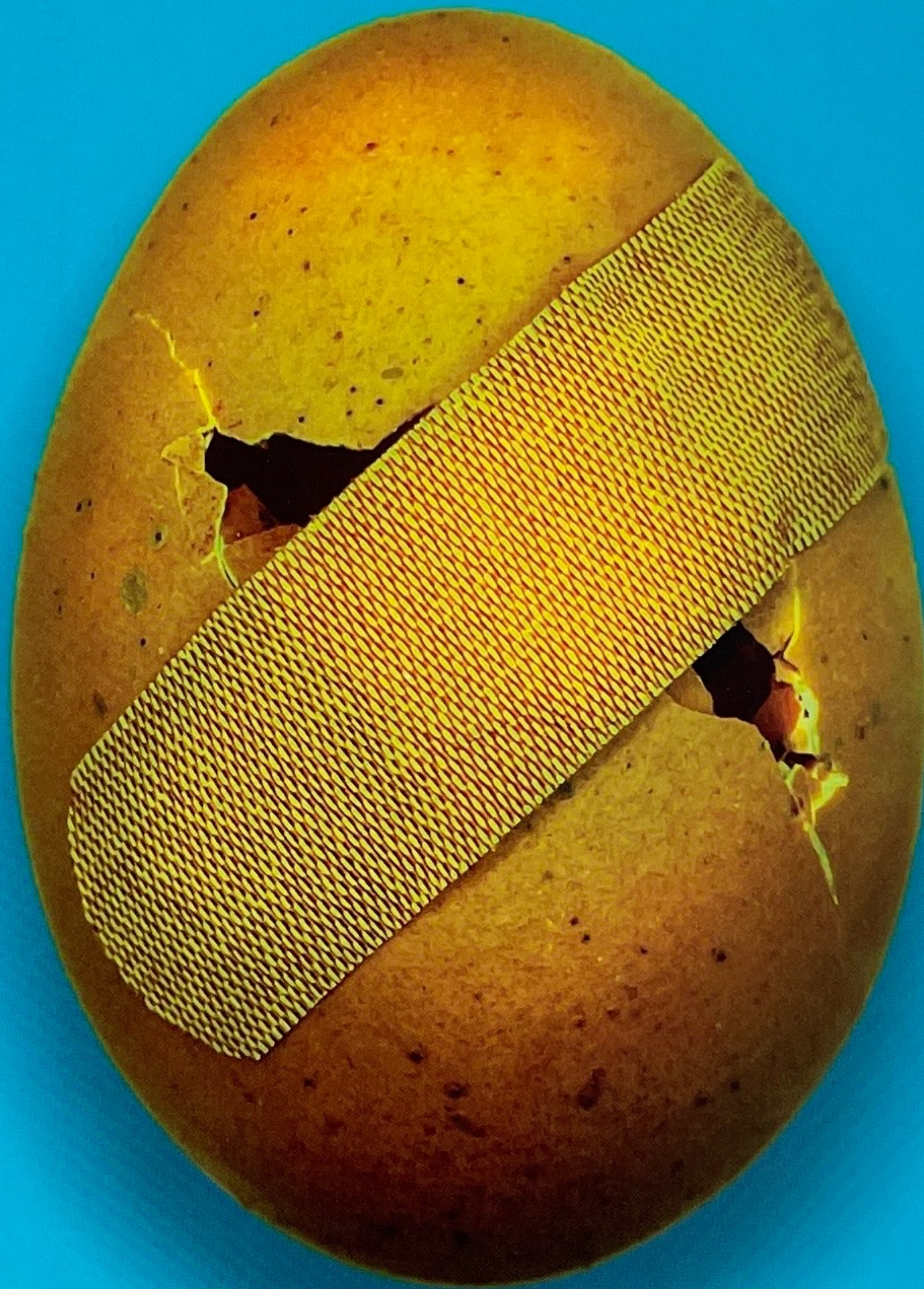


Voices

2020-21



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VOICES

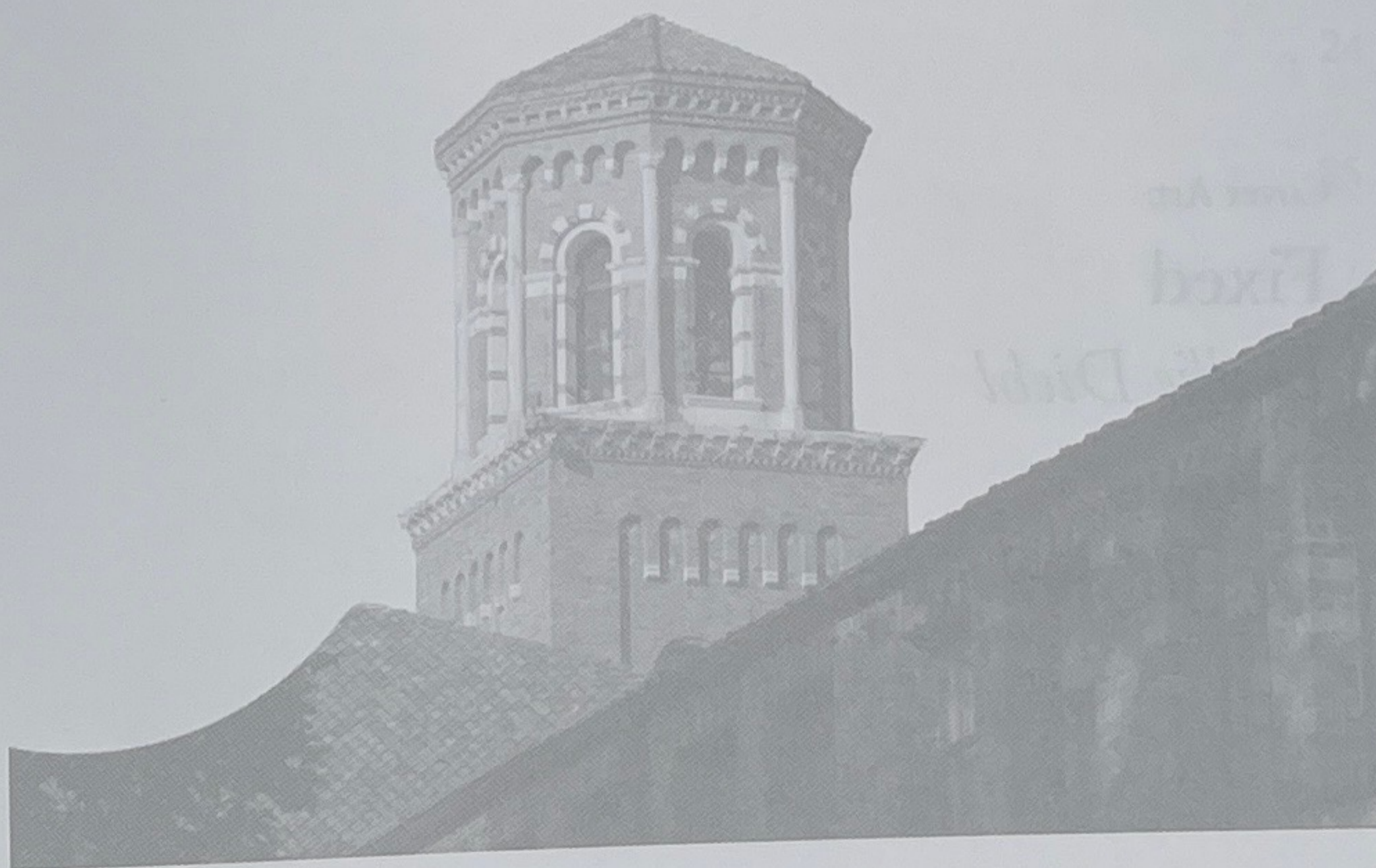
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EDITORS' NOTE

The Editors proudly present the forty-second issue of *Voices*. We extend our thanks to Dr. John Schulze, our *Voices* advisor, for his expertise and guidance throughout the creation and publication of this journal. We are grateful to the Department of English, Humanities, and Philosophy; the Student Allocations Committee; and the Bryan L. Lawrence Endowment for making this year's *Voices* possible. We would also like to thank Kristen Longo for making our postcards and posters. Finally, we thank all of this year's contributors, whose work made for a thoroughly enjoyable issue.

The Editors hope that the time and effort invested in the creation of this year's *Voices* matches that of our contributors. The COVID-19 pandemic impacted our publication timeline, leaving most of our work for the summer months with a particularly small editing team. Through all of the hard work and time spent in the *Voices* office, the editors have found great enjoyment in bringing you the 2020-21 issue. We hope that you enjoy reading our contributors' work as much as we have and that the pieces contained within provide you with connection during a time that has made many feel increasingly isolated.

If you are interested in submitting your work for a future edition of *Voices*, you can search for us on [Submittable.com](https://www.submittable.com) or visit our website: mwsu.info/voices.

