

# Prairie Ink

A literary Annual



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“There is a way to see inside by looking directly through to seed or marrow.”

-Joan Halifax

## **From the Editor**

Dear Readers,

We are emotional creatures who are more often governed by those deep-seated urges that are a part of the human experience than we are by the logic and reason we would sometimes prefer. These emotions can be overpowering and life-destroying. Grief and loss are, in particular, very real emotions that can change our lives permanently and drastically. The ethereal language of art can help us process these emotions as we struggle putting words to thoughts too deep for our ability to express. As we lose ourselves in that liminal space between reality and dream, art allows us to explore our inner-selves, to give voice to the unspeakable, and to impress ourselves on the world.

This edition has been an excellent follow up to last year’s greatest hits edition and includes submissions from several members of our writing workshop. We are pleased to see the work they’ve put into their art bear fruit as they share with the larger community. We are grateful for their contributions and look forward to another year of excellence as we strive to serve the voices of our community.

-Scott A. McDonald, Editor

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## Contents

### **Kansas Day**

Theresa Smith Fryberger.....Cover

### **Invisible Losses**

Anne Schiller .....Page 4

### **Empty Rooms & His Boots**

Mary Ellen Schinstock .....Page 6

### **Gone Fishing**

Mary Ellen Schinstock .....Page 7

### **A Red Day**

Darren L. Ivey .....Page 8

### **Morning Light Through the Oak**

Theresa Smith Fryberger.....Page 23

### **Wellspring of Creativity**

Esther Saylor .....Page 24

### **Fawn of Summer**

Samuel Steele .....Page 26

### **Nothing Left Now**

Rylie Fairbank .....Page 28

### **Broken Joy**

Anne Schiller .....Page 29

### **Abandoned Leaf**

Theresa Smith Fryberger.....Page 31

### **The Last Great Battle**

A. C. Smith .....Page 32

### **Rx Sunshine**

Kate Fiala .....Page 43

### **Puzzle Piece**

Rylie Fairbank .....Page 44

### **A Boost Up**

Mary Ellen Schinstock .....Page 45

# **Invisible Losses**

By Anne Schiller

Invisible – my injuries are invisible. My flesh is visible: it looks fine, just like everyone else's. Two legs walking around. Two hands gardening, writing, and shopping. Two eyes watching traffic, watching TV, watching people.

Why do they not see?

I lost one leg years ago—suddenly and unexpectedly amputated from my body. No one saw the gory mess. They did not want to. Some cast a quick glance. Others asked me to walk with them, ride a bike with them, be strong. None of them wanted to look.

Over time, after years of multiple bandages with years of trial and error prosthesis, I learned to manage, kind of manage, without that leg. My full attention was poured into my remaining leg. Keeping it strong, making sure to take very good care of it. I needed this surviving leg, for without it I could not stand. The leg needed me, too. With its twin now gone, it needed me. To navigate and to accept this life with a plastic imposter for the flesh and bone once there.

Invisible. No one could see the missing leg—only me.

Only the surviving leg and me.

Time filled some gaps. The surviving leg and I grew into a cadence. We could march together without much of a limp. A few stumbles, but we were managing quite well.

Then, it happened.

The explosion of flames and smoke.

The remaining leg was severed.

How can they not see?



Only oozing stumps remain.

Memories of once healthy, vibrant legs.

Memories of once thriving, living sons.

Legs that can never grow back.

Sons that will never grow older.

Loss.

One grave covered in grass; the other in fresh-dug black dirt.

Sons, who can only speak in dreams.

Those dressed in black murmur words and walk away.

My heart, a pile of bloody guts in my hands.

They won't see.

## **Empty Rooms**

By Mary Ellen Schinstock

From Room to room I go walking  
I hear people on the TV talking.  
That's the only sound I hear  
In empty rooms once full of cheer.  
I call your name but you're not there  
Oh, Lord, the pain's so hard to bear.  
Your pictures and your memory's here  
In empty rooms once full of cheer.  
I'll never understand just why  
God held your hand and let you die  
But left me all alone right here  
In empty rooms once full of cheer.

## **His Boots**

By Mary Ellen Schinstock

His boots still sit in that same old spot right behind the door.  
The same old beat and battered pair that he always wore.  
The saddle is on the rack and the bridle's hung on the horn.  
The pad is stained by many miles and the seams are worn and torn.  
His spurs are hanging on a nail, the rope is in the can.  
And his old horse is standing there, just waiting for the man.  
And here am I, gazing at the stone resting just above his head  
Wishing I had at least ten more years to hold his hand instead



Gone Fishing by Mary Ellen Schinstock

# A Red Day

By Darren L. Ivey

A Sword & Sorcery Tale in the Style of Robert E. Howard, Lin Carter,  
Michael Moorcock, and Others

*... Harken, my lords and ladies, while I sing to you tales of the Tyeth Dá Dennen, the chosen people of Sovereign. Of their shining kingdoms of Feloes, Giries, Myroes, Fonoes, Canáiol Dubéon, Meanmeogh, and Sláoba Firmeola. Cities that were lights of civilization and law amongst the darkness of chaos and savagery. And hither came Lémfede the Mangod, an immortal champion, a warrior, a protector. Destined to forever march in war against his nation's foes and pull them down in utter ruin.*

At the point where the borders of the Seven Kingdoms met, the granite monolith of Etheir Tor rose some fourteen hundred feet above the Plains of Telemh Gaellte. Known to the *Tyeth Dá Dennen* as a holy mountain forbidden to mortal men, the sheer faces and risk of falling offered yet more disincentives to would-be climbers. In the millennia the mountain had watched over the world, only one, who was more than a man, had ascended to the peak. His name was Lémfede.

Five hours he spent scaling the north face of Etheir Tor, his questing fingers and toes finding small purchases on the rock. Three times he halted and rested while increasingly cold winds buffeted him. Behind, a massive thunderstorm was approaching in the distance. Finally, as the sky grew dark and the lightning began to flash, he dragged himself over the edge of the cliff. He rose and beheld the Tree.

Situated on the plateau that was the top of the mountain, the Tree towered sixty feet above him. Its large crown of rugged branches was laden



with emerald-green leaves and golden acorns. The light- to medium-gray bark was moderately ridged and furrowed with veins of gold pulsating in waves within the surface.

The Tree was surrounded by a wide sward of green grass, and when Lémfede stepped onto the lush turf, the sounds and precipitation of the storm ceased. All around the mountain, heavy rains lashed the earth, lightning streaked through the sky, and thunder boomed across the plains. In the presence of the Tree, though, Lémfede heard and felt none of this. Instead, he was bathed in gentle sunlight, felt only a soft, cool breeze upon his skin, and heard only silence. Not a foreboding hush of dread, but, rather, a quiet of peace and serenity. Lémfede had traveled one thousand leagues to look upon the Tree, and he felt an inner delight as he drank the refreshing stillness deep into his soul.

As he stood and patiently waited, Lémfede seemed a heroic figure taken from ancient mythology. He stood six inches above six feet with broad shoulders, deep chest, slim waist, and mighty thews. His face was bold and strong-boned with a close-cropped beard. He wore a simple, short-sleeved tunic that reached to mid-thigh. His boots, armor, weapons, and other accoutrements had been left at the base of Etheir Tor where his horse was sheltered in a rock outcropping that formed a natural corral.

After a time, a Voice emanated from the very air: *You have fulfilled my commandment.*

“Aye, Lord,” Lémfede answered in his own deep bass. “The blasphemy of Aicheod the Necromancer hath ended, his bloodstained altar is broken, and he dwells no more in the Hidden Tower. The wyrm Draka no longer troubles the hills of Hairit, and the people of the land harken to the words of Sovereign.”

