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Winter 12-2023

## Commonthought (2023)

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**BETTER**

*Commonthought 2023*

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*Commonthought* is a celebration of the creative endeavors of Lesley University.

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## **Balloons!!!**

*Kale Kimble-Lee*

# My Scars

*Madison Reed*

I look up and down the canvas my body has provided  
Surveying the flesh that covered my arms, legs, and shoulders.  
Rubbing my hand over the uneven surfaces,  
Closing my eyes and just remembering.  
Every scar is different from the rest.

They all tell a story,  
Both the man made and naturally occurring ones.  
My left shin,  
From a slide tackle made in a soccer game.  
My right knee,  
From surgery to remove a rock.  
My upper thighs,  
From moments of solitude.

My ankles,  
From an attempt to quickly shave my legs and failing.  
My left forearm,  
From my cat being in a bad mood.

Each were crafted with an underlying theme,  
That of loneliness and isolation.  
Of a need to forget.  
But also, a theme of forgiveness,  
Of love and learning.  
But more importantly healing.  
After all that's what a scar is there for.  
To show that something has healed.

I love my scars

# **My tears could build a stairway to heaven**

*Alyssa Camara*

If memories could build, a stairway and tears could construct a  
road,  
I'd stroll right up to Heaven and bring you back  
Just to hear your voice  
or even just your laugh  
I still remember you after all these years.  
As you were full of happiness,  
When you were still around,  
With swelling tears and an aching heart,  
I would climb the stairs to heaven  
To feel the warmth of your embrace  
Even if your spirit is present, it is not the same. Hearing your voice  
and seeing you close by,  
There will be no more tomorrows to hold you back; only yesterday  
remains.  
Even yet, the sun sets and the stars shine brightly.  
The dawn turns into the day, and the day turns into the night.  
Without you here  
It just isn't the same, and I wish you were still here.  
With your bright smile and joy,  
If memories could build, a stairway and tears could construct a  
road,  
I'd stroll right up to Heaven and bring you back



# Mind Games

*Kelly Fede*

In the dim-lit room, a single candle flickers,  
Casting dancing shadows on the walls,  
As isolation lingers.

The air grows **H**eavy  
with the weight of silence.  
*Whispers* of doubt,  
nothing seems at rest.

*Overthinking*, a relentless beast,  
it **f**easts and it **d**evours,  
Nourished by fears,  
it often **E**mpowers.

When s e p a r a t i o n  
the thoughts take ho**L**d,  
Tightening their grip,  
their powers uncontro**L**led.

*FADES,*

Slithering like vipers,  
**suffocating** hope,  
its venom poisons,  
all that Gr**O**WS.

In this battle of the mind,  
where **d**arkness often **c**hampions.  
Isolation

and

Anxiety

Are my constant companions.

## **Private Comfort**

*Ricky Whipple*

Away from the bustling, careless world  
I sit in a secluded paradise  
No matter what challenges are hurled  
They deflect off my humble little slice

A slice of the land, a piece of the house  
Where I may hide out like a weary mouse  
A private dwelling all to myself  
For comfort is my chosen wealth

A squadron of shelves, sturdy as trees  
Contain assortments of cherished things  
Anime collection, sure to please  
Books as numerous as feathers on wings

Above it all rests my bed  
A perch where I may lay my head  
Just below that is my desk  
A design that's quite college-esque

A silent wonder is my room  
With dozens of stories abound  
It holds back the spiteful gloom  
Through love and peace all around

## **Game 1**

*Madison Reed*

I surveyed the stands,  
Friends, family, and strangers had all gathered.  
Even my parents,  
Traveling all the way from California.  
I stood there shaking,  
Hoping that my anxiety wouldn't get the best of me.  
I had 10 girls standing there with me,  
We were silent but their presence reassured me that I would be ok.  
The sun was out  
and was glistening off my sweaty forehead.  
I continued to stand there.  
Now slowly taking some deep breathes,  
reminding myself that I deserve to be here.  
The announcer then checks the mic,  
Tapping it a few times.  
They do the usual introductions of the game matchup.  
And then my heart starts racing,  
I know I'll hear my name soon.  
"Starting in Goal for the lynx is a freshman,  
From Burlingame, CA. Number zero.  
Madison Reed."  
I stepped out to wave  
and locked eyes with my mom.  
Reassured that I belonged.

## **Execution**

*Ricky Whipple*

She breathed in the sight of the court  
As the guards forced her to her knees  
Her dress is torn, shreds in the fabric  
Matching the cuts she suffered long ago  
The battles she endured briefly flash  
Through her ailing mind

Husband and child, not far away  
Realize that this will be her fateful day  
He rushes forward, blade swiftly drawn  
To free his love through valor and brawn  
Alas, his wrath had been foreseen  
By His Majesty's mind akin to a machine

Royal guards, on instinct primed  
Respond to restrain the baleful rogue  
Lances striking with skillful aim  
Their riposte so deftly timed  
As the gathered crowd would colloque  
While the father was rendered tame

Hushed murmurs and daughter's cries  
Herald the woeful convict's demise  
A slew of tears clouds her sight  
Isolated in her plight  
A silent plea for mother's life  
Dashed at the sight of a cold scythe

Cloaked figure, scarlet red  
Approaches silent as a grave  
Sharp metal is slowly raised

The whispers are frantic and many  
Like the myriad thoughts rushing through her mind

All the things she would never do  
One final look with love that is true

A single stroke of shrieking blade  
Despair and horror cruelly displayed  
Pure silence, all voices stayed  
A tragedy birthed and monstrously made

# I'm sorry

*Storm Medina*

I'm not soft and easy to love

You can't hold me.

