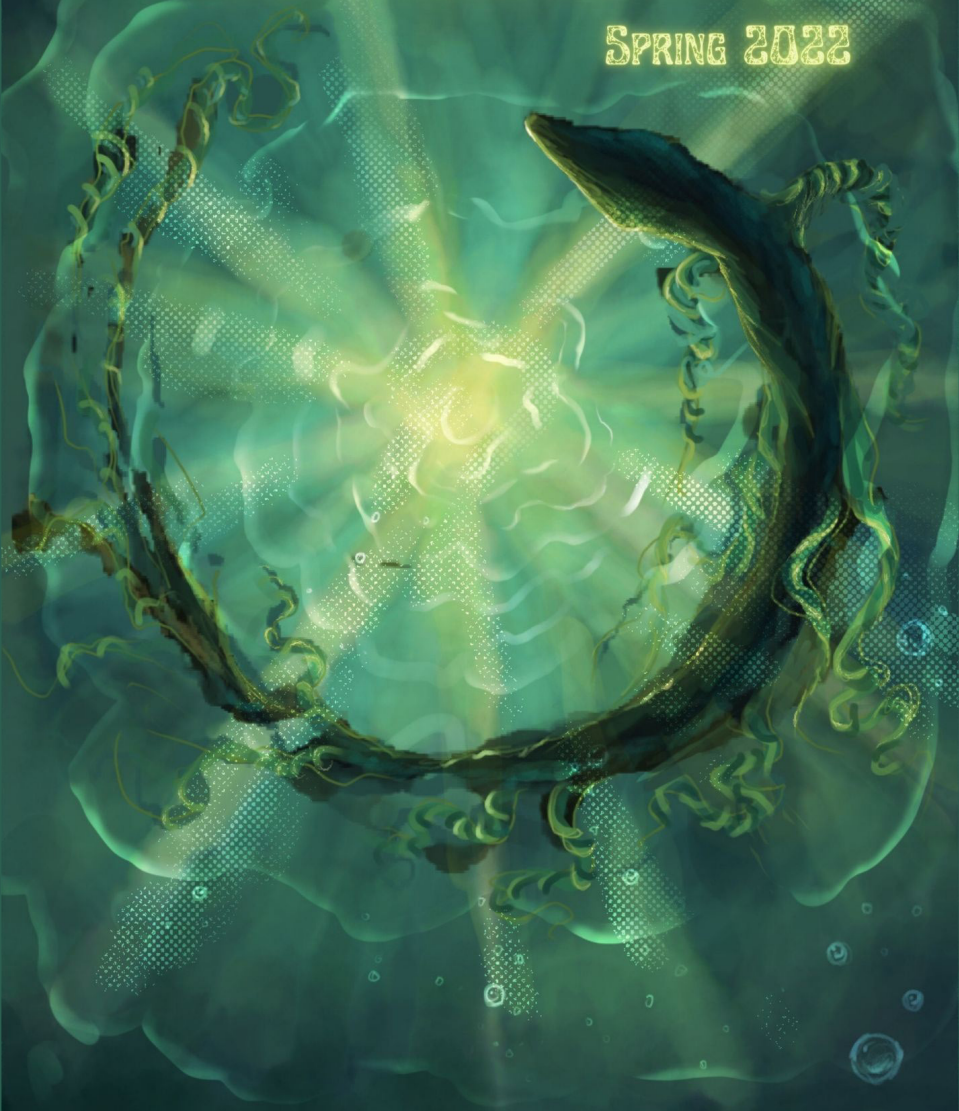


THE MEGALODON

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THE MEGALODON
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nontraditional, experimental,
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within our Creative Writing community.

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Faces (*Gouache*)
Linda Garce, '22

Penny, Penny, Penny. Don't Kill People
Phoenix Mingo, '22

“Gosh darn-nit, Penelope!” Sitting in a sacrificial circle in an eggshell dress, surrounded by charcoal, previously cultists, was a young brown seven-year-old girl with crudely self-made septua-puffs tangled and knotted. To Penelope, it was too dim to tell why the room smelled of those smells. Rotten eggs, fried keratin, and spit-fry pork, a mixture of pleasantry and vileness. But, knowing of the unsafe flames of before and the faulty plumbing of the once proclaimed school, the culprit was the explosive case of hydrogen sulfide. The reason the girl survived despite her dedicated ditch—a grave well-made—was that she wasn't quite human. Life-wise, she took after her skully Father who stood above her in disgust. He couldn't quite show it facially, of course, but she knew what it was by now. This was the third time she had succumbed to this, but the twelfth time death, to her, pleasantly reunited them.