Lémfede’s long journey to complete his mission had not been uneventful. As his actions in these other matters were incidental to the task at hand, Lémfede left unspoken why the brigands ceased to raid the merchant

caravans on the High Road, or how assassins had failed to murder King Perthilín, or what extraordinary secret the spy Casseor had shared in return for rescuing her soul from the sorcerer Belir's iron-bound mirror. Sovereign already knew of these, and, in any case, they were of lesser significance.

The Voice of the Unseen God spoke once more in deep, calm, bell-like tones: *Harken, faithful servant, this is My commandment which I deliver unto thee.*

Lémfede bowed his head and said, "Command me, Master."

*To the south lies the lands of the Tówzóytur, the Sea People, and long have I watched them grow in wickedness. A great chieftain has risen among them and gathered the warbands of nine tribes into an army. This new leader is called Narthys. You have heard of her?*

"Aye, Master. She is said to be a fearsome fighter who wears a cloak of human skin flayed from the living bodies of her enemies," Lémfede replied.

*She has assembled this mighty host for a single purpose, to destroy My people. I wish you to journey to the Sonenn River and do battle with those who seek to cross the bridge and attack the southern marches.*

"I shall destroy them, my Lord," Lémfede said.

*Beware of overconfidence, My son. Narthys and her shaman have made an unholy pact with dwellers of the Old Night. Their mad ambition and lust for power has led them to seek to overthrow the elemental forces of nature that sustain this plane of existence amidst Space and Time. Their abominations have soiled the very face of this world. Always before, you have gone where I have commanded. Now, you must decide your path. If you meet them, despite the many gifts which I have granted, you will endure great punishment at the hands of the Tówzóyturans. You may be slain. Your body may not only perish, but your immortal soul may be torn from you and cast into echoing gulfs hidden beyond the stars to become a demon's plaything.*

Lémfede knew that beyond the ring of light surrounding his world were night-dark realms unguessed by mortal men. In these Outer Voids of cosmic foulness lurked formless shadows—terrors which could be summoned to take on flesh and crush and slay at the bidding of evil sorcerers. If Narthys was trafficking with these ageless fiends, then she was a foe that needed vanquishing.

*The mark of great and wondrous deeds is upon My people. Mighty happenings are growing in the web of Fate, and one blood-maddened mortal shall not impede the road of destiny. What say you?*

Lémfede stood thinking of all his master had said, while the world seemed to pause for a moment, and the fate of seven kingdoms, and three more yet unborn, hung in the balance. At last, he said, “Lord, send me.”

*Touch the Tree.*

Lémfede stretched out his right arm and gently placed his fingertips on the bark. At once, his senses swam as a delightful coolness enwrapped every fiber of his being. His skin tingled as Sovereign cleansed and renewed every muscle and every sinew, every organ, every bone, and every nerve in his mighty frame. For even though Lémfede would never die of old age or sickness, he had occasionally known fatigue of the flesh and of the spirit since undertaking his sacred charge those long centuries ago. The weariness of a never-ending task faded away and was replaced by a restored, heady strength and a reinvigorated determination.

*If you survive, come again to Me here. Once your body is hale, you will then journey to the land of the Tówzóyturans. There you will confront Narthys and her shaman. Fare thee well, My son.*

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The Sonenn River formed the southern border of the *Tyeth Dá* kingdom of Feloes. Spanning that broad, deep channel was a massive stone arch bridge

wide enough to allow two wagons to cross abreast of one another. The solidly-built structure was beyond the capabilities of the *Tyeth Dá*, or any other living tribe, to duplicate; indeed, most believed it to have been constructed by the Old Race. On this day, Meder, a young warrior oath-sworn to the House of Degde, guarded the bridge. As the sun rose above the horizon, he was four turns of the glass into his watch, and his thoughts were of the roast pork and tankard of heather ale that awaited him when he returned to his lord's fasthold. Suddenly, his reverie was interrupted by the sounds of a galloping horse approaching on the north road. Topping the gentle rise, the rider charged down the slope, his right hand open and raised above his head to signal his peaceful intentions.

Drawing up in a cloud of dust, the stranger spoke in a resonant voice, "Warrior, the Tówzóyturans are marching! A warband will soon be upon this place. Ride you to your lord's hall and warn him. Have him send riders to the neighboring holds to gather men and come to this place!"

Meder only stared at the newcomer, marveling at his size without fully comprehending his words. "What? What is this you speak?" the young warrior asked.

"There is no time," the stranger said. "Another larger army is marching on Canáiol Dubéon, but High King Dalbéath is alerted to their presence. The Sea People hope to keep his gaze there, while the smaller force crosses the river and crushes Dalbéath between the two wings."

"What is your name, as my lord will ask?"

The mangod, for the stranger was he, had spent centuries traveling under a wide variety of false names, but, today, something made him say, "Lémfede."

Meder started and then said, "Well, you are well-named if you seek to hold off a warband of the Tówzóytur. Only our greatest hero could

accomplish such a feat.”

Go, now! Ride swiftly!” And such was the ring of command in the stranger’s voice that Meder was fully two leagues away before he could begin to wonder if he was right in leaving his post.

Lémfede watched the youngster kick his horse into a gallop, then turned to the bridge. He crossed over the river and knelt down at the southern end of the stone structure. With his dagger point, he swiftly drew in the dirt an intricate Symbol that glowed briefly once he was finished. He returned to the other side, took some of the firewood Meder and his fellow river-guards had gathered, and arranged them into a small pile. Placing his hand atop the wood, he spoke a Word, and the sticks were instantly alight, the flames displaying a greenish hue near their base. He next proceeded to don his armor and look to his weapons.

Completing his preparations, he sat down near the fire. Chewing on a strip of dried beef, Lémfede waited and remembered the day he had died.

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Three thousand years before, he had led eight hundred warriors against the savage Fimioran tribes at the Pass of Belgeten in what became the kingdom of Myroes. Outnumbered three to one, the *Tyeth Dá* were victorious in the battle but at great cost. The Painted People, called such because of their intricate body tattoos of woad and ocher, had been unwilling to surrender and fought to the last. More than half of the *Tyeth Dá* host had fallen, including their general. Sprawled on the field, surrounded by the mangled corpses of men he had killed, Lémfede was dying. He stared dizzily at the abundance of devastation that lay before him. From one slope to the other, the dead were strewn in a gory mantle that choked the pass. As his lifeblood spilled onto the ground and his vision faded, he first heard the Voice of Sovereign.

*Lémfede, My son, said the One Above All. You have been a faithful servant of My people. The need for your sword arm hath not yet ended. Will you serve*

*Me still?*

“Yes, Lord, I will serve you always,” Lémfede had whispered.

*I can promise you naught but a long life of hardship. You will know hunger and thirst, strife and sacrifice, and loneliness and pain. You will spurn hearth and kin to serve Me and My people. Will you accept this burden?*

“Yes, Lord, I will do so gladly.”

Lémfede then saw only blackness until he woke beneath The Tree. His mortal wounds had been healed, and Sovereign had accorded him greater powers of body and mind than those of ordinary men. He was similarly granted knowledge of facets of reality veiled to mortal minds, of the worlds beyond worlds, and of the eternities within and without eternities.

Before the battle at Belgeten Pass, the *Tyeth Dá* had been a tribal confederation of nomadic herdsman who had wandered out of the Far North. Lémfede’s victory had secured them a place among the great realms of the continent. For the following three thousand years, his people grew strong and wealthy on the basis of their prowess in war and trade, and they founded seven glittering kingdoms of stone and iron. During this time, Lémfede had labored unseen and unsung while doing Sovereign’s bidding and protecting the *Tyeth Dá* nation from her many foes. Never had he regretted his decision.

