

I do not want to hide anymore. I do not want to tuck myself away, fold into the mundanities of life like a boulder shrouded in pine branches. I do not want to be like the regular birds, no matter how pretty their songs may be. I will not be complacent to live my life hiding from view up on some distant branch. Instead, I will be a cardinal. I will flash my color boldly to the frigid air. I will hide no longer, but captivate instead. I will let my thoughts be known, my ideas communicated, my emotions expressed. I will stride to the edge of my branch, I will turn my face outward. I will sing.

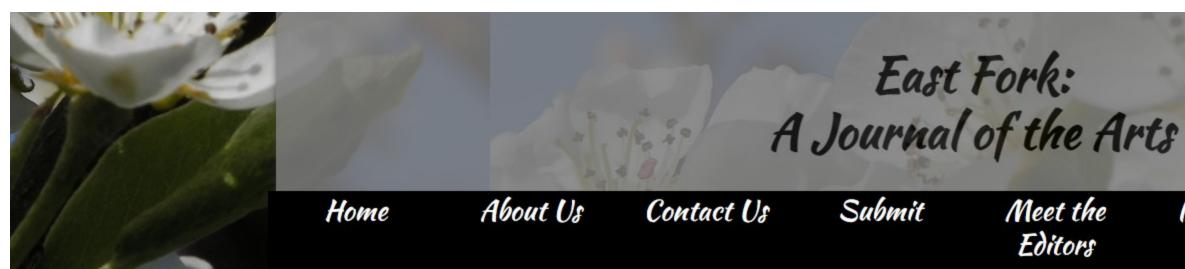
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The Age Of Man

By: Teddy Murphy

The coarse concoction of decaying leaves and cold gravel were all that supported the polished clogs of the shivering child. She let the sleeves of her gray fur coat hang limply over the tiny clenched hands that struggled to fight off the creeping chill of September frost, and shrugged her shoulders to cover her exposed neck. Her head tilted down, releasing renegade strands of sandy, windblown hair, which refused to conform to her mother's well-crafted ponytail, falling limply past her forehead and tickling her pale cheeks. The black stockings she wore were partially covered with propriety by a plaid skirt adorned with railroad tracks of blue, black, and white.

The figures that she hid from were not unfamiliar to her. She had been in their cold company for twenty dreary seasons, each one changing to reveal evermore the pale, rubbery features of her paternal overseers. As seasons turned, these features of the figures focused sharper and clearer, and her incontrovertible fear of the unknown grew stronger and stronger. She had happily spent the first five years of her life playing around their feet, feeling the warmth of her father's coarse khaki pants and gentle kiss of her mother's flowing dress. The ripe leather of his shoes was polished and shining, but the daughter struggled to find her face in their reflection, as she had seen so many times in the musical cartoons that had been marketed for her entertainment. The inviting cotton of her mother's slippers dazzled the daughter's eyes with their bright colors from afar, but as she crawled close, she discovered the polka dots of purple and blue were nothing but a canvas for brown, matted threads and stains of dirt and grime, hardened with age beyond recognition, and somehow still retained an alien adhesiveness when touched by curious hands.

It was in this year that the daughter discovered how to look up.

There comes a time at that ripe age of five when one must endure the privilege of a western education. The mind is curious, young, and bendable, having been deceived into believing in a world of vibrant colors and happy endings, animated faces that sang perfectly written songs to them from a closely watched television screen. The figures happily sent away their naïve seed to the wood paneled schoolhouse, where she would receive the knowledge and education needed to become a contributing member of society in the dawn of the critical 21st century.

On her first day, she discovered many things: letters and numbers, words and pictures, names and faces, friends and enemies, students and teachers. But when an unfamiliar skirt standing in the front of the class called her name, she was so shocked that she couldn't help but twist her baby blue eyes up to the first adult face she had seen in her entire life. It looked down at her, smiling a toothy smile, well practiced and well rehearsed.