“Look at what you've done, Penelope! Do you not understand that I have to write in all these souls!?” There was only a slight change as he glanced at the charcoal, a hiccup that could've gone into a laugh. “And also, people are dead. That's sad, too, in your case. Do you not care, Penelope?” The girl shrugged, leaped off the pedestal, and went to her pink floral backpack nuzzled in the grasp of some charcoal. Even as the arms had no meat or bone, she kept it there as she took out a macaroni art piece to show to her big man.

“That’s you, and that’s Mommy,” Penelope says as she points to the globs of glued gluten beginning to paint themselves green. Her mother had slipped the limbo of being alive and died three years prior, leaving Penelope and letting the Reaper that calmly waited for her soul to be able to go. However, the girl he bore was annoyingly persistent, both in personality and in body. No truck, priest, or angel would stop this girl. In her mind, the shell of a man thought, she is ultimately innocent, showing past school activities in the light of corpses and burnt hair, faking humanity to perfection. She’d have been a wonderful daughter if her mother had the right soul.

“You killed these people.” The Reaper stated.

“I did not! They wanted to know where to kill me and I a-pprom-pia-tely told them. Buh-Besides, Mister Sassumel will like eatin’ them. He always likes eatin’ them.”

“Appropriately...” The Reaper corrected in despair, “Appropriately.” He didn’t know who ‘Sassumel’ was. Maybe a devil or an angel who wanted to manipulate a half-reaper child. It took a lot of guts to do it, even thinking of gathering the ingredients to make a spanking new world with a halfling. Killing her would be easier to weed off the chance, but the Father honestly wondered if the girl was Sassumel herself. If she was possessed, he’d feel pity, but he didn’t really know the difference between death from murder and possessed murder. Unlike his siblings who also took the job of reaping souls, he had no manner of death to be restricted to. He could reap any soul he wanted and it seemed that every task he took led

to the inquisitive young murderer.

“I did not murder!” She screamed in response to his jaw lowering slightly. The Reaper nodded his head in fake approval, easing the stupid girl. He took the macaroni art piece and put it into his coat. Then declared,

“I’ll hang it on a refrigerator,” before disappearing from her on the seventh day and seventh month of being seven. Penelope stood up in triumph, her hands on her hips and trying to contain all the energy in her little body to keep the cool her Father displayed. He took it, he took it! On and on, his little act of affection swirled in her little mind. Another piece needed to be made for him, something more on-point considering his curt-matureness she failed to inherit. Dots, dots, dots, her mind wanders still into an innocence unknown to her progenitor, hyperfixating on the artistic movements to bend the Grim Reaper into fatherly obedience.

Pointillism! Beginning with charcoal, ash, and colorful wax candles, going on into the night and ignoring the approaching sirens. When they had broken down the doors with melted locks, the firefighters weren’t very surprised at the girl with bloody feet and a little record hand on the floor. They knew her. She was a common link to many cases but was assumed to just have terrible luck because of her age. That was one part of it, as well as her good luck of meeting her Father each time to bask in the overrated familiarity of shared blood.

Penelope didn’t fight back against them when they pulled her away from her hideous interpretation of art. She needed paint, anyway, and these humans were full of

life and thrill to lead her Father back to her.

“Where should we take her?” Asked an EMT to another, their sadness true and humorous to the deathly girl loving the independence of her loose humanity.

“To a home, of course.” Yes, of course! A home! The death of a mass of humans had lessened the father-daughter bonding—2 minutes and 47 seconds exactly—but one by one would lengthen it. It’d be tricky considering her thoughts upon it were juvenile, and she was physically underdeveloped, but the dreams fell upon her soft mind with a pleasant squish. The humans see her giving a sweet Cheshire smile, a question upon their minds, a clever tickle for Penny. Who cared for the events of before, the cultists, the priest, the truck!?

“I hope I have lots of siblings!” Penny sweetly says to the EMTs. And every time, she really is.



Charles (*Mixed Media*)
Andi Wilson, '22

Rotten Milk

Maryam Zalzal, '22

It's a shame

Pouring cereal into a bowl

Only to find expired milk left in the fridge.