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The sun was not yet in its zenith when he heard the enemy approaching. Lémfede extinguished the fire and gazed once more upon his beloved land. The waving, waist-high heather stretched for leagues in three directions under a bright sun while soft white clouds drifted across the blue sky. In the far distance to the west, he could see the hazy, snow-capped mountains. He turned and strode to the bridge.

When the Tówzóyturan vanguard reached the river bank, they beheld a single warrior standing in the center of the two thousand-foot-long stone span. He wore a plain helmet without crest or other markings, laminar armor, and greaves. Sheathed at his left hip was a long, straight broadsword, and strapped to his left arm was a round, iron-bound oaken shield. In his right hand, the warrior held a slim and graceful axe with a slightly-curved three-foot oaken shaft, a single-edged blade, and a short spike on the back and another on the top of the head.

Ettir, the captain of the vanguard, was wary of a trap as one man could not possibly hope to stand for long. Without doubt, he believed there were others. Cursing the delay that would surely displease his mistress, Ettir swaggered out to meet Lémfede. He was followed by fifty men clad in fur and iron, and, as they stepped onto the bridge, each of them walked across some faint lines in the dirt.

“Good morrow,” Lémfede politely greeted the invaders. “A fine day, is it not?”

Ettir roughly answered, “Aye, a fine day to wet our swords. Do you come to beg for mercy, or do you seek your death?”

“I see the Sea People are as churlish as ever, but one cannot expect good manners from swine,” Lémfede responded. The exchanging of insults between enemies prior to battle was a tradition of long standing.

“Swine!?! Why, you miserable whoreson. I am Ettir of the Raydegne tribe. Many are the men who have tasted my blade. I will surely feed you to the crows simply for wasting the time of a mighty warrior such as I,” the Tówzóyturan captain snarled.

“I have already forgotten your name, and the mightiest portion of you ran down the leg of the bitch who whelped you,” Lémfede retorted. The insults sailed back and forth for a time, growing in equal measures of imagination and scorn. For his part, Lémfede delayed so as to give Lord Degde time to

gather his warbands, but he also wanted to finish the fight before nightfall. Finally, glancing at the sun, Lémfede abruptly said, “Enough! The lands of the Sword People are not for scum such as you. Depart or die here. I have spoken.”

The Tówzóyturan sneered, “You fool! There are a thousand warriors at my back. Our mistress has delivered our foes into our hands! You, one man alone, cannot hope to stop us. And, after we kill you, we will kill all your menfolk, rape your women, and enslave your children. Today will see the last of the *Tyeth Dá Dennen*.”

“Then let us begin,” Lémfede replied, and his left hand sketched a curious gesture above his head. Instantly, the air was rent by a flash of green eldritch energy and a booming thunderclap of sound. Drawn up before the bridge, the Tówzóyturan host opened their eyes, all of which had involuntarily closed, to behold their fifty-one brethren now lying on the bridge in smoking heaps. Every one of the dead had crossed the Symbol Lémfede had drawn in the dirt.

Lémfede looked at those closest to the bridge, wolfishly smiled, and asked, “Who dies next?”

Having seen the fate of their comrades and fearing the obvious Sorcery, the Tówzóyturans were hesitant to step onto the bridge at first until a few hardy souls grimly moved forward. Shamed by their courageous example, more joined them. The Power of the ward Lémfede had used to dispatch the vanguard was spent, and, with a tigerish leap, the mangod bounded forward and landed amongst their corpses. There, anyone advancing would have to move around or over the bodies and so could not easily charge the *Tyeth Dá* warrior.

With wild cries, the barbarian invaders dashed forward, and the bravest warrior, or the one most foolhardy, ran to kill Lémfede with one mighty



blow. Instead, he miscalculated the reflexes of the mangod, and a quick swipe of the axe threw a bloody travesty of a man against the legs of the attackers. Lémfede sprang forward, and his weapon felled an enemy with a severed shoulder, and a third terrible swing crushed the skull of another. Swords, axes, and spears cruelly swished the air about him or rebounded from his armor as the mangod moved in a blur of dazzling speed. He leaped, shifted, and dodged, never offering a stationary target while his axe wove a whirlwind of steel that left dead and dying men in its wake. A hideously-scarred Tówzóyturan went down with a cleft skull before he could bring his weapon to bear. Lémfede caught the sword of another on his shield and struck once more, slashing through chainmail hauberk, ribs, and spine. Shouting men were pressing forward on three sides, and in their midst the lone *Tyeth Dá* silently hewed left and right. Swords rose and fell, and the great axe flashed among them like lightning. From one side, a tall warrior dashed in, swinging a longsword. From the other, a long-haired tribesman thrust with a spear. Lémfede evaded both weapons with an agile bound and swung his axe in a pendulum motion, forward and back. The tall man and his head flew in two separate directions, and the long-haired spearman dropped as the backswing hammered the axe's rear spike through his skull. Lémfede straightened, pounding his shield into the face of a man rushing him from the front; the iron spike jutting from the shield's central boss transformed the warrior's features into a red ruin. To the left, a Tówzóyturan was raising a two-handed sword over his head, intent on bringing it down on the halfgod's skull. Lémfede's arm flashed out, thrusting the top spike of his axe through the man's eye and into his brain. To the right, a warrior came with his own axe lifted, and Lémfede kicked out at his foe's knee, rending cartilage and tendons with a wet snap and the leg folded, sending the barbarian to the ground. The mangod then brained the fallen axe-man, ending his screams.

The clash and clangor of steel shook the stone bridge, and the crossing became littered with the twisted bodies of Tówzóyturan warriors. Their

snarling heads flew from drooping shoulders, their hearts were cloven in twain, their ribs were smashed into broken shards, and their entrails spilled at their feet. They slipped in puddles of gore, and in their scores, they fell to the swift-striking axe of the mangod. The dreadful strength and valor of Tówzóytur was the stuff of legends, but, even in their superior numbers, the sons of that land could not stand before the swiftness, the three thousand years of battle experience, and the deific might of the *Tyeth Dá* champion. Mere men could not long weather this storm of battle, no matter their courage, and, at last, the Tówzóyturans withdrew leaving behind the dead, the dying, and the wounded.

Lémfede walked back twenty paces from the scene of the slaughter he had wrought, leaned on his dripping axe, and watched as dumbfounded Tówzóyturans pulled bodies, living and dead, from the bridge, clearing a path. Despite his amazing vitality, he was slightly winded and took advantage of the respite to return to his camp for meat, bread, cheese, and wine. Resuming his earlier place, he ate and drank, and waited for the next attack.

Thrice more the Sea People rushed across the bridge, and thrice more the mangod killed them in great numbers. Lémfede abandoned his earlier silence and, his vision becoming clouded in a red mist of fury, shouted long-forgotten oaths and roared war songs that were thousands of years old. The fierce tribesmen swirled in, and Lémfede, like a living engine of destruction, smote and slew. His shield was splintered by murderous blows and flung into the grimacing faces of those striving to kill him. His harness was hacked to tatters and splashed with blood, his helmet dented, and he bore upon his arms, neck, and legs a plethora of bleeding wounds. At one point, an enraged warrior, thrusting his fellows aside in savage impatience, came plowing through the throng and swung his sword viciously at Lémfede's head. The halfgod ducked, and the blade glanced off the top of his helm as it

whistled through the air. Lémfede rose in a practiced flowing motion, struck a tremendous overhand blow, and his axe handle snapped even while the blade clove the man from shoulder to mid-breastbone. Wielding the remnants of the haft, he crushed the helm and head of another enemy, then progressed to wreak havoc with his broadsword. In the midst of the fourth charge, the Tówzóyturans abruptly pulled back and shrank away from the abomination suddenly stalking through their ranks.