But the daughter saw through her mask. She saw stains of yellow, painted on the teacher's charming white teeth from years of nicotine and THC. She saw down her grey throat, it's healthy ripe color burned away from boiling alcohol entering her chest and acidic vomit expelling through the same scalded tunnel, and giving off the shivering aroma of cheap vodka and the pungent scent of a toilet filled with oral expulsions of the same solution. She saw through her eyes, shining and bright corneas framed in dull black retinas. They sang a monotonous melody of years of youth and passion stripped away from her flesh with the fleeting heart of a lover, a dissonant harmony of pecuniary struggles and worldly wants, televisions and furniture she could not afford, in an apartment she would never see outside of the well lit, artificial photographs of domestic heavens in the latest Pottery Barn catalog cover. They pounded into the daughter's eyes a rhythm of distrust, a cadence of regret that assaulted the teacher's ears when she longed to find another pair of arms to hold her, a pair of eyes to calm her, a pair of lips to sing to her, and a touch that would send a warm tingle up her spine. This face was the song the adult sang to the child, meticulously composed in forty-nine bleak years, and as the child listened, she longed to look up and hear the song of her own parents.

When the teacher released her children, the adults mingled about the schoolhouse, waiting to pick up their effervescent offspring from their famous first day of school. They came out in waves, some more adept to collecting their crayons and markers than others who took the more care with their entrusted craft store valuables. Parents walked off, mother and father standing to either side of their child, as if protecting them from some unforeseeable but unavoidable danger.

However, two remained. Their daughter had not taken her place in between them to relive all the details of her first six hours of elementary school to them. Instead, the daughter had taken up hiding around the corner, eyes closed, hair covering her ears, and her head firmly crooked down.

She knew well the song of her parents. And she did not wish to hear it.