I'm covered in sharp edges  
that will cut your hands.

My voice cannot be soft and soothing,  
it will always come out too rough  
I will never say the right thing.

I'm not good.

I will only hurt you if you come any closer.

I am every bad thing  
my mother

my father

Nicole

Brandon

Nathan

redacted

said I am.

I am not a flawed

but beautiful thing,

I am glass shards  
covered in the blood of everyone I tried to love.

Please don't add your own blood.

Please don't try to put me back together.

I don't know how to stop being shards of glass,

so please find someone else. Someone who isn't sharp and cruel,  
who won't cut your hands when you touch them.

## Home Base

*Sharisse Zeroonian*

*Indian Orchard, Springfield, Massachusetts, Fall 1968*

“How do I look, Anna?” My brother David asked me, then thirteen, as he tried on a shiny new pair of rectangular aviator glasses, one of many of his possessions that were strewn all over his bed and waiting to see if they made the cut to go into his suitcase.

“Like Roger McGuinn”.

“Excellent That’s what I was going for.”

“Are you taking that?” I pointed to an issue of Playboy that lay on his pillow.

“I’ll need to strengthen my hand somehow”.

“For what?” Our sister Christine piped up. She was eight, and always asking questions, either about the least – or most – important things.

“For fighting.” I replied lightning fast, and winked at David.

*Nice save, Anna.* He mouthed, and continued packing.

“What will you eat there, David?” Christine asked.

“I don’t know. Canned soup, maybe.”

“In Vietnam, people eat noodle soup for breakfast.”

“Good to know.”

“But who will take me to my bus now?”

Now this, I knew the answer to; for now – or ever –, all of David’s normal big-brotherly duties, from school drop-off to nighttime comfort to providing alibis to our parents when in trouble, would now fall on me.

“Anna will. Right, Anna?”

I stared at the Playboy cover model again, the dictionary image of “curvy” with two aneurysms of womanhood threatening to split her one-piece bathing suit open. Her face, barely made up, was demure yet intense; it gave her the air of someone who knew everything there was to know and would judge you if you didn’t. She made me nervous, but I felt I had no choice but to make eye contact with her.

“Right.”

“When are you coming back?”

My brother rested his hands on the bed and rocked back and forth, as if to soothe himself.

“I’ll come back when I come back.” He told her with a forced grin. “So you better be good for Anna”.

“Or what?”

“Or I’m taking you, too!” Without warning, he playfully grabbed Christine and pretended to stuff her into his open suitcase. I felt too shy and big to join them at first, but then gave in, and jumped on my brother’s back – as the Playboy model watched.

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“Let’s talk about figures.” Mr. Hinckley, our Algebra teacher, told us at the end of school one Friday, two weeks after David had gone. “I don’t mean stick figures; I mean zeroes. Millions. Thousands. We see those little zeroes everywhere, all the time, and talk about them all the time without thinking. ‘My mom told me to do my laundry a million times.’ ‘There’s two- thousand people in line for lunch today’.”

“There’s about two-thousand people in our school.” Mike Sahakian, the boy who sat next to me on my left, called out.

“That’s right, Mike.” Mr. Hinckley took a sip of coffee from his mug and put it back down on his desk, on top of a newspaper that screamed the headline “Nearly 2,000 US Troops Dead”.. “When you leave here today, I want you to imagine coming to school tomorrow morning to absolutely nothing. No chatter in the halls. No line for lunch. No lockers opening and closing. You know what three zeroes look like; now imagine what they feel like.”

The bell rang, and we all hurriedly packed up our things. I thought about what my teacher had said, all the way out the door and during my trip home in the back of the bus. It reminded me of something my uncle Sevan had told us a few days prior, when he had come to fix my dad’s truck.

“One and a half million of our people were killed by the ‘Turks.’” He lectured me and Christine at the kitchen table. “That’s why some of us hate them.”

“We don’t hate anyone.” My mother, who was on the phone taking an order for pies – which we made fresh from the fruit that grew on our land – took the receiver off of her ear long enough to say.



“Except for George Wallace.” Christine piped up. “Right, Papa?”

“Not even him.” My father grabbed a few sprigs of dill, tarragon, and mint from a plate on the table and ate them – just as he and my mother had grown up doing with all their dinners. Good idea, as that night, Mama had made a tuna noodle casserole using a recipe from Mrs. Nelson down the road, who was famous for never salting or seasoning anything.

“What?” My mother said wearily to the customer. “No, not you, ma’am. So...yes, so it’s Balian Farms. Spell it? Uhhh....it’s a bit of a doozy, I’m afraid....first, I’ll give you my name. It’s ‘Siroun’. Yes. Rhymes with....uh....you know, that’s a good question...”

Uncle Sevan smirked to my sister and I. “Did you know that before your mother met your father, she used to tell boys her name was ‘Sarah’?”

“What?!” Christine crowed in delight. “Mama, you didn’t!”

“Sevan, enough.” She took the receiver off again and hissed.

“I love your hair, Mama.” I said sweetly, hoping it would melt the ice in the room. “Siroun” was Armenian for “pretty”, and indeed she was, with bold cheekbones and hair so black and lustrous it glittered blue in natural light. She was on day two of a new perm, the ends smiling into perfect tunnels on either side of her face.