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Fixed

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Carson Ower

Reggie

Danika Hollis

Reginald Rojas—Reggie—was known for having a loud mouth. He didn't do sports; he was not really the team player kind of person. He was a skater, sort of (Tony Hawk was an alumni of his high school after all). Everyone just knew him because he talked. A lot. If he knew anyone was bothered by his personality, however, his loud mouth was a flippant disregard of any judgement. Even though he did alright in school, he was bored. And so, he was fine with the titles of jokester, punk, slacker, smart-ass, meat-head, etc., that were often thrown to him. He lived up to it and laughed. If he was going to have to put up with being in school, then he was going to make it fun, fun for himself.

One of his unfortunate and constant targets was Richard Smith—Rich—in his fourth period history class with Mr. Sanchez. He was not someone that had gone to elementary or middle school with the lot of them. He had just showed up one day, new to 11th grade. It wasn't that he was a nerd, he was fine, whatever. It was his very heavy, very English accent—and maybe his long hair. He was a novelty, something new to fixate on when Reggie got bored. Reggie's favorite thing was to greet Rich with, "ELLO, GOVNAH." Rich would cringe, Reggie would laugh. That would be that. Hilarious. And to Rich, Reggie was made of just two simple things: loudness and a cheap hat (for Reggie always wore his "lucky" San Diego Chargers ball cap).

On one normal Tuesday, Reggie sat in his normal assigned seat, with a normal book stored on the rack below. Pictures of men's mullets adorned the book cover—Rich thought this very weird from the moment he had "met" Reggie. To most others, however, it was just another funny thing about Reggie. One year, all of his book cover were random pictures of Daniel Radcliffe. Reggie's normal greeting made Rich involuntarily cringe, as per usual.

"ELLO, GOVNAH. 'OW DO YEW DO?" Reggie's bottom lip contorted. His top teeth popped out of his mouth. His nose crinkled and his eyes closed in amusement. Out of bored habit, he fixed his cap. John and Christian, Reggie's two best friends, also punks, laughed.

"Top of the mornin' to ya," Christian said. It was in an accent that was both terrible and culturally oblivious but of which made all three boys laugh.

Rich closed his eyes, took a deep breath. When his eyes opened again, he continued to remove a binder out of his rucksack. He straightened up, fixed a piece of mousy brown hair, and faced forward. If I ignore it, they'll stop. This mantra was repeated as he took in another deep breath. Unhappy with the strand of hair he had just fixed, he pulled it back down to his face and let it shield his eyes. At home in Birmingham, he would be studying for the GCSE with his best mate, Lee. There was a little park down the way from his home—

old home—where they would take their textbooks and cuppa tea. If it rained, they could step into the coffee shop across the street. He frowned at the happy memory, now muddied in sadness. He still had wavering thoughts on if their move had been for the best. The move had been good for his dad and mum; but then, was bad for it brought him to something so unfamiliar and mean. The class started and his tactic worked. The unfamiliar and mean—and the posse—left him alone.

Five minutes before the end bell, the phone in the classroom rang. The students erupted into hushed excitement. Mr. Sanchez shook his hair free, his baggy slacks and white shirt jiggled as he walked to pick it up. He answered and, while listening to the caller, turned to look in the boys' general direction. Rich's stomach dropped—it reminded him of the last time his class was interrupted by a phone call. The class silenced. When Mr. Sanchez hung up the phone, he turned and looked in their direction again, "Reggie, Mrs. Hall would like to speak with you."

At the sound of their principal's name, John, gave a loud, "OH! HO! Whatdja do this time, Reg?"

As Reggie got up he gave an even louder, "Nothing." He paused. "Nothing besides your mom." And then there was an explosion of laughter. Always. Always laughter. And it was the laughter that made him forget his mullet-clad textbook.

Mr. Sanchez sighed, now his lecture would never finish. Ugh, teenagers, he thought. Outwardly, he remarked, "Reggie. I hope you're not going to be this rude when you talk to her."

When Reggie left, Mr. Sanchez let the still unfocused students out a little early. It was one of the reasons he was everyone's favorite.

Rich, by habit, lingered to let all the others go ahead. Mr. Sanchez, oblivious of any one still left in the room, finished cleaning the board. When he turned around to find that Rich was still there, he motioned toward the desk next to him. "Hey, Richard, looks like Reggie left his book. Do you mind taking it to the office?"

"Me?" Richard squeaked. He had no interest in touching the filthy thing.

His 'me' could have been a high pitched 'yee', which was close enough to a yes for him. "Thank you," he said, oblivious to any hesitation.

Still a little apprehensive, he nodded, picked up the book and the rest of his things, and left. Out of curiosity of what lay under the mullets, he peaked at the title page: *The History of the Modern Middle East*.