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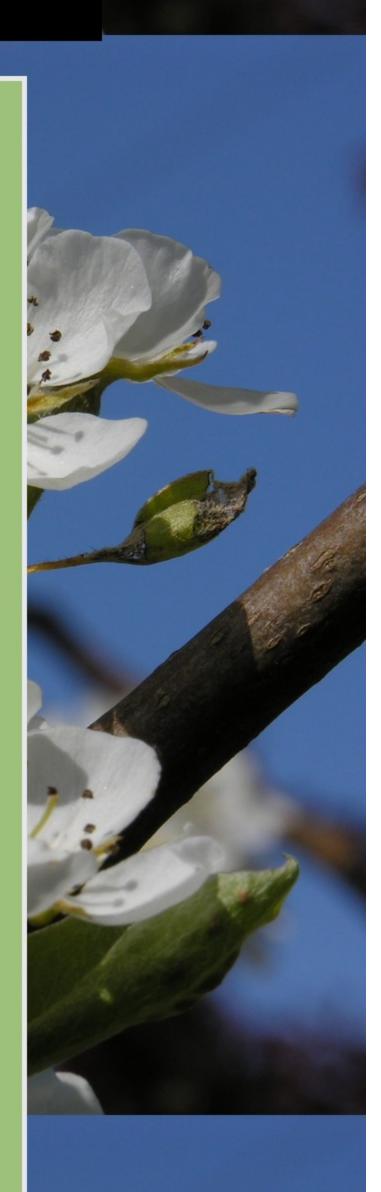
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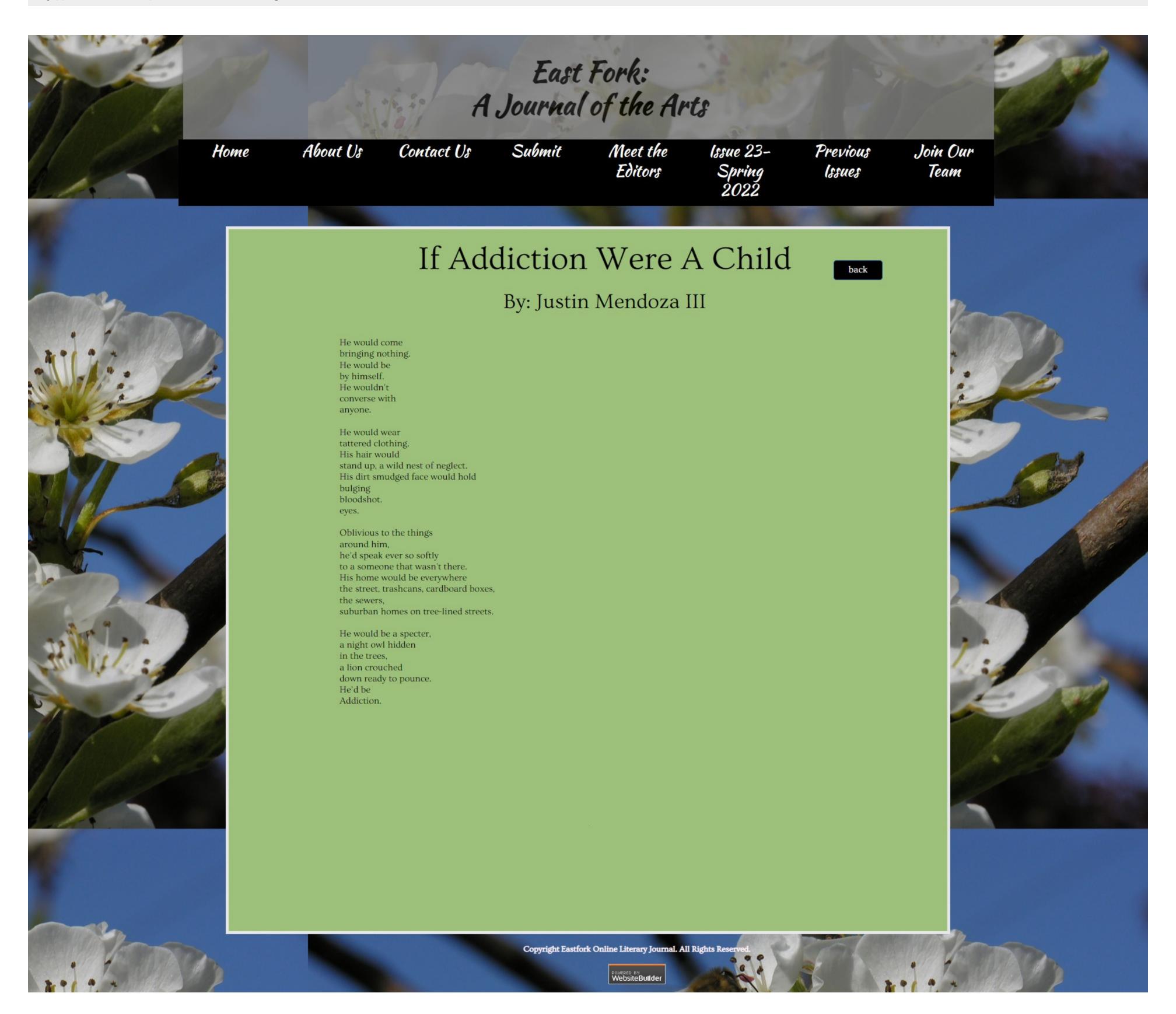