“Thank you. Inspired by Mary Tyler Moore herself.” She fluffed the right side of her head before nervously laughing to the customer. “Sorry. So, the last name is B-A...nope, ‘B’ as in ‘boy’...no problem – hey, sometimes *I* forget how to spell it...”

My uncle rolled his eyes.

“Do we hate people from Vietnam, Papa?” Christine’s voice rang out again, so loudly Mama had to cover the receiver for a third time.

“Of course not.”

“So why did David have to go?”

My father paused before he answered, turning his head to the ceiling as if for help. I noticed how ungroomed he now looked; he usually never missed a shave, he had let himself get a five-o’clock-shadow that eventually into an eight-o’clock evening sky.

“Because he’s being a good American, Christine.”

“I want to be a good American, too!”

“We never will.” Uncle Sevan glared at my mother, who was still coaching the customer on how to spell our surname. “Get used to it”.

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After I made the ten-minute trek from the bus stop to our farm, I checked the mail – as I had done every morning for the past month since David had gone. Every time I opened the little metal door, my heart froze, preparing me to find nothing– or worse, the wrong kind of letter.

Once I saw his handwriting on the envelope, I tore it open with jittery fingers. He mostly talked about the food he ate – or what passed for it on his base – and the friends he had made in his bunker.

“Not kicked out yet”, he had closed out a paragraph with, and punctuated it with a smiley face.

I giggled to myself, thrilled by that private morsel of a joke he had saved just for me, and held the letter under my arm as I opened the front door into the kitchen.

“Hi, ma’am.” Mama, who was sweeping the floor, stopped to hug me. “How did school go?”

I handed her the letter without answering; being called “ma’am” – even affectionately – made me wrinkle inside. She looked at the envelope, breath hitching, and then ran her finger over the now ripped-up top. I was preparing myself for a lecture on opening mail outside the safety of our house – especially this – but when she tenderly laid her hand on my cheek, I knew I wouldn’t get one.

Just then, hurricane Christine tore through the hallway and into the room.

“Come see the girl!” She exclaimed, nearly out of breath, and then dashed back outside.

“Girl?” I glanced at my mother in confusion.

“You’re going to have a new friend.” She said oh-so-naturally. “With your brother gone, we’ll need a little extra help around here. We talked about that.”

Had we? As I tried to remember, pieces of dead conversations started coming back to me; girl, ad in the newspaper, dividing up the chores – all clutter that my brain had decided to throw out in favor of bigger matters.

“I didn’t think it was going to be today.”

“You need to start listening better. You’re the oldest now.” She tapped my nose with her finger and pointed to the hallway. “I think she might be in the kitchen, but go check.”

With my head spinning, I peeked into the kitchen to see if anyone unfamiliar was there. To my relief, I only saw my father standing at the stove, keeping his eye on the small metal pot our family used to boil coffee.

“Did you have a good day?” My father gave me a half-hug around the shoulder.

“Uh, yeah, um...” As I struggled to put a sentence together, the sound of a language I had never heard before floated to my ears from the living room.

“Is that the TV?”

“No, that’s Rumeysa. Our new helper.”

Rumeysa. I liked the name. It had a wealthy – almost regal – sound to it, and was undoubtedly more special than my name or those of my siblings. Before Siroun and Nareg got married, they had agreed that if they were going to pass on their genes, they weren’t going to pass on the butterflies they used to get during roll call.

I heard the phone hang up with a click, and there was the girl, standing right in front of me. She was about my age, and chubby, with frizzy hair reined into a long, tight braid. She was dressed more for a day at the office than the farm, and it was clear that whoever had washed her blouse was a huge fan of starch.

“What did your mother say, Rumeysa?” Papa asked, turning the flame down on the stove.

“She said I should go home by five.”

“We’ll get you out of here by then.”

“Is this Christine’s sister?” She looked me up and down, which suddenly made me, clad in dirty jeans and a T-shirt, feel self-conscious.

“Yes, this is Anna”.

“Your parents don’t speak English?” I asked her.

“My dad does. My mom just speaks Turkish. I mean, she can say ‘hello’ in English and stuff, but that’s it.”

My father poured the coffee into two miniature cups, gingerly shaking the pot to make sure enough of the coffee foam made it to the cup’s tiny rims.

“My mom makes coffee the exact same way.” Rumeysa’s face lit up when my father served her one.

“Anna likes a little bit of the grounds mixed with sugar and milk.”

“Papa.” I whined. It was true; I had been enjoying that combination since I was younger than Christine, but now I felt embarrassed about it. Rumeysa shook her head.

“You’re not supposed to do that.”

“I have to. It tastes like boiled dirt.”

“Maybe when you’re older, you’ll like it more.”

“When I’m....?”

“Fourteen.” She said with pride, but then retreated a little. “Well, not yet. I will be in December. I’m in high school, though”

“You shouldn’t be”.

“I went to kindergarten in Colorado. Different cutoff.”

“Was your father operating on soldiers there?” Papa asked.

“Yes, sir.” She took a ladylike sip of coffee, not even flinching at its bitterness. “In an army hospital. Same one I was born in. That was our home base for a long time. Before we moved. And then moved again. And again”.

“My aunt works in a hospital.” I blurted out. “In Holyoke, not far from here. She’s the one you see behind the desk in the E.R.”

“Not the same thing.”