The Thing was a great beast, covered in black fur, with a face semi-human yet demonic in aspect and utterly terrible. Its slanting head bore two close-set horns and a pair of wolfish ears, and the lipless mouth was filled with tiny pointed teeth. From its misshapen shoulders were four long, sinewy arms ending in slender fingers and curving, sickle-like talons, while its legs and cloven hooves resembled those of a goat. In its clawed hands, the monster carried two curved swords, a club, and a poniard. Lémfede grimly held his broadsword and his dagger and waited for the fiend to attack. No matter its ghastly form, he knew any fell being clothed in material flesh could be slain by earthly weapons.

The mangod and the Thing locked eyes, and the latter recoiled in sudden fright. “Aye, spawn of the Unnamable One,” Lémfede boomed. “You have peered beneath this worldly shell and looked upon my naked soul. Know you that I am a Servant of the Higher World, the Champion of Sovereign. Crawl back to the filthy hell from which Narthys summoned you.”

The infuriated creature growled and took a step forward. “Get thee down, foul one! Get thee down, lest I smite thee with the Secret Flame.” Lémfede raised his arms and spoke Words of Power in a long-dead tongue that crackled the very air and caused wisps of green fire to swirl about them.

Suddenly, the monster rushed forward swinging its weapons. Lémfede ceased his incantations, and their blades flashed appearing scarcely to contact before leaping apart only to touch once more. Even as the halfgod and

the demon continued to trade lightning-quick blows, they released their spirits from their corporeal bodies. Joined in battle, the two relentless etheric forms rose through misty voids of night and oblivion and fought across unlit oceans of Space and Time. To Lémfede, his essence had become a dense, coiling tendril of flickering sparks, while that of his foe was a rolling cloud of burning darkness. Although without limbs, they grappled together in bodiless combat as their struggles took them into a majestic cosmic ocean of blazing great stars.

Lémfede fought harder and more bitterly than he had on the bridge. Rather than physical strength, he opposed the demon with all of his iron will, his boundless courage, and his unshakeable faith. In incorporeal form, the waif of the Pits called upon the frozen fire of dark suns, which engulfed all life and sanity. Struck by those spectral blows, Lémfede faltered under the abysmal and blasphemous horrors that lurked in formless wells and lost realms of blackness. The same cosmic evil he had spent his long, long life opposing roused him to renewed fury, and he countered with fiery shafts of intolerable light. Locked in battle, the two drifted among the glittering stars until, suddenly, the disembodied demon stiffened and writhed as if in mortal pain. The monster shrieked soundlessly in a long and agonizing scream that shook the firmament, then the flaming Thing melted in Lémfede's grasp and disappeared. After the weary spirit of the mangod floated for a timeless moment, he returned to his earthly flesh on the bridge over the Sonenn River. There, Lémfede saw the results of the contest that had persisted even while the astral bodies of he and the fiend battled elsewhere. Two of the monster's arms had been severed, its head hung by shreds of sinew, and Lémfede's blade was sunk to the hilt in the creature's groin. In turn, Lémfede's chest and back had been raked mercilessly by the demon's talons, and its dagger had bit deep into his side.

Three Tówzóyturans in a line abreast, their overlapping shields held

high, charged forward and struck the dazed *Tyeth Dá*. Lémfede staggered back, but, keeping his feet and swiftly recovering his senses, he hammered the warrior to the left a terrific blow with his fist that dropped the man with a broken jaw, splintered teeth, and snapped neck. He seized the shield of the fighter in the center, slammed its rim into the man's face, and threw him, shield and all, off the bridge. Grasping the third warrior in his huge, scarred hands, Lémfede picked him up bodily, lifted him high in the air, and dashed him headlong into the stones underfoot. The fallen man lay still, his crumpled position hinting at broken limbs and a ruined spine.

“*Clíodhaemhsileos!* Hither to my hand!” he roared stretching forth his arm.

An emerald light pulsed the length of his sword from the pommel to the end of the blade as it emerged from the demon's back. Then, the weapon leaped from the corpse and flew to Lémfede. Even as the well-worn, leather-wrapped hilt slapped into his palm, the halfgod was pivoting smoothly, his sword sweeping in a figure eight that left two charging *Tówzóyturans* choking in their blood. Another went down with his skull split to the teeth, and a fourth with a quick slice through the great artery in his thigh. Lémfede knew, one way or the other, the end of the battle was nigh. Splattered from head to foot with reeking gore, he had already taken enough punishment to kill any ten ordinary men, and only his divinely-gifted vitality had saved him thus far. The blood-maddened horde of surviving barbarians threatened to drag him down in a mail-shod embrace of arms and legs while Lémfede's blade chanted its death-song. The din of flesh rending and bone snapping rose above the screams of pain and wrath, but the mangod's booming war cry drowned out all other sound as he gathered himself to leap amongst his foes, and to kill or die.

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As the sun fell, Meder rode beside Lord Degde across the heather at the head of the column of house-troops. He had been alternately praised and

rebuked for leaving his post to warn of the Tówzóyturans' surprise attack. His description of the strange but mighty warrior he had met was likewise greeted with interest or derision. Fortunately, High King Dalbéath and his army had smashed the main attack earlier in the day. Now, the result of Meder's own actions would be judged. He was turning to speak to his lord when he noticed the noblemen had gone pale and silent. Meder looked ahead and saw the bridge he had left hours before. The slashed and trampled dead lay as they had fallen. Their stiffening hands gripped the hilts of shattered swords and the hafts of shivered spears. Light from the fading sun stained their broken corselets and rent mail blood-red and partially obscured the gore that drenched the bridge in curdling pools. Slowly circling in the crimson sky were carrion birds, patiently awaiting their turn. Approaching the grisly scene, the *Tyeth Dá* saw additional bodies down below, thrown about the banks or floating lazily in the shallow eddies of the river. Downstream the water was stained scarlet, and more corpses were drifting with the current. "By Sovereign's favor, we are saved," Meder breathed in awe.

Lord Degde looked about him, and asked Meder in a hushed voice, "What was the name of the man you left here?"

"Lémfede, my lord," his oathman answered. Meder and other house-troops looked among the Tówzóyturans, but none of the heads thrown back in their death-throes belonged to the man they sought. The young warrior secretly feared he had fallen into the river and drowned under the weight of his armor.

"You may be correct, Meder. Surely this was done through Sovereign's favor. Lémfede, you say? I wonder ..."

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High atop the holy mountain of Etheir Tor grew a Tree of immense

proportions. Under its sheltering limbs and green leaves that rustled in the gentle breeze reclined a giant of a man. For weeks, he had lain there in the tranquil stillness recovering from grievous wounds that would have slain an ordinary mortal and from a heart troubled by deeds done on a red day of slaughter. At last, he opened his eyes and smoothly rose to his feet. Turning his gaze to the far distant south, he said in a strong, deep voice, “Lord, send me.”



Morning Light Through the Oak by Theresa Smith Fryberger

# Wellspring of Creativity

By Esther Sayler

In the forest primeval.  
Longfellow tells us of love—  
Of Evangeline in the murmuring pines.

In his ancient forest  
Tree branches reach out  
Touch their brothers  
Roots grow deep.  
Intertwine  
Tangle  
Towering, still-living beings—  
These trees—  
Harken to primeval times.  
Embody history.  
Guard centuries of existence.

From these trees  
Forests grow  
Flourish  
Inspire Longfellow—  
All of us really.

So, too,  
Our brain embodies  
A forest primeval.  
Neurons connect,  
Interlace, embrace  
Like ancient forests.





Caves, hollows,  
Pools of cells  
Cache histories,  
Store ancient memories.

Interlacing pictures, colors, shades  
Haunt the brain—  
The coo of turtle doves,  
Pounding of drums,  
The green scent of pine,  
These bits—  
These neurons  
See and stash  
Paint our history.  
Invite fantasy,  
Give a peek behind the curtain,  
Race along worn pathways.