A pity dumping it out—

All that potential wasted.

Though

 you didn't want cereal yesterday.

 you had other obligations that day.

It was Sunday

 —dedicated to god and church:

 To love thy neighbor
 and thy enemies too.

 To repent
 then reconsider and regret.

 To not judge
 nor to be hypocritical.

They'd be waiting there for you

Carrying logic puzzles in a bindle

 until of course you replace it with a nice Birkin

Bag.

You'd enter the confessional

And bury their sins in your cerebrum—

 wrinkling as it ages sour—

 scalpel carving grooves along its surface—

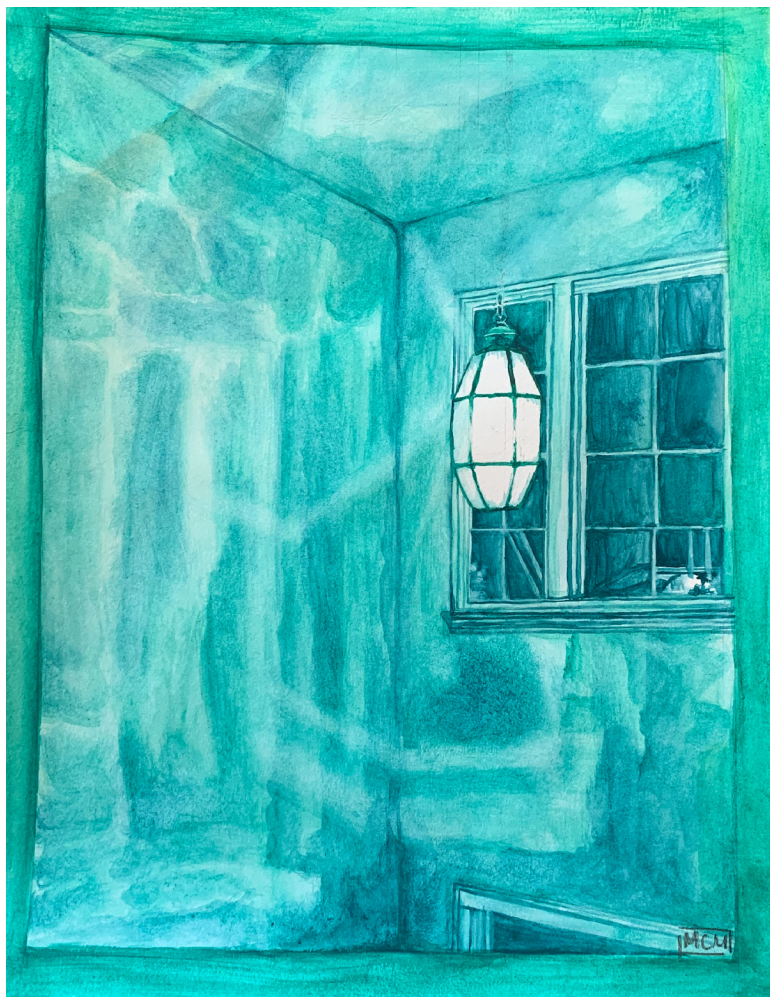
Flushing out the terms from fifth period's exam

Drowned by waves and tidal currents of their dating
 options

and family

dilemmas
and self-inflicted
stress

Until the exterior decays
When you're far past your expiration date
Stamped with
BEST BEFORE: (enter date here)



Lantern (*Watercolor*)
Moe Ceasario-McKeown, '25

Drown
Gabriel Kris, '22

Suspended,
Breathless,
I wonder,
What is out there
What is left?
Who?

My throat swells,
Becoming a vacuum,
My veins tie into knots.

What happens when my heart gives way?
When bloodless lungs fall from empty bodies?

Does the sea offer her loving embrace?
Opening arms of black and blue,
Will she cradle me, gently rocking,
Until my chest no longer yearns to be full?
Am I swallowed,
Dissolved,
Into a murky expanse that is
Not empty,
But so full that I will never see to the bottom?

Or does the sky reach down with cold hands?
Does the universe wrap fingers through bones?
Twisting through my ribcage,
Am I disassembled,

Untied,
My body weaved back into the stars?

Am I enveloped by the ocean?
Do I encompass the universe?