“No sh –” Before finishing the phrase, I glanced at my father for his reaction. In the past, he would have admonished me, but he didn’t; along with shaving, disciplining my sister and I had also fallen to the wayside. He did nothing but pour a spoonful of milk into my cup.

“You got the last few drops, Anna.”

“Nobody milked Louise today?”

“It’s David’s day to –” He stopped himself. A somber hush fell over the kitchen, and I felt the atmosphere go thick and tense in my throat.

“I’ll do it.”

“Take Rumeysa with you.” He cleared our cups and saucers while avoiding our eyes. “She’ll need to learn, anyway.”

“If it helps, Mr. Balian,” She said politely, “I do know how to milk already.”

“Of course.” He rapped his head with his knuckle. “Right. Yes, that’s why.....yes. Well, in that case, take Anna with you.”

“Yes, sir.” She shifted her eyes back to him. Without another word, my dad went back to clearing the table, lost within himself.

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“Where’d you learn how to do this?” I asked her as we sat by the barn, with our family’s blue metal milk bucket between us.

“In Colorado.” She pulled down the old cow’s udder with a fluid motion. “You think this is farm country? Go out there. Nothing but green, even in the middle of Denver.”

Next to us, a group of our chickens — which were allowed to run freely around the farm — congregated near us to watch. Moments later, Christine came barreling down the field, holding a giant stick as a pretend gun.

*“This land is my land, and only my land...”* She ran towards the chickens, singing at the top of her lungs. *“If you don’t get off, I’ll blow your head off...”*

“Christine, it’s not funny!” I yelled at her, and she struck a sassy pose.

“It’s just a game.”

“No, it’s not.”

She huffed at me, then turned to Rumeysa.

“Why did you kill us?”

My face grew hot, and I wanted to crumble into the mud and hay beneath my feet. Rumeysa, however, seemed unfazed.

“Me? I’ve never killed anybody.”

Christine considered this for a second, and then continued terrorizing the chickens. I held the bucket for Rumeysa, still burning with embarrassment.

“Just ignore her.”

“It’s fine.” Rumeysa shrugged. “I’ve been asked that a lot ever since I moved here.”

We worked in silence for several seconds. Every so often, she stopped to watch Christine in admiration.

“My mom’s having a baby soon.” She beamed. “I hope I get a sister.”

“No, you don’t.”

“But I’d be okay with a brother, too.”

I said nothing. She took a break from milking and bent down next to me, like a teacher consoling a crying student.

“You’ll get used to it. My dad goes away for months and every time he comes back, I get a little spooked at first when I hear him singing in the shower.”

“But it must be nice.”

“Oh, it is. Except when he gets bad dreams.”

“David doesn’t get bad dreams.”

“He will. He’ll wake up screaming, and you’ll wish he would go away again.” She put the bucket off to the side, her face completely neutral. “Once, in real life, my dad cut a bullet out of a soldier’s belly. But in the dream, the guy woke up during surgery and cut *his* belly open.”

“Maybe I’ll meet him.”

“I wonder if he’s met your brother.” Then, realizing what she said, raced to do damage control.

“I didn’t mean it that way.”

“I know.” I gazed down at my now shaking hands, and then the bucket, which was nearly at its limit and threatening to spill over. Neither of us talked for a moment, until Rumeysa suddenly got an excited glint in her eye.

“I hope they never see each other.” She said, with a mischievous lilt. Like, never, never, never, never, ever, ever....”

I picked up Louise’s udder and cut off Rumeysa’s never-ever chain with a violent squirt of milk in her face. She squealed, and then let out a hearty laugh.

“Don’t waste that.” She wiped the milk from her chin. “You’ll need it for your coffee.”

I squirted her again, until Louise decided she’d had enough and kicked me in the shin. Rumeysa and I both laughed, and exchanged a knowing look – a shore eroding between us.

By the time October rolled around, Rumeysa and I had grown even closer. Soon, we were walking together to and from our respective bus stops every day, and bonding over every farm activity from milking Louise to shelling peas. She even started joining us for meals, like she did for breakfast one weekend, on the day of our Halloween party – by which point, we hadn’t gotten any more letters from David.

“Maybe he ran out of paper.” Christine suggested, as she shoveled heaping spoonfuls of cornflakes up from her bowl and drained out every drop of milk she could. “Like, ‘cause they’re raisin-ing it.”

“*Ration-ing?*” My father lowered his newspaper to smile at her.

“Somebody should ration your cornflakes.” I muttered under my breath, shaking the nearly empty cereal box.

“Anna, stop.” My mother snapped, her face hidden behind a book of recipes that she had gotten at a yard sale. On the cover were several bundt-shaped dishes – mostly involving gelatin – that looked like science experiments gone wrong.

“Don’t tell me you’re going to cook any of those things for the party tonight.” I said, pointing to the bottom of the page, which featured a fish-shaped mold of aspic with hot dog pieces in it.

“Nothing says Halloween like Jell-O.”

“Just make some kebab and two big batches of rice. It’s still warm enough to grill outside.”

“Well, the Abramsons are coming. So are the Carlsons, and the Josephs....”

“Do you have a costume for tonight, Anna?” Papa asked, eager to change the subject.

“I’ll be a witch.”

“Do you have an old witch costume?”

“No, I mean from *Bewitched*. They just wear regular clothes.”

“Nice try.” My mother put down the book and reached over to jokingly pinch my cheek.

“I’m too old for a costume, Mama.”

“You’re not too old at all.”

“I’m the oldest now.”