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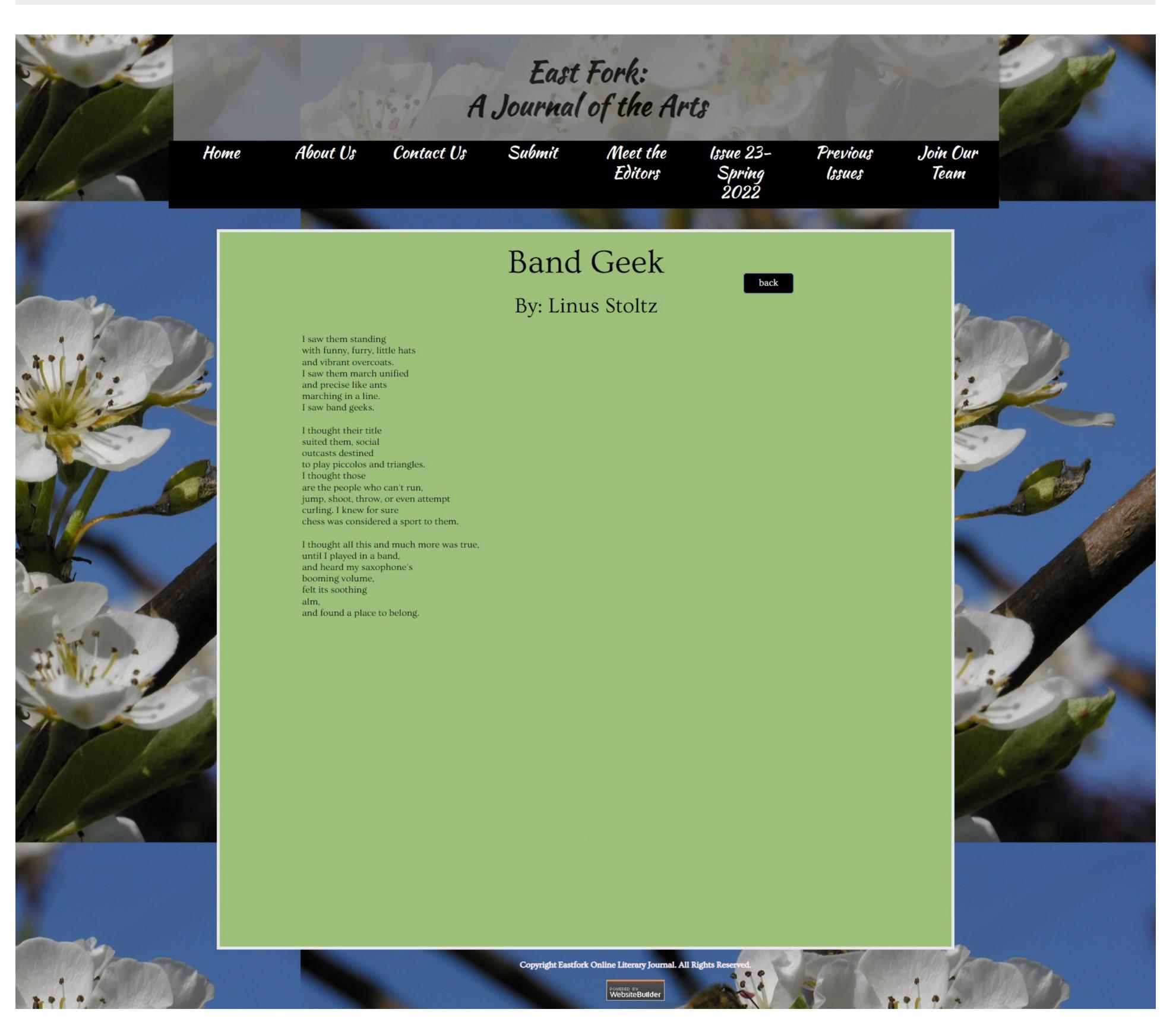
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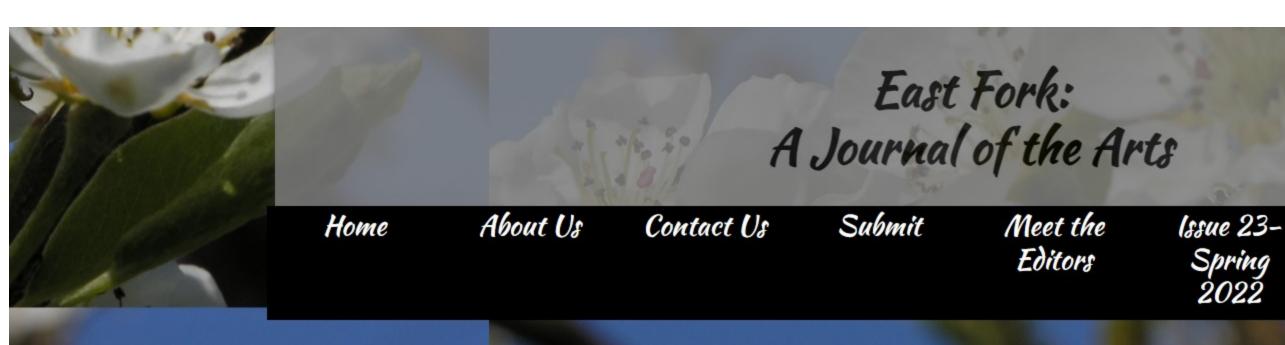