Here, I think, is where creativity resides.  
In those ancient glades,  
The brain  
In forests of half-remembered events  
In neurons, branches, pathways,  
Scented with pine  
And flickering campfires.  
Here humans color the world  
Creativity stirs  
Murmurs primeval.

# **The Fawn of Summer**

By Samuel Steele

It was the first week of summer. I had just started my new job as a farmhand, waking early in the morning and going home late. The air was still crisp with the remnants of spring in the mornings and as I worked, the air would grow heavy in the evening. Although we were barely awake and functioning, the guys and I loaded up in the truck and set off. We had plenty to do and only so much cool air in the day to do it.

We were bouncing along in the pickup that day when we saw a doe, and her fawn. We slowed down, and as we rose over a hill, there they were, staring at us. As the truck screeched to a halt, I wondered what went through that doe's mind. In that instant, time froze for me and that doe. We made eye contact and I saw a moment of hesitation in the mother's dark and calculating eyes as she looked at me, but then she was gone, bounding off into the meadow.

Although it is widely known that the maternal instinct is distinct in most animals, from personal experience, it seems deer do not fully embody this quality. The doe must have seen a barreling pickup coming towards her and figured it was either her or her fawn. Eventually, she made her final decision, she was out of there. The fawn didn't quite seem to get the memo however and stumbled into the grass on the other side of the road.

The roar of the truck's engine shuddered to a halt, revealing the sounds of a cool summer morning, and some rustling in the grass. As we got out, the smell of diesel, oil, and herbicide slipped away, revealing the fresh grass and the slight smell of something wild. I could still taste the dew and geosmin from last night's rain in the air. Investigating the rustling, we found the source of the sound, the fawn, left behind by its mother. Its form was huddled and alone, shaking slightly. Slowly we approached and to our

surprise, it only stayed there, maybe oblivious to our proximity, maybe just frozen in fear. Gently I picked it up. It was still very young, even having its spots still. The hair was as soft as silk, it was the softest thing I have ever touched.

After all the guys had a chance look at its delicate form, we let it down to the ground. Only then did it start to walk, more like stumble away from us. However, it was walking in the opposite direction of its mother. I picked it up one more time and set it on the other side of the road on the wet grass of the ditch. With that, the fawn stumbled into the tall brush, after its mother. We watched and listened as the rustling grew more distant and eventually there was nothing. After a moment of silence, we returned to the truck and with a few seconds of engine turning and warning beeps the truck sputtered to life, we still had plenty of work to do. We rolled on and went to work.

That was the highlight of the summer. It was and still is a reminder of how gentle life is and the beauty of nature. I often go back to that day to reminisce and be reminded of the simplicity and significance of life. I go back to smell the grass and taste the dew and remember that soft, silky fur. I remember the doe's eyes and wonder if they were perhaps not calculating but begging. Begging for us to save her young, not force her to make this terrible decision. But then I am reminded of what did happen. How I was touched by nature and how we sent that fawn on its way back to its mother. I am reminded about that cool morning in summer when my life changed for the better.

# **Nothing Left Now**

By Rylie Fairbank

I have nothing left now...

Nothing left to hold

Nothing left to keep

Nothing left to love

I gave it all away... to you...

I gave all I had the second you said you needed it....

Without a second thought to myself –

Every ounce I had; I gave it to you...

I have nothing left now...

Nothing left to have

Nothing left to want

Nothing left to see

I gave it all away... to them...

To those who bit the hand that fed them...

Took more than I had to give...

Enemies disguised as friends...

I have nothing left now...

Nothing left to give

Nothing left to take

Nothing left to me

I gave it all away...

You took more than I had...

Without one thought to myself –

I gave it all away...

I have nothing left now.

## **Broken Joy**

By Anne Schiller

I In the fog of a dream, the mist was pierced by a bright bolt of lightning. I saw her, tall and of solid body, once healthy and perhaps still is. I can tell by her stance that she is a strong woman. She has worn the trials of her life in a way that makes her struggles invisible to others.

She turns and looks at me, and I see in someone else's face the horror that people have seen in mine. For the first time, I look into my soul, instead of out of my soul. This ache is different. I see a heavy, ugly lock; her lock. I wish I didn't know what lies beyond that lock, but I do. The lock secures the darkness.

My eyes meet hers – our eyes pool into a single watery chasm. We don't speak, yet the same language forms between us. The language of pain. The universal language.

The mist cleared, uncovering the scene behind her. And I knew. I knew too well what it meant. My throat closed tight, and I could not breathe. Yet, even without breath, I distinctly saw everything. A reflection of December 21.

An accident.

A fatality.

My son.

Her brother.

Holiday decorations of green and red, twinkling lights, ribbons and bows were on the floor. Objects mixed with disheveled boxes; boxes open with treasures both out and in. Bubble wrap and smaller boxes, once meant to protect fragile and pretty keepsakes strewn about in no order. Chaos, anger, and despair, all swirling around the boxes, around the wrapping, and around the tree of twinkling lights. She carelessly pulled ornaments from the tree and

dropped them into any big box – the one nearest her foot from wherever she was in that moment. Her hands were moving in wild motions, as if separate from her mind. The turmoil guided her hands, but her hands could not interpret the message. She worked like a short-circuited robot.

She turned, and her eyes met mine once more. She pointed to the free-floating shelf above.

JOY.

Wooden letters, carved large and garnished with sprigs of deep green and bright red berries. The wood carving, posed on the shelf, solid and proud of its beauty. As she pointed, it lost the balance it once knew and tumbled to the floor. In a split second it landed with a loud crack. JOY was now broken.

Split into two, green and red spilling out of the “O”, like guts spill from the abdomen of a slain deer. The same shattering crack, the one we heard that night in December, just before Christmas.

JOY was broken.

She turned away from me without a care. Her blonde hair caught the reflection of the twinkling lights as she passed by the tree. Her white and pink fluffy socks tromped through the boxes, the wrappers, the mess of figurines, and lights. She stepped with both disdain and unattachment. The material under her feet now meant nothing.

I was drawn to her being, I could not help but follow her. The pull of her agony was more than I could resist. I did not care that I knew not where she was going. I followed her without intention.

I stop. I feel sharp pieces under my feet. I hear dull crunches with her steps. I look at the floor – glasses, dishes, plates, all broken. Thrown about without any purpose, just thrown and splintered. Big pieces, small pieces, some still almost whole. The floor: a dry riverbed of chaos.

I cannot cross – I cannot risk cutting my feet. I cannot bear the pain as

she does.

I raise my head; I gasp and watch her steps. She opens the back door and a cold wind tosses the curtains. The cold slaps my face and forces me to watch. She leaves through the back door, as if not to care about the creation she carefully constructed, and then robotically deconstructed.

The mess left behind, she quietly walks out – numb. Numb to the cold. Numb to her now blood-stained socks.

I stood quite still. I see blood patches on the floor. Her bloody foot prints adding to the path of broken plates and crushed glass.

I turn back to the room from where I came.

JOY is broken.



Abandoned Leaf by Theresa Smith Fryberger

# **The Last Great Battle**

By A. C. Smith

Commander Khorina Vosloff gently tugged on her reins, easing her horse to a stop before reaching the top of the hill. She dismounted slowly, due only in part to her age. She was deep in thought as she stepped to the ground and silently handed the reins to her escort, a proud, young member of Aquitania's elite Black Dragon Battalion. Approaching the crest of the hill, she considered the words she would exchange with her friend.