Everyone at the table went silent. My father visually seared me as he folded up his newspaper. Even Christine knew I had messed up, and for once, didn’t revel in it. I felt myself shrinking, as I would have done when I was five years old and in danger of being sent to sit in the corner.

“That’s funny, because I’m going to be a witch.” Rumeysa got up from the table and brought over a big paper grocery bag that was sitting in the corner. She reached inside and produced a witch’s hat and a long black velvet dress.

“Very nice.” Papa nodded, genuinely impressed.

“So soft.” Mama stroked the dress. I put my hand on hers to show her I was sorry, but she immediately shook it off as if it were a fly.

“Go find something in your closet.” She murmured, in the universal way that scorned mothers do. I felt my eyes stinging with hurt.

“I can help.” Rumeysa got up from the table.

“Thanks, honey.” My mother nodded warmly at her, but turned her nose up towards me. “Maybe clean the closet, too.”

I stood there, seething but stuck, until Rumeysa linked her arm in mine and we made our way together.

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“What will you be?” Rumeysa asked, after we got to my room.

“I’ll find something.” I said with half my body buried in the closet. After a minute, I stumbled upon my cowgirl costume from last year. It was simple, nothing more than a pair of jeans with a star buckle belt in the middle, my dad’s old leather vest, a green-and-white plaid shirt I’d had for two years, and David’s old hat from when he was a cowboy for Halloween several years back – when he was in fifth grade and I in kindergarten. Instantly, I was hit by a ten-wheeler full of memories; me scared silly of walking onstage in the school Halloween parade by myself, David breaking away from his class to join me, him saying “Don’t worry, I got you”, the love and strength from his hand flowing intravenously into mine.

“You should see if the jeans and shirt still fit.” Rumeysa’s voice snapped me back into reality.

“The jeans will fit me until I’m twenty.”

“And the shirt?”

I put the flannel over my T-shirt and tried to button it, but noticed that now I couldn’t do it as easily as I could the year before.

“I think it shrank.”

“Or maybe you grew”. Rumeysa stared at my chest. She was right; a certain part of myself was definitely begging to be free. I then peered at her chest, which – despite her plump stomach – was as smooth as the fields outside my bedroom window. I suddenly felt heavy, clumsy, and uncool.

“You don’t have to button it.”

“I don’t think cowboys ever went unbuttoned.”



“Then do this.” She handed David’s vest to me and helped me into it. Thankfully, it was opaque enough to hide everything.

“You pull that off pretty well.”

“Thanks.” I exhaled with relief.

“Any other kids coming?”

“Remember my hospital aunt I told you about?” I stepped into the jeans and pulled the belt buckle as tightly as I could. “Her kids are coming. But just with their dad. He’s my only uncle.”

“Do they know?”

I stopped wrestling with the buckle. Her face was turned to the wall in shame, and I felt myself getting uncomfortably warm under my costume.

“I don’t think so.”

“Would they care?”

“No”. I lied, taking off David’s hat to cool my head down. I breathed in and out twice, holding it close to my frantic heart.

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It was like any typical Halloween party that we’d had in the past; music playing, bowls of candy planted in different rooms, paper pumpkins – made by my sister – taped to the windows. The dining room was packed with our neighbors and friends wearing what seemed to be an entire department store aisle’s worth of costumes, everything from the usual ghosts and goblins to characters from television.

“There you girls are!” My mother spotted us in the crowd. She herself was dressed as Glinda the Good Witch, to match my sister who was dressed as Dorothy. She fixed her eyes on me.

“Anna, is that David’s hat?”

“Yes, ma’am.” I rotated my head so she could see it clearly, and it seemed that she too was staring down the same ten-wheeler that had hit me earlier in my room.

“Why don’t you go join your cousins in the living room?”. She said, struggling to stay stoic.

I wanted to tell her that I would have rather joined David in a foxhole, but I shut up, and led Rumeysa to the living room, where sure enough, my cousins Raffi and Andy, and our neighbor’s daughter Carol were all crowded around the TV, watching *The Ed Sullivan Show*.

“Which ones are your cousins?”. Rumeysa asked. I jerked my thumb at the boys.

“Thing 1 and Thing 2”.

At this, Raffi and Andy turned around. They were identical twins, and on this night they wore matching white turtlenecks and red blazers.

“What are you guys supposed to be?” Rumeysa asked.

“Smothers Brothers.” Andy – the nicer of the two – gestured towards his costume, and then Raffi’s. “Can’t you tell?”.

“Not really. You just look like..... little men.”

I chuckled, in spite of myself. The boys, however, were not amused.

“Who are you, anyway?” Raffi squared up to her. Unlike Andy, who couldn’t seem to grow facial hair for his life, he had a brown mini-beard sprouting beneath his lower lip. Little man, indeed.

“This is my friend Rumeysa.” I found myself clearing my dry throat to say.

“She’s their helper.” Carol, who was dressed as a princess, replied without looking away from the TV.

“Oh, yeah.” Raffi’s face shone with a sly sneer – which I knew, from years of being related to him, never preceded anything good.

“I remember now.” Andy grinned.

Suddenly, the confidence I had known Rumeysa for was nowhere in sight. She seemed to wilt under the boys’ gaze, and I felt a fiery engine revving in my soul.

“Go get us some punch.” Raffi shoved Rumeysa, and she stumbled back. I caught her, then faced my cousin.