The Smiths Ruin Christmas

By: Hannah Cravens

The Smiths look average in every sense of the word; they live in the suburbs, they have a nice, American car with a "My child is on the honor roll at Washington High School" sticker on the bumper, and every Thanksgiving they have a nice meal with turkey and pumpkin pie. They are a perfect family: a dad (Jonathan), a mom (Sarah), two precious children (Katie and Johnny), and a golden retriever (Sammy). Unfortunately this nice family has some extended family members who are not so normal or perfect. There are lots of cousins and uncles and aunts and grandparents who do not live in the suburbs, drive Toyotas and Hondas, and have eaten Chinese on Thanksgiving. This not-so-nice part of the family is coming to the Smith's house for Christmas, and Mrs. Smith is very worried that the neighbors are going to see all of these people she has tried so hard to keep hidden.

Right now on December 23rd, Mrs. Smith is sitting in her rocking chair that Mr. Smith gave her for Mother's Day about five years ago. She's rocking and rocking while she thinks of all the problems invading in a mere two days. There is Mr. Smith's sister and her mob of a family-six kids and no father! Now the mother has to work two jobs to support her brood. Mrs. Smith is very glad that she is not nearly so irresponsible as to have children she can not support or have a husband she can not keep happy. Then there is her side of the family, a sister and a brother. Now the sister is not so bad on her own; it's just her sister's daughter. What a little tramp-barely seventeen and pregnant. The Smith's little Katie would never think of getting herself into such a mess and embarrassing the family. Mrs. Smith adjusts herself in her seat as she thinks of the worst of them all: her brother. The little miscreant has had a drug problem since college and just got out of a rehab center. The family is just lucky that no one has ever found out-think of the shame! That is enough with the disturbing thoughts, decides Mrs. Smith. She slowly pulls herself out of her chair and makes her way to bed, turning on the night-table lamps in the children's rooms to guide them when they get home, as both are at very important study groups. She lies down on her side of the bed and folds back her husband's side of the comforter because he is downstairs on the computer taking care of the finances.

It is too bad the Smith children are not really at study groups. Straight-A Katie is with her boyfriend in the back of his pickup, and varsity football Johnny is lighting up a joint in the park with some of his friends. Financier Mr. Smith is doing a dirty deed of his own. Instead of balancing the online checkbook like he said, he is IMing his pretty new secretary. Around two or three in the morning the children creep in and find their way to their rooms, and Mr. Smith follows them upstairs soon afterwards. They all want to be well-rested for when the not-so-perfect family members come.

It is Christmas morning and Mrs. Smith is rocking and rocking and rocking in her chair. Her eyes flit nervously from one member of her extended family to another. All of them are gathered in the Smiths' large living room, unwrapping presents and exchanging small talk. Everyone seems to be behaving so far, but she knows that it is only a matter of time before someone does something very, very uncouth. Suddenly a siren breaks the calm. Everyone races to the window to see what house is so unlucky as to have a cop come for Christmas. Shocked looks are exchanged when the patrol car comes to a halt outside of the Smiths' house. Immediately Mrs. Smith turns to her brother and says, "I knew your problem would ruin Christmas. Are you really so irresponsible to bring drugs into my house?"

As he looks down in shame and mutters a tearful response (something about being clean for six months), policeman after policeman bursts through the door, pushing Johnny Smith against the wall and reading him his Miranda rights. Mrs. Smith screams in horror that they are, of course, mistaken and really should stop and think about what they are doing. In a matter of minutes, though, it is very clear that the policemen are not mistaken. From Johnny's room emerges box after box of cocaine, marijuana, and a wide assortment of pills. Unfortunately for the Smiths, Johnny's room is not the only room that needs to be searched. In Katie's room the cops find birth control pills and condoms and from Mr. Smith's study, they take the computer.

By nature cops are not really quiet people, and all of the comments they make throughout the house travel quite easily back to the ears of the Smiths and their guests, who are still sitting quietly in the living room. Mrs. Smith rocks quicker and quicker as they hear:

"This is probably the biggest bust this unit has ever made. I'll bet we make the news!"

"What a little skank. Is that a pregnancy test? Whaddosit say? Positive? Guess little miss cheerleader's going to miss prom."

"I wish my secretary sent me pictures of her in lingerie. I'd be a happy, happy man."

All of the family members stare at their laps, not sure of what to say or what to do. It is quite amazing, though, how everyone in the room is thinking the same thing (except the Smiths, of course). They are all thinking how glad they are that they are not as screwed up as this family and how glad they are that they are not nearly as irresponsible as this brood of hoodlums.