General Valeria Meenos had become a legend throughout Aquitania and Numor during the long war. The first born of a peasant farmer, she may well have lived out her life in obscurity in the quiet countryside if not for a simple act of bravery when she was coming of age. She had saved the life of the Provincial Governor's son when his royal barge capsized in some rapids on the river near her family's farm. Being of like age, he was quickly smitten, and they began a relationship that his family vehemently opposed. Finally, in a bid to stifle the growing romance, the governor secured an appointment for her to the Royal Military Academy in Aquilla. She was headstrong, independent, and wanting more out of life than marriage, even to a member of royal society, so she accepted.

With only a handful of women having preceded her, most of whom had washed out, her every move as an officer candidate was scrutinized. She eagerly faced the challenges thrown her way, excelling in all aspects of military education and training, particularly the strategy of large-scale battles. She possessed an uncanny ability to anticipate and counter her opponent's strategic moves. Much to the chagrin of old guard traditionalists, she graduated at the top of her class. Now, after years of relentless hard work and well-deserved promotions over her seething male counterparts, she was the second-highest ranking field general in Aquitania's Imperial Army. While blazing a trail for other women to follow, her achievements had far eclipsed



other officers, male and female. She had become a household name, idolized by young women and girls throughout Aquitania.

Khorina reflected back on other times they had stood together on the morning of a great battle. Quickly discovering they had much in common, the two women had become best friends when they entered the academy together. They were the same age, almost to the day. They both were driven by a constant need to prove themselves. They were even born and raised in the same province, living a mere day's ride from each other without ever having met. After years apart in pursuit of their military careers, they had been drawn back together during these eight years of war that embroiled all the surrounding kingdoms. Times like this were spent confiding in each other so that only the appropriate words and actions would be witnessed by the brave soldiers who followed them.

During the war, Khorina's name, too, had become well-known. Her bravery and leadership on the battlefield were second-to-none, and even with her mounting years, her incredible combat skills and proficient use of battle magic could best nearly any opponent. No mages had been recorded in her bloodline, so the elders were baffled when she began exhibiting innate magical prowess as an adolescent. With tutelage, her power and control increased as she grew into adulthood, making her a prime officer candidate.

"I understand last night's patrol confirmed the news of Berylian reinforcements," she said when she neared the general.

"Yes."

Valeria continued to survey the vast, grassy meadows of the Berylian Marches. They could see in the distance the Berylian forces mustering to the southeast as the morning sun broke the horizon. In the meadow behind the two friends, who now stood shoulder-to-shoulder, were two large encampments of their own fighting forces, and beyond that, far to the west, the smoke from the encampment of the Numoran Highland's meager

provincial army could be seen.

“So, what news do the final reports bring us?” Khorina asked without looking at her friend.

Valeria sighed. “Besides the thirty thousand infantry and eight thousand light cavalry in their 1st Imperial Army, the patrols now tell us that ten thousand heavy cavalry arrived late yesterday flying the flag of their 2nd.”

Khorina's heart sank. She knew their chance of success had likely just been dashed. “And this against our spy's assurances that their 2nd was decimated in the battle to defend Kamaleel,” she said with disgust. “I'm surprised those fools can find their way home when they journey beyond our borders ... and what of our ten thousand late infantry?”

Valeria shook her head slightly. “No. Since they didn't make it across the River Numor before the main bridge was destroyed by mercenaries, they had to cross elsewhere. I'm sure Commander Angkor is pushing them hard, but they're still at least four days' march behind us.”

“So, they will field roughly fifty thousand troops to meet our twenty-four thousand. At least that should give them a fighting chance,” she said with a smiling glance at Valeria.

The general looked at her with a pensive expression. “Need I remind you, old friend, that the Berylian's reputation for defending their homeland is well-deserved?” She looked away and continued. “Our people have been told the word from Aquilla is 'victory or death.' The Berylians have fully committed, giving us our best chance to defeat them and bring an end to this madness. If the Numorans succeed in taking their capital while they're here engaging us, this cursed war will finally be over.”

Khorina thought about their strategy. It had been Valeria's plan to draw the Berylians out into the open to defend their border so the Numorans could mount a surprise attack on their capital.

“Do you really think they can take Kamaleel with five thousand troops?”

she asked. "They only have, at best, a few hundred of their elite Green Guard left. The rest are mostly untrained conscripts and volunteers. They're merchants and farmers, not warriors."

Valeria studied her friend briefly. "I know," she finally replied. "You and I come from the blood of commoners. Would our people not do the same to defend Aquitania?"

Khorina conceded a sheepish half-smile. "Your point is well taken."

"Yes, I believe they will succeed," the general added. "And even if we fail, by the time the Berylian army can return, they will have taken the city and forced King Lorgus to capitulate."

Khorina simply nodded.

"The arrival of their reinforcements changes the plan," Valeria continued as she looked off in the distance again. "I've given this a great deal of thought. The Blackveil Archers will take the front line in a staggered-V formation with our few Gunderlun Pikemen disbursed among them. That is where I need you, Khorina," she said, looking at her friend. "When the ranks close, the archers will split so the lancers can move up just in time to meet the enemy's charge. I know the archers aren't trained or equipped for melee, but with no infantry, we must let them advance to us. It's the only chance we have. Berylia prides itself in the strength of its formidable cavalry, so they will charge us, and our archers will have to hold their ground at all cost."

Khorina nodded. "They will use their bows as long as they can, then their swords ... and then, their bare hands if need be. We won't let you down."

Valeria smiled fleetingly. "I know you won't," she said. "Half our Potishan Knights will reinforce the front line while the rest cover the flanks. Our trusted Captain Molenaar has convinced me to remain in the rear with four hundred of the best Potishans while he and his Black Dragons advance, flying my personal banner."

"I know that's not easy for you, Valeria, but you must be protected. You are

the very heart of Aquitania's army.”

Valeria remained silent, again scanning the horizon.

“It was you who led our forces to victory in the Zandoran Highlands three years ago, turning the tide of this war. It was you who led us into Darkmoor, driving the last of the Keshans into the sea. It was you who led us to Shanaris to aid the badly outnumbered Numoran army against the Argonians. That act, more than any other, quelled the mistrust of the Numoran people and strengthened our alliance, making this campaign possible. That's why the citizens of Vendegar cheered for you when we passed through their streets last month.”

“Come now, Khorina, it's not all my doing. You too were there for all those battles, as were many others, but more importantly, the soldiers ...” she slowly turned and looked back at their encampment. “Some of them haven't been home to see their family in years. They—they are the heart of Aquitania, and I would gladly die for them,” she finally added.

“They most surely know it, Valeria,” Khorina replied with a warm smile. “That's why they're willing to die for you.”

Valeria returned her smile briefly. “And what of you, my friend?”

“Oh, don't worry about me,” she replied as they turned and started back down the hill to their waiting escorts. “I'm holding you to our pact, now that I've won you over. This shall be our last great battle. I know you feel it's your responsibility to stay on and rebuild our forces, but I'll share a revelation with you. You're not the only general in the army.”

Valeria grinned without glancing her way.

“You deserve an end to this way of life, whatever you choose to do with your days,” the commander added. “I know the thought of a quiet retirement caring for my family's long-neglected orchard has carried me through many a siege.”

“You know I will honor my promise, Khorina... . You're right; it is time to go

home. We began this journey together. It's only proper that we should end it the same way," the general said as they joined their escorts, taking their reins from their outstretched hands. "Good luck in battle, my friend," she added as Khorina gracefully mounted her warhorse.

"And may only blessings find you this day, General," she replied with a hint of a smile before turning away to go rally her troops.

Solemnly watching the commander and her strapping young escort ride away, Valeria wondered, as she had so many times before, if she would see her dear friend alive again. The odds this day were long indeed.