“Did you say you wanted ‘punch’, Raffi?” I hovered over him, rolling up my sleeve. Raffi, suddenly cowed, backed away from Rumeysa.

“I’ll go get it myself.”

“Yeah, same.” Carol rose to follow him, and so did Andy, leaving Rumeysa and I alone to deal with the stickiness of what had happened. She sat on the floor, catatonically twirling an unraveled string on our rug.

“You hungry?”

“I’m alright.” She mumbled, but her grumbling stomach suggested otherwise.

“I’ll get you something.”

I got up and headed towards the dining room. The table was fit for a medieval banquet, decked out with an overwhelming spread that

included Oreo and licorice “spiders”, macaroni and cheese, baked ham, zaatar bread that Christine had cut into ghost shapes with a cookie-cutter, and two fruit and veggie trays made to look like fingers and eyes. As I was loading up a paper plate for Rumeysa, I overheard Mama talking in the kitchen with Uncle Sevan. He wore a vampire cape and a bit of gray paint in his beard, but it was the frown on his face while talking to Mama that truly completed the look.

“..... let her eat at your table, work in your fields, take your money....” Somehow, my uncle managed to be loud and irritating even when he was trying to speak calmly. “I just don’t understand how you think it’s nothing.”

“Because it is nothing, Sevan.”

“You’ve never been a part of the crowd, have you? Even when we were kids.”

“I’ve never been –” Mama’s voice was getting wet and frightened. – a part of anything.”

“Turning your back on us doesn’t work in your favor.”

“So you would turn your back on a child?”

“Jesus, Siroun, if you flew any more against the wind, you’d be Buddy Holly’s pilot.”

“I think everyone could use a little mercy right now.”

“Like *they* gave to us? Or like David’s giving to the Vietnamese?”

“That’s completely different from what you’re talking about.”

“Not that different.”

“David could use some mercy, too.”

“For what? What do you think he’s doing there? Playing cards?”

“If it makes you feel better, we didn’t want him to go. He especially didn’t.”

“Doesn’t matter. To the people there, he might as well be Johnson himself. All of us might as well be.”

“And you think that’s right.”

“I’m not saying it’s right. I’m saying it just is.”

I must have been there for at least five minutes before they noticed me. My mom’s hand flew dramatically to her chest.

“Anna! You scared me!”

“Me, too!” Uncle Sevan imitated her, comedically grabbing himself. He slapped me on the shoulder a little harder than needed to.

“Hey, kid! I hear you have a....” He stopped, visibly combing through his mind for the right words. “.....new helper?”

“Yes, sir. We do.”

“I’ve heard so much about her.”

“Have you?”

My mother, sensing my annoyance, gripped my arm.

“Why don’t you go take your food back into the living room, Anna?”

“It’s not *my* food. It’s for Rumeysa.”

“Your *Rumeysa* —” Uncle Sevan cut her name into ragged pieces, “--can’t make her own plate? Does she have hands?”

“Sure she does, Uncle Sevan. She’s just allergic to annoying old men.”

“Anna Melineh!” My first and middle name screeched like tires out of my mother’s mouth. My heart dropped into my belly, and I could see Uncle Sevan internally cheering. So were his sons, who had heard the commotion and were standing in the hall.

“Anna’s gonna get it.” Raffi jeered, sticking his tongue out at me.

“No, she won’t.” Uncle Sevan jeered himself, and I saw all the fight go out of my mother like air from an old balloon. The good thing to do would have been to apologize, to hold and comfort her – the way she had done so many times to me. But I didn’t want to be good; I wanted to be right.

“Go upstairs and come back when you’re ready to act like a human.” She used her last bit of energy to bark at me.

“You don’t have to talk to me like that.”

“Why shouldn’t I?”

“I’m not Christine.”

“Even Christine wouldn’t do this.”

I could have said or done something to help my case, but any logic and reason I might have had evaporated from me. I ran out the back door right before slamming it, and didn’t stop until I reached the pond, where I finally sat down to rest on a long, fat log. The night was chilly, and filled with the dainty whirr of cicadas in the distance, which helped me tune out my mind – for several minutes, anyway.

“Anna?”. Rumeysa’s voice floated from far behind me in the dark. I heard her walking, and felt her take a seat next to me on the log. I didn’t say anything back. Instead, I focused my eyes on the row of trees

that surrounded the pond. Something overtook me, and I began to shiver.

“Anna, are you okay?”

I tried to answer, but my brain-to-lips pipeline was suddenly clogged. A massive void was beginning to open up inside me, like the middle of a zero – or many of them, tattooed into textbooks and teachings, with echoes too deafening to ignore.

Rumeysa lay her head, sweaty from her witch’s hat, on my shoulder. The wind swirled around us, pushing our hair into each other’s faces like a question.

# A Poem for Tom Reed

*Madison Reed*

My father is a like a broken trophy.  
An eagle scout award, a law degree, a bachelors of science  
A body full of countless accolades  
But at what cost?

My father is like a broken trophy  
A couple rounds of chemo  
A few replacements of the knee and hip  
Countless doctors appointments

My father is like a broken trophy.  
All polished and smiling,  
Proudly wearing scars and scratches of both past and present

My father is like a broken trophy  
Constantly aching and in agony  
Yet representing a bigger achievement,  
Survival against the odds.