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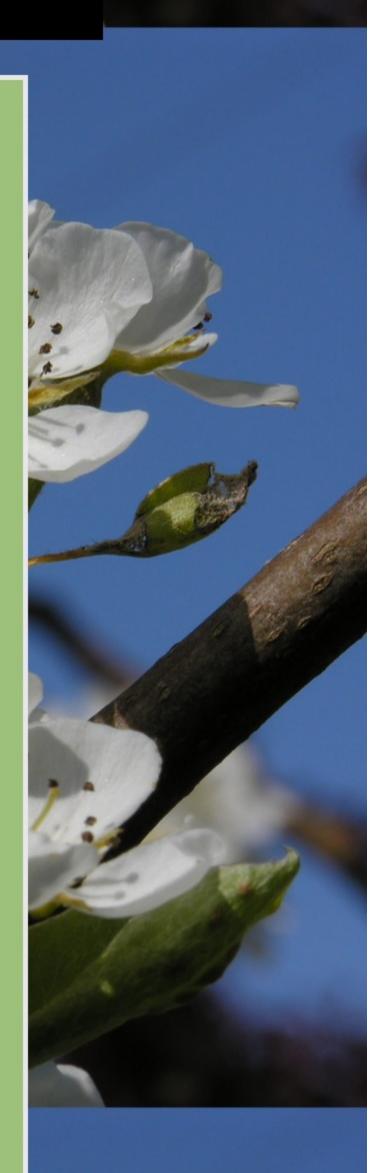
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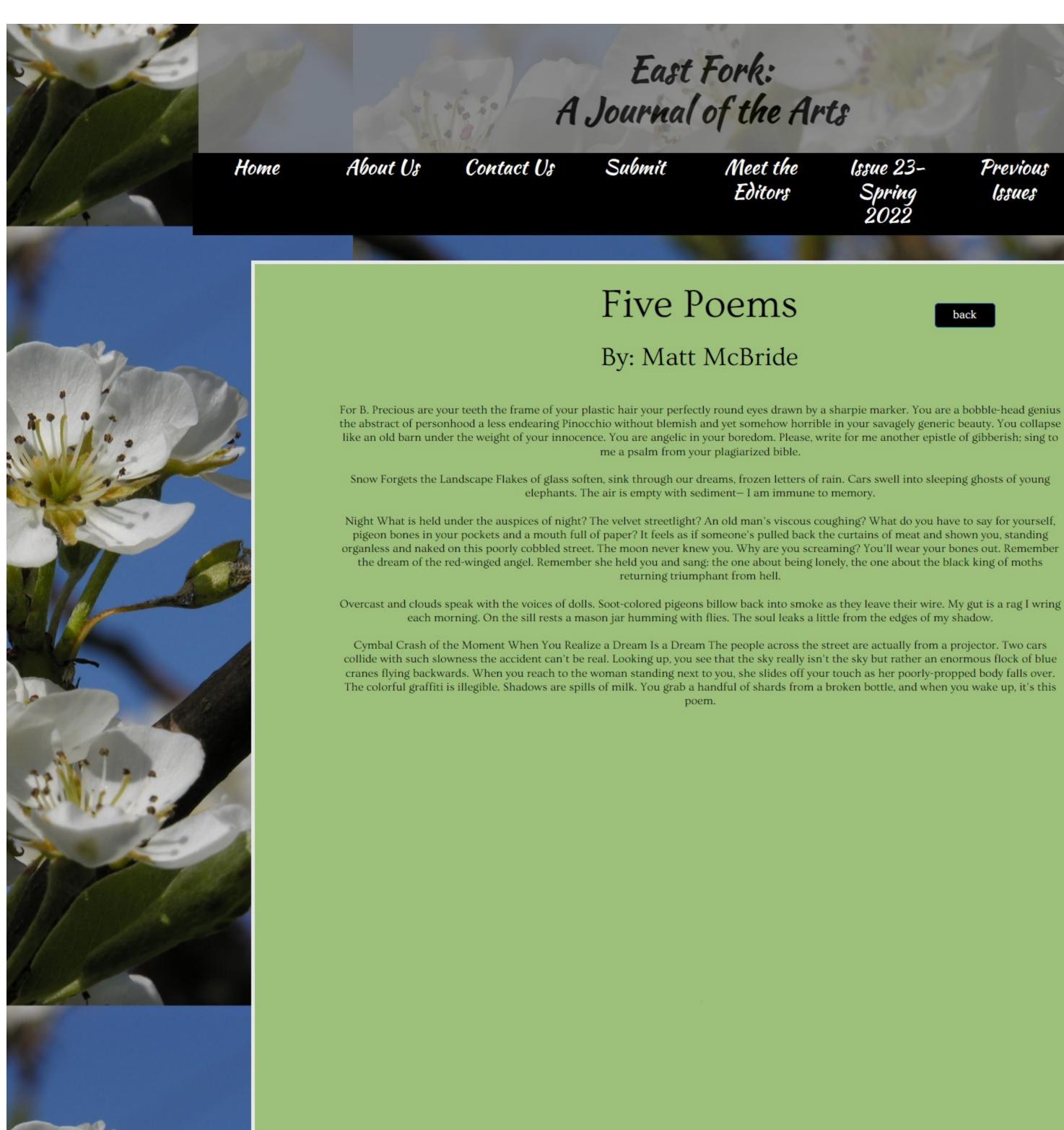
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