The front office hummed. Phones rang, people walked to and fro, papers shuffled, keyboards were clicked. Rich asked the attendant at the front desk where Mrs. Hall's office was located and was then directed down a hallway. "First door on the left," the woman said over a covered phone handset.

Rich took his time to walk in said direction. He was in no rush to come face to face with his bully or even Mrs. Hall. He regretted lingering. And

he regretted it further when he had to linger by an almost closed door labeled 'Principal'. Taking off his rucksack, he put his back against the wall and slunk down to the floor.

"Your mom is on her way. I'm sorry, Reggie. I'm so sorry, Jessica. I knew your father well; he was a good man. I'm so very sorry I have to be the one to tell you." Suddenly Rich knew the type of hushed voices and sniffing he was hearing. He saw the phone ring again in Birmingham. He saw his old teacher answer.

Rich heard Jessica, Reggie's sister, give a stifled gasp. Reggie responded through embarrassed sniffles, "Thanks, Mrs. Hall. He always spoke of you kindly."

The boy in the hall blushed. It was the nicest thing he could recall Reggie saying. But it was also the saddest.

"My last memory of him was as he boarded the plane for Iraq—"

Iraq.

Rich's heart accelerated. Knowing of the personal violation he had just made, he hastily stood right back up.

Iraq.

He was transfixed on the word. He paused, debating if he should stay longer. He wanted to stay. He wanted to reach out. He wanted to reach out to Reggie, to Jessica. He wanted.

But he knew this was a private conversation he had no right to hear.

Rich turned around and left the book with the secretary.

Over the next few days, Reggie was absent and class was weirdly quiet—by then the word had gotten out that his father, an officer in the United States Marine Corp, had died in an ambush. No one quite knew what to say about it. John and Christian ignored Rich, and he started to feel better about his history class. But his "feeling better" mood was tinged with sadness when he thought about Reggie and his sister and how suddenly close he felt to the both of them.

It was on the following weekend that Rich flipped through the day-old newspaper at his desk in his room, looking for a current event to write about. Because, well, homework. An advert stood out: *Local Hero, Officer Rojas, Memorial Saturday*.

He shook his head and decided he needed to get a bit of fresh air. He set the paper down and wandered through the house towards the back door into the garden. But as he passed by the kitchen, he saw his mother.

"You alright bab?" Mrs. Smith watched as Rich took a banana from the work top and huffed into a chair opposite her.

After a moment, Rich admitted, "Nah. Not really."

"What's wrong?" Mrs. Smith took a sip of her tea.

"You know that boy I was tellin' you 'bout? Reggie..." Rich took a paper towel from the holder and set the banana on top.

"The one that's always givin' you hassle?" The woman set her cup gen-

tly on the table.

"Yeah. His father passed away." Rich blinked back the tears that were trying to start. "Marine. Died in Iraq." The boy looked up to see that his mum's eyes started to well too.

"Oh darling," Mrs. Smith stood and walked to the electric kettle on the side board while trying to hide her tears. "I'll make a brew." When she started the kettle, she turned to face her son.

"I miss dad," Rich said, turning his attention to the garden out the window.

Mrs. Smith watched, not knowing what else to say. "I know. I miss him too," was all she could manage.

For two minutes, the only hum of life came from the kettle as they waited for the water to boil. "The funeral's today. 'Thought I'd go," Rich finally said as his mother handed him a cuppa tea.

"Do you want me to come as well?"

"Nah. It's alright." Rich stood, juggling his mug and banana in one hand as he went to the garden door.

Reggie stood at the pulpit, looking over the blurred faces, and talked. He wasn't terribly religious; it was his mother's idea to have the service. People will want to pay their respects, his mother had said repeatedly to him. He didn't remember anything he had just said as he looked into the faces his mother said would be there. But when he looked for John, he was unable to find him. Odd. He looked for Christian. Not there either. Less odd, but still odd. And another odd feeling tingled at the back of his brain. Tension settled over his shoulders. Jessica's friends are here, he noted. His mouth suddenly dried, he took a gulp of water before he continued.

That's when Reggie saw Rich out of the corner of his eye. That odd feeling worked its way from his brain to the top of his spine and he shivered. Rich sat as close as possible to the side door into the narthex. How long has he been here? Reggie stumbled through more memories as he talked. He found himself talking about the first Chargers' game he could remember... and the last. Does he know my dad? He stuttered over the lessons, left untaught, that would be lost to him forever. He managed to vow to be there for his mother. For fuck's sake, is he crying? How dare he.