# **My Little Sanctuary**

*Ricky Whipple*

At times I find myself desiring  
A secret chamber underground  
My mind races and plots, conspiring  
While dreams of comfort are abound

Within my house a hidden door  
Within a plain, ordinary wall  
Passcode inserted, "Mind is sore,"  
And away the illusion will fall

Small elevator, bright and keen  
Passing through the rift between  
The harsh world I know  
And the pleasant escape below

Lone corridor, without sound  
Except the white noise all around  
Only step into the room  
No more the pressure shall loom

Bed and desk, neatly made  
Game console for my aid  
I take a rest with pure delight  
Free from the gaze of society's spite

## Manic Pixie Dream Slut (Spoken Word)

*Finnegan Ross*

Men say they want a girl with colored hair and a quirky **look**. But  
let's be honest; what you really want is a manic pixie dream **slut**.

A broken mysterious, and wild girl who you can **fuck**.

But that's ok because you're not like the other **guys**; you're one of  
the "**good**" ones.

You tell her she's pretty, and you hold open the door,  
but when she doesn't beg for your **cock** like a good little **whore**,  
**you** call her a stuck-up bitch who led you on.

Men say they want a "**crazy**" girl. Yet when she's holding a razor  
and bleeding on the floor, **you** tell all your friends you love her,  
but she lied about her **disorders**.

**You** say **she** was in the wrong. **You** tell others **she** was the crazy ex.  
When in reality, **you were the one who begged and coerced her  
into sex**.



## **Under the Oak with Girl**

*Alyssa Barile*

“I want to write about permanence.”  
She tells me this under an oak  
that has lived thousands of lives before us.

Watching, the sap drips down the divots, girl sits next to me,  
unknowing.  
And I am unknowing in a different way than she.  
We are living simultaneous, not cohesive  
I get nervous.

I try to focus, her words feel geometric.  
The sap is almost to her hair,  
but I cannot understand that she is trying to tell me something  
subtle.

Like a plane overhead her words fly.  
Her hair is sticky now, I cringe.  
Sap makes me uncomfortable in a way I cannot fathom.  
Our relationship is funny like that,  
and now I am expected to respond.

# Capturing Realities through Tainted Memory in *Maus*: Authenticity of Women's Stories From the Holocaust As Told By a Male Survivor

Raffaella Vogt

Images encapsulate the essence of life, taking a moment in time and freezing the deep feelings and memories within it. There is a strong correlation between images and their compositions in relation to provoking emotions and thoughts within the viewer. *Maus* by Art Spiegelman does exactly that, presenting an emotional and intense retelling of the Holocaust through the lens of a survivor. Throughout this retelling, the characters of the story, specifically the women, have their stories told for them, and their voices claimed by Vladek. As a result of this multi-character story being told by a singular man, the female characters have their stories silenced and repainted through a masculine perspective and interpretation of their lives. Vladek's descriptions of the women as vulnerable and overdramatic affects the outcome of *Maus* as a visual narrative, erasing the stories of Lucia, Mala, and Anja, painting them only as how Vladek saw them, not as how they truly were.

Most of the narrative of *Maus* centers around flashbacks, visually taking us back into Vladek's memory to accompany his verbal recountings. *Maus*, as a narrative, demands "intensive reader participation through 'closure,'" that Scott McCloud, in his fundamental book, *Understanding Comics*, argues differentiates comics from other narrative forms (Mandaville 223)(McCloud). This intense participation effectively brings the reader into the emotions of the Vladek's memories. Within these memories and flashbacks, we get a glimpse of all of Vladek's family members, including his first wife Anja. Anja is introduced to the reader as a rebellious young woman from a wealthy Polish family. Amongst the female characters in *Maus*, there is very little variation in their designs. The men wear hats and have changes in outfits such as jackets, scarves, and suits while the women remain in the same outfit throughout the narrative.



Fig. 1, Anja's family meeting Vladek, *Maus* (p.g. 22), Art Spiegelman

In figure one, the women are shaded out by hash marks, as they are not pertinent to the scene and should draw the attention of the viewer to the men in the room. These women are both wearing dresses and are not distinguished by any distinct facial features such as wrinkles or glasses like the men. Anja, one of the three central female characters in *Maus*, is the only woman who is distinguished from the others. Both her design and dialogue differ from the other female characters that surround her. She is portrayed as “incredibly clever, from a rich family... a very good girl...”, which makes her stand out from most of the other one dimensional female characters (*Maus* 15). She has high standings of “wealth, social class, and education...” making it clear that she is the obvious choice for Vladek to focus his attention on (Kinney 44). The introduction of Anja's character in this manner sets the standard and perspective that Vladek holds to women, which is integral to interpreting his perspective.

Physical traits and status aside, the women in *Maus* are visually and textually portrayed as weak and as obstacles to Vladek and other male characters in the story. The women in Vladek's world, especially Lucia and his current wife Mala, are portrayed as stressors in his life. They are drastically different from Anja, with her being the only woman out of the three who is held highly in his memory- like an idol. Lucia, who is the first of the three women in Vladek's life to be introduced, is painted as melodramatic and clingy.



Fig 2., Lucia begging Vladek to take her back upon meeting him Anja, *Maus* (p.g. 20), Art Spiegelman

In figure two, Lucia begs Vladek not to leave her for the better option, that option being Anja. Lucia, out of the three women, is the more stereotypically dramatic and “needy woman” in her actions towards Vladek. This facet of her personality and the resulting mannerisms caused Vladek to push her away and cast her aside (*Maus* 20). Mala, the third and last love interest in Vladek’s life, is portrayed as a woman he had to settle for in the end after losing Anja. In between the interviews with Art and his father, Art and Mala share conversations and talk about his father’s issues. Mala repeats constantly that “He’s more attached to people!” and that he’s stingy with his money (*Maus* 93) Through their lovers' quarrels, we also learn that Vladek has photos of Anja all around his desk “like a shrine” (*Maus* 104). By incorporating all of the different voices of these women, it is evident how Vladek views the women in his life and the world around him, and how that somewhat negative view is held by Art as well.