\* \* \* \* \*

By midday, the opposing forces were poised for battle. The horns sounded, and the ground shook with the thunder of laden warhorses as Berylia's cavalry charged to crush the invaders. When the enemy closed to within range, Khorina gave her captains the order, and five thousand archers expertly unleashed their death from above. Arrows blackened the sky and rained down on the charging enemy like a driving torrent. Wave after wave the archers fired, nocked, and fired again even before their previous shots had found their marks. The charging mounts began to trip and fall, only to be trampled by the horses behind them until at last their forward progress stalled. The few who managed to maintain their stride through the mayhem were met by companies of the two thousand Gunderlun Pikemen who anxiously waited.

It was time. Khorina gave the command, and the archers split their formations, allowing the lancers and knights to flow past and rush the disoriented enemy. As the mounted soldiers came together, Berylia's infantry poured through the gaps and rushed the Blackveil Archers. While those in the rear continued firing volleys into the Berylian forces, the ones on the front line were forced to abandon their weapons of choice to engage the enemy in swordplay and hand-to-hand combat. Soon, the entire battlefield became a

writhing mass of confusion. The thunder of the charge subsided, replaced with the sounds of clashing steel and the deafening cries of war and death.

As was her custom, the great hero Khorina Vosloff fought like a crazed berserker. Ducking and tumbling with the deftness of a warrior half her age, she slashed, hacked, parried, and stabbed with her sword while casting spells with her free hand. Enemy soldiers were thrown to the ground with crushed bones by her Power of the Ram spell, or incinerated by her Fire Wall. Others were frozen in mid stride, glassy-eyed and paralyzed by her Grip of Terror spell. As always, her troops were inspired and driven to fight on, certain of their invincibility with her at the lead.

Valeria surveyed the battle from within the ranks of the 1st Battalion of Potishan Knights. She sensed the anticipation in the members of her heavy cavalry unit. Even their well-trained mounts were skittish from the war cries and scent of fresh blood that filled the air. But alas, it was not to be. This day, they would practice patience. Rules of military conduct, as well as common sense, dictated that she allow her unit to be drawn into battle only as a last resort. She issued curt orders to field riders, relocating her few available reinforcements to the most strategic locations as dispatch after dispatch arrived from the front-line troop commanders. Unlike other great battles, the fighting did not cease at dusk. The opposing armies remained engaged through the night, fighting by the light of torches and a full moon. Valeria could not help but admire the ferocity of the defending Berylians. By midnight, the dispatches from the front-line commanders had ceased, and she knew that most of the pikemen, lancer, and archer troops had fallen.

Dawn broke the next day to reveal countless dead and broken, bleeding bodies. The morning sun glistened off bloodstained armor, and the stream that meandered across the once-picturesque meadow now ran red as far as the eye could see. The fighting had been so close-quartered that warriors and mounts, dead and dying, friend and foe, were heaped together in indistinguishable piles. Although it was obvious the Berylian losses were

much greater, Valeria estimated at least two-thirds of her forces were gone. As the day wore on, the fighting slowed to sporadic skirmishes until finally the Berylians could take no more and sounded the retreat. Valeria was sure they had lost more than three quarters of their army. The enormity of forty thousand brave soldiers having died in one day defending their homeland gnawed at her. True, their power-hungry king had sent them to her, but it was she and her brave followers who had delivered them to their final judgment.

As for the invaders, Aquitania's 6th Imperial Army that Valeria had so proudly led for the last three years had been reduced to barely four thousand soldiers. Stunned, bloodied, and disorganized, they were just thankful to be alive to see the enemy's retreat. As always, she was proud of all her brave warriors, but today, the deciding factor had been the legendary Blackveil Archers. They had been five thousand strong when the battle began. Now, they numbered less than five hundred. And the companies of burly, highland warriors that comprised the 1st and 2nd battalions of Gunderlun Pikemen had been almost completely wiped out. They had stood fast against the most unnerving sight on the front line of any battle: a charging cavalry. While the knights and lancers fared better, they had still lost more than half their members.

“General Meenos.”

A chill coursed through Valeria at the ominous tone of Captain Molenaar's voice. Her heart was breaking as she turned to look directly at the approaching officer. “Yes, Captain.”

“I uh, I'm afraid I must report bad news concerning our hero, Commander Vosloff. General, she uh ... she—”

“Yes, Captain, I understand.... And what of your Black Dragons?”

He checked himself and straightened to an appropriate posture for reporting to his superior officer. “We are badly damaged but still intact, as are three battalions of Potishans.” The officer searched for more to say. “This is a

great day for Aquitania, General. We have finally broken the Berylian's war machine, and against such odds. This is surely our greatest battle.”

“Perhaps ... I uh... .” When she knew her voice was about to crack, she raised a hand to indicate she needed a moment, and turned to step away, racked with grief for her lost friend. She sniffled and took a calming breath as she thought about all their achievements together. She thought about how close she had come to keeping her promise to Khorina.

Then she thought of the course her own life had taken since she left home as a young woman. She thought of Frederick, the Provincial Governor's son she saved from drowning that day so long ago when they were both young. Dear Frederick fell deeply in love with her, and she loved him, too, but she knew her destiny awaited her elsewhere. She wanted more out of life than her loving, hardworking parents had been able to achieve with their small parcel of land and herd of livestock. And she wanted to accomplish it herself, so she broke his heart and left to pursue her own path in life.

In time, he recovered and married, eventually assuming his father's role as Provincial Governor. She took lovers, but never loved. She was married to the army. Over the years, she and Frederick carefully avoided each other, and she eventually heard through a mutual acquaintance that his wife had suddenly taken ill and died. Then about a year ago, they met at a diplomatic function in Aquilla. It only lasted a few hours and was awkward and bittersweet. She offered her condolences, and as always, he was gracious. They remained formal, yet she left the palace that evening unable to deny she still had feelings for him, and her intuition told her he felt the same. The next day, she rejoined her troops, and the life she had chosen so long ago, and they were off on another campaign. She slowly shook her head. *My life that could've been, she thought before chiding herself. Please forgive me, Khorina, for thinking of myself at a time like this.... Oh how I will miss you my dear friend.*

Captain Molenar gestured to the soldiers nearby to move off in respect for



their general, while he remained, standing at ease, patiently waiting through the uncomfortable silence.

Finally, after discretely wiping away tears, Valeria turned and addressed him. "Have a burial detail bring Khorina and meet me on the hill where we last stood together," she said, extending her hand to point, only to retract it when she felt a tremble. "There we will bury my friend overlooking the site of her last great achievement, and a monument will be built for all the brave warriors lost in this battle, both Aquitanian and Berylian."

"Yes, General," he replied compassionately.

"Now, let us talk of your future, Commander Molenar," she said, turning to face him once again.

The surprised officer gave a brief hint of a smile before checking himself and coming to attention. He was elated by the unexpected field promotion, but present circumstances forbade celebration. "Thank you, General."

Valeria gave him a fleeting smile. "No need; you earned it. Besides, you and I know better than anyone the size of the boots you must fill."

He nodded. "Yes, General, indeed. Commander Vosloff will be sorely missed."

She pursed her lips and nodded. "Yes... . Now then, for the matters at hand. First, you will form a detachment of a dozen scouts—our swiftest riders. Give each of them full provisions and a spare mount. I want them to leave immediately. We must know if the Numorans have succeeded in taking Kamaleel. If they've failed, our work here is not yet finished. And sending twelve should ensure that at least one can return to give me a report. That is paramount."

"I will see to it, General."

"We need to prepare a delegation to deliver terms to the Berylian's camp," she continued.

“Unless they plan to meet us on the field again tomorrow, they will disarm, with my guarantee of no harm or retaliation, of course. Then, if our scouts bring good news from the Numorans, you will take the Dragons and two battalions of Potishans, and escort the Berylians back to their capital. I will remain here with the rest until our infantry arrives, probably in four or five days. You should be able to deliver them and return here by that time.”

“Of course, General ... and?”