Iceberg (*Digital*)
Chara Kim, '23

How to Grow a Soul
Claire Koch, '22

Have you been feeling incomplete? Like you're missing something?

Perhaps just not quite right?

I regret to inform you, but you are in possession of an underdeveloped soul.

If you'd like to grow your very own complete soul, please follow this instructional guide!

> *Step One: Locate the Seed of the Soul.*

Shove your fist down your throat and feel around the cavity of your torso,

Keep searching until you find something that feels like a small stone.

It will be rigid and dense and generally smooth to the touch, albeit a few bumps-

Once you locate it, grasp down firmly.

Be persistent. The soul seeks comfort and it likes its home in your body.

It will run from you, fleeing down your appendages

Following your vascular system to seclude itself with your fingers or feet.

Once you've captured the seed of the soul

Wrench it out of your body with one hand

As you pull fistfulls of earth up from the ground with the other.

> *Step Two: Bury the Soul*

Once you've dug it a shallow grave,
Gently acclimate it to its new home.
Unclasp your fingers from around it, letting it breathe in
the cool air as you lower it into the pit,
Release it from your palm and wait- Once it realizes
where it is, it will become afraid
And try to escape.
When it starts to attempt its great getaway
Flatten out your hand and press it into the soil,
Hold it down in the dirt as it writhes and squirms and
fights for its freedom.
Continue to restrain it until it gives up on struggling and
surrenders.
When it has decided to lay still, fill the hole back up with
dirt and tell your soul goodnight.
Lie through your teeth and tell it you'll be back soon.

> *Step Three: Forget*

Things are supposed to grow when you place
them in the ground and let the rains wash over
them
Right?
It'll be fine.
Go about your life and let your soul slip from your mind.
Prepare for your days to be sadder than before.
If you thought your life was troublesome without a full
soul
You're not going to like a life with no soul at all.

> *Step Four: Remember*

In time, you will begin to miss your soul.

Despite it having served a mere fraction of its purpose
You'll begin to notice its absence and to feel the void it
left.

You may choose to acknowledge this feeling or to wait
until other people take notice of it too-
Until they start thinking that you've been extraordinarily
bland lately

That you seem volatile,

That you've *just been down-right insufferable*.

Once the turmoil of being truly soulless has sufficiently
eaten away you, go visit your soul.

> *Step Five: Visitation*

Return to your soul that you left behind,

Notice that it has not changed.

Nothing has sprouted or bloomed or germinated.

Why hasn't it grown?

Let anger consume you,

Tell your soul that it is stupid and worthless.

Tell it that you *never needed it anyway*,

Scream at it and stomp on it and, if you are so inclined,
Spit at it.

Tell it that you don't care anymore.

Leave.

Repeat Step Four.

> *Step Six: Visitation II*

This time, when you see that nothing has sprouted or

bloomed or germinated,
You will feel remorse.
The weight of your own body on your knees will
suddenly feel like far too much,
And you will drop down on them, right in front of your
soul.

At this point, formulate your apology.
Tell it that you're sorry, and that you didn't mean any of
those horrible things you said.
Tell it that you feel lost without it,
That you feel like a shell of a human,
That you want it to please come back to you.
If you feel compelled to cry at this point, allow yourself
to.

Cry. Sob. Let hurricanes of tears rush from your
eyes and on to the mound of land beneath which
your soul lies.

Tell it you'll be back soon (and mean it this time) and bid
your soul adieu.

> *Step Seven: Self Improvement*

If you were in possession of a mere seed of the soul
before, you likely have some fixing up to do.
Identify your shortcomings.
Maybe you need to be nicer to people, maybe you need to
be less apathetic, maybe...
Whatever it is, fix it.
No one else can set you right, the burden would be too
heavy on your poor fellow.

> *Step Eight: Reconnection*

Once you believe you have made the necessary improvements to make yourself a happy, healthy home for your soul

Once you have shown your penitence, learned to see the good in the world, maybe found something to truly love,

Return to it one final time.

The beauty of the soul is that it flourishes when you do. Now that you have grown to be bigger, better, more beautiful, so has your soul.

By now it has sprouted, blossomed, germinated
The leaves have unfurled, the soft petals have burst from their buds, and the stem stands tall.

Carefully dig it up, cradle it in caring hands, and admire it

Then, swallow it down back into the cavity of your torso;
Feel it nestle in and take root in your flesh.