Spiegelman introduces a vital piece of information through a style that differs from what we’ve become used to. *Prisoner on Hell Planet*, a comic illustrated by Spiegelman in 1972 is interjected into the story of *Maus* as a creation of the in-world character of Art Spiegelman. The comic details the story of Spiegelman’s mother’s suicide and the reactions of himself and his father to it. Instead of the simplistic cartoon style with simple hatching and similar lines, the visuals shift to

blackened backgrounds with realistic forms shaded by messy, circular lines that feel claustrophobic (See Fig. 2).



Fig. 2, Art grieving his dead mother, *Maus* (p.g. 103), Art Spiegelman

The placement of panels on this specific page aid the viewer in understanding Art's mental state concerning the memories of his mother's suicide. Above him in the center panel is "the figure of his mother's naked corpse in blood-filled water" with phrases that are

“intrusive and violent” scrawled across the image (Ricks 85) (Spiegelman 103). Below his mother are the dead bodies of Jews killed in the Holocaust, visually establishing how the Holocaust and his mother’s suicide are synonymous in his mind (Spiegelman 103).

Aside from showing Art’s memories and how they are affected by this event, the comic breaks the fourth wall. It exposes the viewer to the true reality and underlying issues of the Spiegelman family’s dynamic and collective familial trauma. We get a new perspective on the outcome of the otherwise hidden mental health issues of Anja and the toll put on her by the Holocaust. The inclusion of such a starkly different piece of media has more intention behind it than just telling the story of Anja’s suicide. Elmwood raises the point that “Spiegelman himself is too traumatized by Anja’s suicide to incorporate her voice into *Maus*” opting to insert this visually drastic and complex comic into his rather visually simple narrative (Elmwood 2). By introducing *Prisoner on Hell Planet*, Art Spiegelman is connecting his own trauma to that of his character in the world of *Maus*. This also establishes a link between the Holocaust and its effects on those who survived it.

Throughout the narrative of *Maus*, both visually and textually, we see the deterioration of Anja as the ideal woman and the expectations set upon her. Most of Art’s memories of his mother were told through conversations with his father and his war-tainted memory shown in *Prisoner on Hell Planet*. Anja and her “...missing story are central to this text’s attempts to negotiate narration of what is lost to representation, but, in the postmodern excitement over ‘gaps,’ which find convenient and popular equivalents in the gutter of comics...” her absence quite literally being the blank spaces between panels (Mandaville 220). Much of the latter half of *Maus 1* consists of Art trying to recover his mother’s journals from the war to retell her story truthfully. Scholars have interpreted his father’s burning of Anja’s journals as “a mother abandonment motif” and as “an example of the violent pervasive effects of structural sexism...” that have managed to seep into the minds of Vladek and Art (Mandaville 219). With the only true version of Anja’s story existing in Vladek’s memory, *Maus* as a narrative serves to reconstruct “a space to register the silence resulting from the destruction of that body and story...” referring to Anja (Mandaville 219). Through his retellings of the lives of these three women, Vladek inherently presents a one-dimensional view of women in the Holocaust and paints

a sort of caricature of their lives (Kinney 42). Vladek's retelling of the women as vulnerable and overly dramatic affects the outcome of *Maus* as a visual narrative, painting them only as how Vladek saw them, erasing their individuality and legacies.

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## Dirty Bong Water

*Finnegan Ross*

Being a loser at 23 is a lot like being a depressed 13-year-old despite the 10-year gap. You still can't drive, you're still struggling in school, and you still sleep in your childhood bedroom surrounded by posters you taped up at midnight on a sleepless school night. The bed sheets may have changed, but the mattress below has been stained with age and ash. Clothes, a mix of somewhat clean and mostly dirty, are still scattered across the floor. However, instead of school socks and training bras, it's red thongs and see-through tops. And even after ten years, you still feel lost and broken. The tears that were shed into pillows over math tests, mean girls, and boys are now squeezed out in between smoke-filled coughs and hacks. You still want to die, but instead of taking matters into your own scarred hands, you just hope whatever is living in your bacteria-filled bong water will get to you first.

As a 23-year-old loser, I sit in my bra and dirty pajama bottoms, surrounded by memorabilia from fandoms that no longer exist. The posters from anime and bands that are now problematic have started to peel off my walls, bringing the old tattered paper with them. I spend my Saturdays smoking shit weed in my childhood bedroom, hoping to get a text back from people who aren't really my friends so I have something else to do than wallow in my own questionable life choices.

I've fried my brain until I was numb just to ignore the fact I am past my expiration date. And all I do is complain. I do it as a way to hide how scared I actually am. I'm scared of driving, I'm scared of failing, and I'm scared of growing up. But I am grown up, and that's the problem. I am the problem because I'm no longer 13, and yet I'm still crying over math tests, mean girls, and boys. I am nothing but a 23-year-old loser with a fear of everything, trying to drown myself in my dirty bong water.





**Paper Hat**  
*Kale Kimble-Lee*