“After that, you will assume command of the 6th Imperial Army and oversee the formation of a provincial army. Once you're satisfied this region is secure until the diplomats can achieve terms of a treaty, you and your troops will return to Aquilla for reassignment.”

“Understood, General.”

“The Black Dragons will escort me back to Aquilla so I can give the Adjutant a full report,” she added. “Do you have someone in mind to assume your role as Commander of the Dragons?”

He looked away pensively. “I will miss leading them.”

“As did I when I moved on,” she replied. “But it is for the best, for Aquitania, and for you.”

He looked at her. “Yes, of course ... Captain Nordivik, he is ready.”

She nodded. “I would agree... . Very well then.”

“Forgive my curiosity, General, but is it true? Are you leaving us?”

“Yes, Commander, I'm going home. I made a promise to a friend that must be honored. This was my ...” she glanced toward the repulsive scene of the battlefield where she knew Khorina had died. Then she cleared her throat to keep from choking up and returned her gaze to him. “This was our last great battle.”

Before the commander's face blurred from her tears welling up, she quickly turned and mounted, reining her horse away toward the top of the hill.

# Rx Sunshine

By Kate Fiala

Sitting by the window,  
Watching the “drought breaking” rain.  
Thoughts wander down dark paths:  
Ills of the world, sick, or departed loved  
ones, problems at work and home.  
The clouds shift and sunlight fills the skies.

Hope rushes in and you realize,  
There are things you can do for the world,  
There are people to console,  
There are friends to encourage,

**And there are new work ideas to try.**

**Thanks Be! to Kansas Sunshine!**

## **Puzzle Piece**

By Rylie Fairbank

I was the unfinished puzzle  
With my pieces on the floor

You saw me lying there – scattered in disarray  
Parts of me upside-down,  
Broken beyond repair,  
And tossed aside as though no one cared.

You saw me lying there –  
Broken and bruised  
Crumpled and used

The puzzle someone once thought to finish.  
Thrown to the ground,  
Lost to the hands of time,  
Shoved under the rug, never to be found.

You decided I was the puzzle you were bound to complete.  
I was the puzzle to be put back together –  
I was a puzzle worth solving.

You collected all my pieces from whence I had been shattered  
Loved all of my edges that had been tattered  
You lifted me from my home on the ground  
The parts once broken, now forever bound

You solved the unfinished puzzle that was once discarded.



A Boost Up by Mary Ellen Schinstock

## **Submission to Prairie Ink**

We are a literary annual that welcomes drawings, paintings, photography, new media art, creative non-fiction, drama, fiction, graphic narratives, literary criticism, and poetry.

We serve as a vehicle for emerging writers who attend Barton Community College or reside in one of the seven counties within Barton's service region.

The editors of Prairie Ink encourage submissions from Barton students, alumni, and community members from Barton's seven-county service area: Barton, Pawnee, Rice, Rush, Ellsworth, Russel, Stafford; and from students enrolled at the Barton Fort Riley Campus and Grandview Plaza Outreach location.

To check out submission guidelines or to submit your work, please email the editors at [prairieink@bartonccc.edu](mailto:prairieink@bartonccc.edu).

## **Acknowledgements**

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# Barton's Mission and Vision

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## Vision

Barton Community College will be a leading educational institution, recognized for being innovative and having outstanding people, programs and services.

## Mission

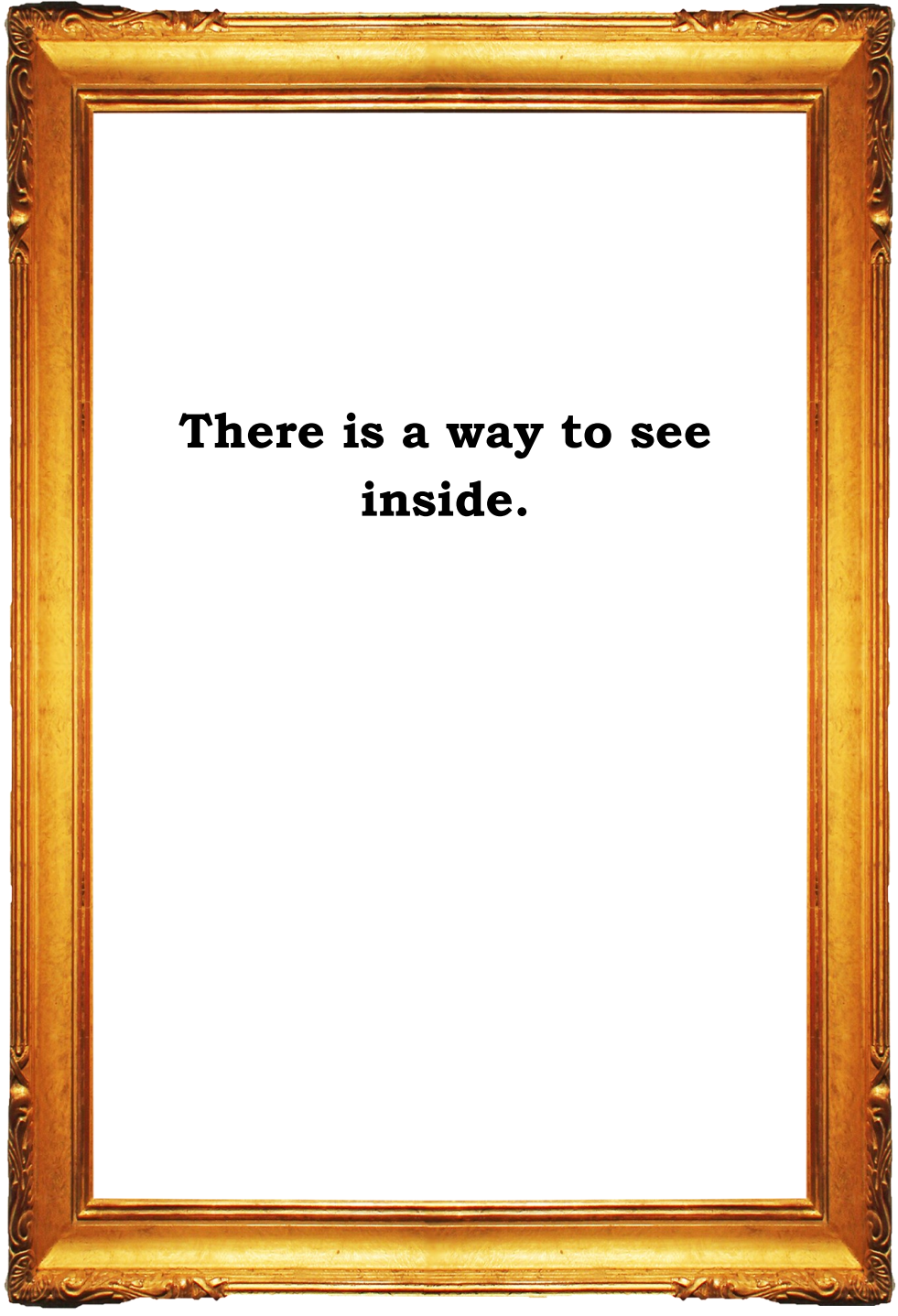
Barton offers exceptional and affordable learning opportunities supporting student, community, and employee needs.

## ENDS

1. Fundamental Skills
2. Work Preparedness
3. Academic Advancement
4. Barton Experience
5. Regional Workforce Needs
6. Barton Services and Regional Locations
7. Strategic Planning
8. Contingency Planning

## Core Priorities

Drive Student Success  
Cultivate Community Engagement  
Optimize the Barton Experience  
Emphasize Institutional Effectiveness

A gold-colored, ornate picture frame with a white interior. The frame has a classic, decorative design with intricate carvings at the corners and along the edges. The interior of the frame is a solid white color, providing a clean background for the text.

**There is a way to see  
inside.**