Congratulations, you have grown a soul.



Wallen's Wonderland (*Mixed Media*)
Sarah Baffoe Bonnie, '22

Grandpa's Throne

Bridgette Rudolph, '22

I can vividly recall what my grandpa's throne looked like. The antique barber chair sat in rustic, gilded prestige over all the long drinking tables my eyes could barely see over, lined up for the family reunion. Uncles, aunts, second cousins, and distant relatives who arrived without invitation filled in the benches like summer campers out for lunch.

It was a mess. A warm happy mess. Finding a place to sit was like a game of musical chairs where no one stayed in one place too long, hopping from lawn chair to bench to standing around the water cooler, the mass of guests stayed moving about the banquet.

Grandpa, however, watched over all of them from the corner of the garage in his ancient and mighty barber chair with a foaming Pepsi can in hand.

The chair was an antique from the 1920s. Cinnamon colored cushions had faded to a sun-bleached tawny color. Rust formed a thin line at the bottom of the stand. The seat wrench hadn't been touched in years and had frozen in place. Tears were beginning to form on the cushions of the arm and footrests, but the chair still held firm. Age had been creeping in on the chair for years, but Grandpa wouldn't part with it. My cousin Josh told me Grandpa had stolen the chair from a Chicago barbershop in his early twenties on a dare, but dad said he'd just bought it at a garage sale because it was one of the few

chairs he could easily get in and out of in his old age.

To me, that chair felt as entwined with Grandpa as his ever-present Pepsi can was. In every family picture, every reunion, every time he sent his grandkids off to go fishing at the lake, he was in that chair. Grandpa kept it in the front corner of the garage next to all his fishing and welding equipment.

The midwestern garage that looked more like a renovated barn had opened its gates and the inside was flooded with my family of strangers. Mom and Dad could list off relatives faster than an auctioneer calls bids, but to me, most of them boiled down to nice-looking people who all said some variation of, “You’ve grown so much! You were only this big when I last saw you.”

I didn’t wander far from my immediate relatives for fear of being sucked in by the horde of cheek-pinching strangers. Mostly, I stuck by my grandpa’s side.

He rarely moved from his chair over the course of the reunion unless he was getting another can of Pepsi or excusing himself for a minute. Grandpa didn’t go to greet people with a big hug like Grandma did. He smiled from his chair, gave a wave from his hand or held up his drink in acknowledgement, and moved on. If you were lucky, he’d call out a teasing remark.

He would call to you, but he would not leave his chair. The king doesn’t leave his throne and go in search of you, you come before the king. I watched as many walked to my grandpa’s barber chair to bow and talk to him. However, they never started with him. You don’t greet the king first. First you meet with the knights,

the lords, the advisors. Everyone who came before my grandpa started with his children. My father and aunts stood by his side like loyal retainers at a royal feast.

Grandpa didn't sit with the posture or cold gaze of a king, but the air bent around him. It twisted and knelt before him, falling silent to listen when he cracked a joke. His laugh shook the mountains and his round belly bounced trying to catch his breath. He looked old but he never felt old. His hair had long since left, leaving wrinkles and sagging flesh on his face. It took a little extra effort to smile, but that never stopped him. He wore hunting shirts and fishing boots from the 90s, 'cause they still fit.' When Grandma's back was turned he'd stick his tongue out at me, and I'd do it right back until Grandma turned around.

Every time we had our big mid-western family reunion, I'd race to the food line, skipping over the veggies and going right for the bread rolls, deviled eggs, chicken, and Grandma's carrot cake. Once I had raided the food tables, I always ended up next to that barber chair, either sitting on the floor or pulling up a stool next to it, watching as people approached, bowed, and were dismissed from before my grandfather. Typically, I was ignored unless someone asked me how school was going or complimented my pretty red hair. They always moved right along to my parents or aunts after talking to me.

Whenever Grandpa got bored waiting for someone to finish talking to his children and start talking to him or when he wanted to give someone a clue to get lost, he would turn to me from his throne and look down

at me on my little stool. I was the only one the king came to look for.

I was also the only one who could sit on the king's throne. The few times grandpa rose from his chair and walked off, no one dared sit in it while he was gone. Save for my cousin Josh, who enjoyed pushing limits, whether they were his own or his mother's. He would proudly plop himself into the chair once Grandpa was out of sight, but would leave without argument once Grandpa came back.