Reggie thought about Rich for the rest of the service. Rich was something new to think about, when thinking about his father started to become too much. Reggie was angry, and sad, and confused, and grateful, and incensed, and—and mad. He went through the motions of singing and standing and singing and standing. If his father was here, he would have hated this service. But if his father was here, there wouldn't be a need for this service. That tingling at the back of his head nestled back in.

After the last hymn was hummed, he swam through condolence-wishing attendees searching for Rich. Why the fuck is he here? Having no luck inside, he found the closest exit and went outside.

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Voices

The sky was bright blue, the sun too bright to look at. A blanket of warmth fell across his skin and he didn't know it at the time, but he felt lifted—like a bird finding the breeze. The anger he held with him being there diminished into determined curiosity. And so, when he found Rich in the parking lot, he couldn't find it in himself to be mad.

He thought he had missed him, but then he heard a whimper, from between two cars.

Rich sat on the curb with his car keys in hand and he was at the beginning of a sob. He looked up, but he was unable to move. He was unable to stop the sadness that flowed out of his eyes.

Reggie sat down, settled in beside him, shoulder to shoulder, and waited. He looked ahead, studying the paint of the red car on his right and the black car on his left. When Rich didn't stop crying, he took a tissue out of his pocket and put it in his hand. Slowly, Rich folded his fingers around it and lifted it to his eyes. Reggie then knew that his being there was nothing to do with him.

Minutes passed and soon he settled down. "My dad died in Iraq," Rich said into the tissue.

"So did mine," Reggie tried his first joke since finding out.

"We never had a memorial." There. Rich finally said the one thing that hurt him the most. The thing he kept flashing back to. It wasn't the move overseas, it wasn't the school, it wasn't the people. He wasn't unhappy with the unfamiliar. He was unhappy with what he knew was missing and his inability to do anything about it.

"—Reggie!?" Jessica called out, looking for him. "Where ar—" she called, looking down the space between cars. "Oh." She stopped when she took in Reggie's friend sitting next to him. "I'm glad one of your friends came—"

"What do you want Jessica?" Reggie rolled his eyes.

"Mom's looking for you." She turned back around and left them alone.

Reggie and Rich sat in silence for a few more minutes. Rich took in measured breaths and used the tissue to wipe his eyes.

"Are you coming to the reception?" Reggie asked.

Rich shook his head. "Thanks, but I can't."

The following week, Reggie was back at school. He knew John and Christian were already in 4th period, and then he also thought about how Rich would be waiting. Rich was Reggie's new thought—Rich would be looking straight ahead, hidden behind his hair, ignoring him. And that's all Reggie wanted, a day without being looked at, a day where everyone treated him like Rich did. Right then, he wished for more people like him.

Before class, he waited in the bathroom until the last possible minute. And when he opened the door to Mr. Sanchez's class and accidentally ran directly into Rich's back he stammered across, "Sorry." A wisp of his hair grazed his face as he turned around to look at him and Reggie felt hot, confused.

They stopped in their tracks.

The bell rang just as the door closed behind him.

It was Christian from across the room that hollered, "Look, King Riiiiichard has arrived. We can start now." He rolled his 'R' in Richard for an annoying effect. A smattering of laughter followed.

"Shut the fuck up," Reggie said, collecting his cool and walking to his normal seat. All noise ceased. A few other students turned to stare and even Mr. Sanchez flicked his eyes in their direction. Rich paused, letting him pass by, unsure of what was unfolding.

"When did King Richard knight you?" Christian sneered. Reggie's Monday morning grumpiness was usual, he knew Reggie would get over whatever was up his ass sooner or later, always did.

"You're a fucking idiot," was Reggie's simple but effective reply, "Clueless, too." Christian, confused at his response, turned away from Reggie, pretending to be interested in the start of class.

Both Reggie and Rich sat down as quietly as possible. Reggie attempted a friendly nod at Rich when he stole a sideways glance at him. Pink blossomed across his cheeks, and he snapped forward. Reggie wanted to hide. But it was too late. He wanted all of the other stares to snap forward. But then he also wanted everyone to start talking so he could have the chance to say to Rich that he didn't mind that he came to the memorial. He wanted to say to him that Christian was an idiot. He wanted to give an excuse for. He wanted to be. He wanted to say. He wanted.

Voices

Halie Diehl is an aspiring contemporary artist who is currently a Senior at Midwestern State University with soon expectations of holding a B.F.A. Her major areas of focus are Graphic Design and Photography. Her fine art practice focuses on the labyrinth of interpersonal struggles and experiences one faces while battling with mental health issues. The work is intended to simultaneously put viewers in a sense of ease and awareness regardless the weight of the meaning behind it.

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