend. I was furious, and I sustained my curses until I physically could not.

After an outburst, the mind feels drained. Mine certainly did, throbbing with betrayal and loss. In that drained state of mind, one becomes susceptible to foolhardy whims. I looked upon the forest, just within reach. One whim—the one most prevalent in the minds of the displaced—is the hope of finding something that would whisk one away to another world. Or another town. Either would do. I stumbled over to the forest lining the school, for I still had two hours until my mom drove to pick me up, and I wanted to do something with my life tonight; that was what I set out to do. It didn't matter what I found, I just wanted to return to the awe of my youth, and it was right here, the mystique of the forest, looming above, and I left the school behind, escaping the fears of the present, for I would circle back in a few hours, just like when I was a kid, eager to learn about this world, and this town, and I took my first step back into the woods.

Mikaela Columba

## Impulsive Instinct



*The project was to choose a room that had a two point perspective, and I really liked this one that I found because it reminded me of the interior of a beach house mansion.*



## To Move On

When petals wilt under the sun  
And roots fail in the fertile ground  
What is there to do?  
When drops fall from a clear blue sky  
And wet a ground that's bathed in light  
What is there to do?  
When houses burn in winter months  
And blaze in flames amidst the snow  
Well then, what is there to do?

When great ones lose their names to time  
And all a life's hard work's forgot  
What is there to be done?  
When souls cheat on the ones they love  
And tender lips do seek for more  
Tell me, what is there to do?  
When hearts are stopped while youth still sang  
And so much light was theirs to share  
What is there to do?

Naafia Thangalvadi

---

## Cure



## Dancer Under the Stars



*I was inspired by some weird antique kitchen utensil that I thought looked like a ballerina. As a former dancer, I thought it would be fun to combine my love of art and ballet. I decided to draw a night sky with the northern lights as the background to compliment the colors of the piece.*



# Magnetic Poems

*The LitMag editors laid out hundreds of word magnets in their office one week for the general student population (and Mrs. Gallo) to enjoy. Below are the results!*

teach the moon of the sun

1999  
by rose

shine from the forest to the sea

show all eternity

the shadow place

winter ly whisper of

rain y mist

microwave bean suppers

lust God over void

essential Farm Bison spring

stop puppy NOROVIRUSES

boil (Milk Drinker) s

love the LampStore

RESTORE

beauty

for these storm ing  
death goddess es

the boy whisper s

violin cobwebs

a wind language

learned by the lake

some sordid eternity

Purely shadow

part ly love

time must always gift

dream s about

power less sleep

future men

play as weak

as a puppy

repulsive language for a bitter goddess like you

lazy bitter honey lie s

like in storm

frantic black symphony produce s a dream

need a vision of luscious light

TRUE diamond love lather ed together

urge s in a delirious world

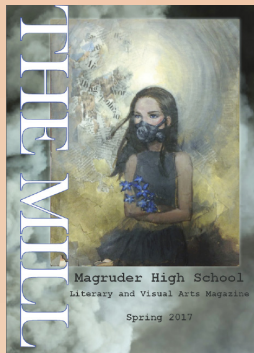
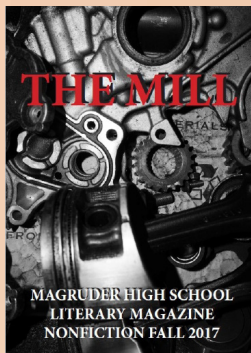
ache and heave

black money

will take

then cease

# The Mill: Quarters 2 and 4

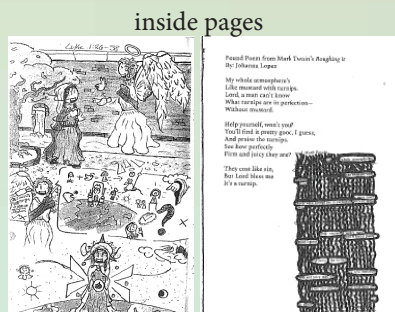
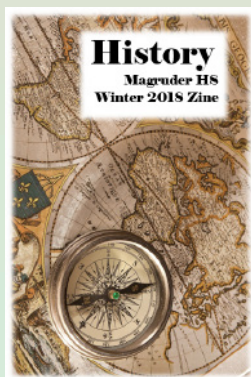


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- Fiction issue (short story, poetry, fantasy, sci-fi) in the spring

## The Two Publications of Magruder LitMag

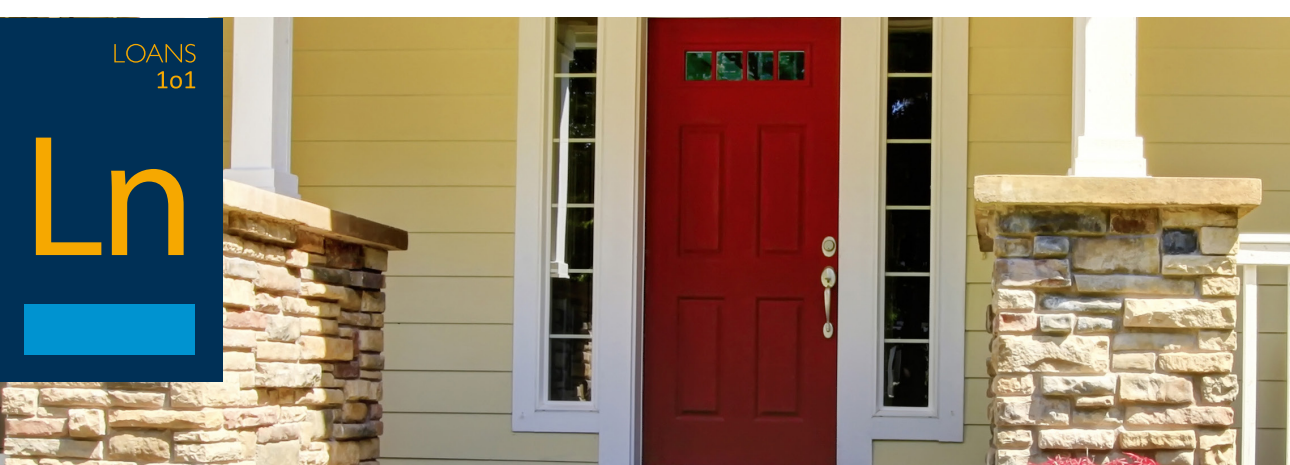
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