When I felt brave enough to climb up into Grandpa's chair, typically with the help of my Uncle Jim, Grandpa only smiled when he saw me in his chair. He approached with a quick shuffle as it was the only way his old legs would allow him to walk anymore. He'd smile and jab me in the side with his fingers. Laughing and screaming, I'd jump from the chair, retreating to my stool and Grandpa would sit down in his chair without a word. Then Grandpa would look down at me and reveal he brought a second Pepsi back from the cooler just for me.

“Here you go, Princess.”



Fancy (*Watercolor*)
L Gondeck, '24

Legacies from the Living
Makayla Bowman, '22

Last Christmas, my Grandma Allen gifted me one of her personal necklaces from her jewelry box. The chain is thin and boxy, laying just across my collarbones. On the center of the chain hangs a circular pendant; two glass panes pressed together by a 24 karat gold frame, which contains a gold cursive “MK” in the middle, surrounded by tiny beads.

Grandma Allen sold Mary Kay products on the side to supplement her work as the owner of Allen Upholstery, a business she founded. A handwritten letter accompanied the envelope that the necklace was wrapped in.

My dearest granddaughter, I'm gifting you this necklace because I feel as if it will bring you lots of joy. I was first gifted it during my time selling Mary Kay, a gift to commemorate my 1,000th sale. Now, you can use it as a reminder of your old Grandma. Merry Christmas.

Now, as far as sentimental people go, I'm as nostalgic as you can get. Sentimental objects tell stories that maybe my memory has since forgotten. For me, these objects create a sense of permanence in a life full of changing memories. As a result, I haven't taken the heirloom off.

Alone, the necklace seemed to be a sweet gift; thoughtful and beautiful, a gesture unique to itself. When paired with another distant gift-giving occasion, the gesture takes on a more solemn tone.

In May of 2021, seven months prior to receiving the necklace, I visited my mom's parents to celebrate their fiftieth wedding anniversary. Fifty years of marriage! Considering they got married when they were twenty, fifty years is a long time to be with someone.

It's also a sign of... aging.

During this anniversary celebration, my Grandma distributed her ceramic angel collection among each of her nine grandchildren. She's been collecting these angel statues for years, each one unique and handcrafted. These statues have been watching me, keeping me safe from their glass cases for as long as I can remember. Now, one of them are mine.

Another *gift*.

When I finally realized the connection between these two gifts, I cried. Hot tears painted my cheeks with salt while my fingertips rested on the Mary Kay pendant. Apart from the necklace, it's simply an angel statue, her long brown hair, hands held out, cradling a songbird. But, paired with the golden necklace, I realized that they weren't presents.

They were the beginning of my inheritance.

Forest Fire
Ariel Balocating, '23

On one solemn day,
Chalky clouds of
Dust and heat
Had gripped the ribbons of sunlight
And yanked them out of the sky.

We all slowly suffocate,
Strangled by accumulated greed.

Half-charred animals scurry out-
Their naked babies left to
Fuel the flames-
While each tree
Crumbles,
Age and years burning
Layer by layer
Until they topple over.

And what water can be used to put it out?
Not the combined tears of Mother Nature.



Humility (*Photography*)
Katrina Achicho, '23

Your Eyes

Eden Gardner, '23

I am entranced by your hands,
Fingers long and slender as they are;
Pale as candle wax, the smoking ashes of the campfire
Now falling limp
At your sides

The flames reflected in your blank eyes
Dancing with the fevered fervor of an animate being
Holding the intimate knowledge that they are dying
Eventually reduced to only the red-orange of glowing
embers.

Here, it is finally silent.
Pine needles rustle in the chill wind
Accompanying the slight pops of tongues of fire.
They reach to lick your ankles, to warm your cold cheeks
Waiting eagerly to embrace you with flickering open arms

My darling, I have admired you from afar for so long
Being this close to you brings a thrill to my now shivering
bones
Even when the slight scent of coconut
Has faded from your hair, overwhelmed by the odor of
copper
Metallic. Sweet
When I close your mesmerizing eyes and kiss your
smooth brow

Goodbye
And release you into the welcoming flames

Later tonight, the sirens might sound-
Piercing and urgent-
With none of the allure of the creatures of myth for
 which they are named
Only the urge to run.
The flashing light of red blue red blue red
Reflecting off the trees
Will not be enough
To uncover what's under the coating of leaves on the
 forest floor.

But, never fear, I will return.
To visit you, scattered among the rotting brown of a
 leafed cocoon.
Be grateful
For I have protected you from the pains of the world
You will never have to leave
And your eyes, once staring into my own with fearful
 tears
Will never have to cry again.



Loud (*Digital*)
Emily Lowther, '22

Gild

Hannah Bassett, 22

shadows cling around the foundations of the altar,
hiding from the weight of the worlds you speak of at the
pulpit.

of eternal life, of heaven and hell, of darkness and light, of
good and evil.

your place is purity, your safe sanctuary,
filled with streaks of bright light beams to defeat your
demons,

with blissful ignorance you worship at the gilded marble
stone,

unaware of truths that lie shrouded in the darkness
dancing underneath.

preaching of one man's blood shed for us all, preaching
do no evil in his name.

in your belief of expelling darkness you degrade the ones
you disagree with,

label good people sinners, ostracized and unwanted,
unless they change to your idea of good.

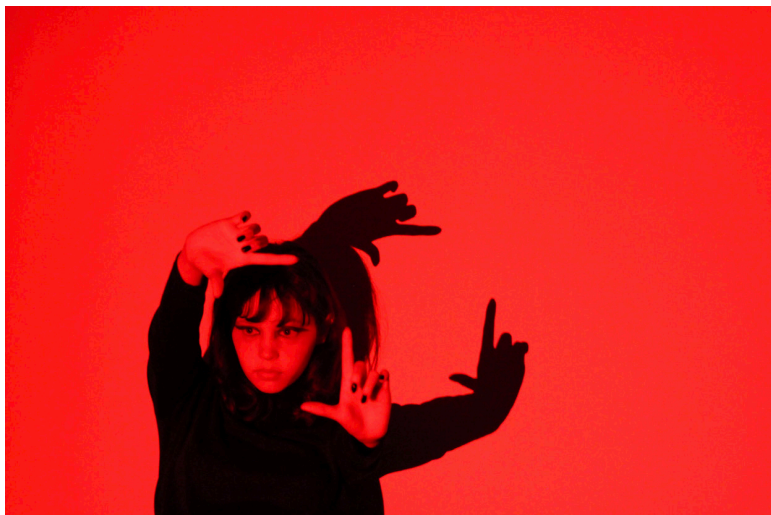
and then you're convinced you're headed to heaven,
because you added another like you to the world.

you've warped your own scriptures to conform to your
will,

kneel in the confessional you built to ask for forgiveness
from sins you created,

and pray to your ancient being buried in the clouds,
who lightens your soul, lifts you up when your time is over.

hours, hours, hours of talking to souls with tainted
words,
look at the chalice, on the blood-stained altar you use to
consecrate the gifts,
at your reflection on the shiny gold rim.
because your blade is the one dripping in swirls of that
separated blood.



Cool (Photography)
Katrina Achicho, '23

Keyring

Alexandra Fuhrman, '23

In a quiet, sleepy town there was an inn, tucked away just beyond the main square, ruddy and worn-out. To say it was simply “well-loved” or “lived-in,” while accurate, would be doing a great deal of kindness. Hidden under the bows of weathered old trees, *The Haggard Harpy*, leaky roof and all, stood as a shoddy beacon of homeliness for the few residents and passers-through the town received.

This inn happened to be the perfect rest-stop for a notorious thief.

Hunched over a desk, he worked away at a lockbox, picking and prodding at a lock that had resisted each and every attempt made to pry the chest open before. Seeming to give up, the thief turned his attention to the opposite end of the table. He reached for the pouch of stolen valuables at his side, running deft fingers along the surface of a gleaming golden ring. Pausing, he moved to feel the engraving again. In an old, long-forgotten dialect, the ring read: *I promise you forever.*

He huffed, hesitantly setting the ring into a pile of other trinkets at the edge of the table, the ring settling with an almost mournful *clink*. Resting among dazzling pendants, prized jewels, and glittering brooches, it appeared almost sad in its simplicity.

The thief turned away, murmuring something

under his breath as he went back to his work. *Forever should last without a ring anyway, right?* Grabbing the underside of the bag, he tipped it upward, spilling the last of its contents onto the splintering desk—a ring of filched keys. They were all mismatched and rusted, but their tarnished forms gleamed a brilliant carmine in the vision left by the Pact.

Taking the blunt, tarnished form of a cell key came first. He turned it once, twice, and was halfway through a third time before the all-too-familiar thrum of rejection shot through his hand and he removed the key. Something of that standing wouldn't have worked to begin with, but it was part of the routine to check each one, he thought. He reached for another, trying and failing and taking key after key to the hole until his fingers pressed against nothing but splinters when he moved to grab again.

The ring of keys fell to the desk with a despondent clank, their holder rising from his seat as he shoveled the jewels into the bag from which they came. His gaze swept the room, the man fixating on anything but the sting of failure. Behind the mask, he felt his face heat up—whether it be with shame or frustration had yet to be made clear. The voice of his master rang sing-song in his head, the hiss of his name brushing along the cusp of his ear as he shook the thoughts from his mind.

All in due time, Delon. Such is the way of the Pact.

His survival for his servitude—the memories of

how he'd gotten here were enshrouded by a ritual defiled, by headaches that ensued when he pushed to remember, but he knew his soul was on the line and there was a way out. It was all in that box, covered with locks and smattered with keyholes for stolen trinkets that *just might fit* when they'd catch his eye during a heist. There was very little that he knew about the Pact, with the chiding voice of his Patron being his only guide. The only thing he *did* know was that he had a chance to escape this Pact, to free the soul he'd promised to his patron, but it came with serving faithfully and working meticulously at the puzzle made to haunt him.

And when it came to the puzzle it was clear that Delon was not thought to be above the simpler troubles of a budding warlock: impatience. The only thing that made it worse was the fact that he was right, the angry bruises and prickly gnashes that marred his arms were enough evidence that work had to be done if he was to attempt his most recent heist again.

But why not go back now? When the layout of the place was fresh in his mind? When he had something to prove? He should go, and quickly. Leave tonight, when they're still recuperating...

The door creaked as it opened. A woman peeked through the crack, light spilling into the room, swallowing up the dim flames of the candles with so much ease he was nearly convinced that day had broken.

She was why.

Tivera Maye. A traveling bard with far too many good intentions for it to be healthy, had... been sent along for the ride? There were no real instructions she bore, and the girl didn't speak either—her music did all the talking for her.

That, and all the other little gestures that caught his attention.

They had worked together before, under different circumstances and different pretenses, a network of those serving the divine for various reasons keeping them in sparse contact during the months they were apart and working with others or on their own. He seldom worked alongside anyone, as partners tended to be a mess of variables that couldn't be accounted for, but even his pride couldn't keep him from admitting that her help had come at just the right time *several times*.

So to have her back again was something that was growing increasingly harder to complain about.

A plate of cut-up fruits was set on the table as the bard entered, the door clicking shut behind her while she found a seat at the edge of her cot. He gave her a cautious once-over, unsure of what to make of the smile she offered—no, *gave*—him. Seeing that she had gotten his attention, her hands moved to sign.

“Sleep well?” Her head tilted to the side, gently pressing on.

Despite her insistence it wasn't any trouble, Delon still found it strange to speak his responses aloud. Usually sure fingers moved slowly, adapting an old cant to the form Tivera was accustomed to using. 'Somewhat, I wanted to finish going through what was salvaged.'

"So you didn't sleep at all." Came her reply. She was as silent as ever, but the bite of her words came through even without a voice.

He shrugged. "An hour isn't bad."

"You of all people should know there is no achievement without proper preparation."

Caught between wanting to curse her for being right or cut the conversation entirely, the thief felt the lull in his reply stretch further and further into oblivion. Studying and observing were infinitely better than confronting someone directly, even someone stubborn enough to stick around all this time... someone who, despite the time spent around her, had skills that were easy to forget.

"Eat and rest, I'll pick up the provisions today." Her hands moved with finality, the resolving chord of a song they both knew she would be playing a thousand times more.

Delon simply nodded, reaching for a slice of apple. Sure, but only because she had won.

The bard grinned once more, shedding any sense

of seriousness in an instant. Hopping up from the cot, she tucked her lyre beneath one arm and waved goodbye with the other before heading out the door. He watched her go, fixating on the creak of the door as it shut.

Would understanding that woman come with time as well? With patience?



Shiny Penny In The Ocean (*Digital*)
Sanai Williams, '22

