



*King of the World I Am – Eric Short – Visual – 2019*

# Elements

# 2019

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Winners of the **Cordell Lerner Award in Poetry:**

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**Alexis Fioroni**

“Fairy Tales”

What did you do?

I did what any woman would do,  
I filled my bed with the finest queens

Searching for you,  
in their damp skin

I kissed the quiet valleys in the cracks of their backs,  
their celestial mooans,  
Danced with sacred fairies.

But they weren't you.

You, my love, had the power,  
to raise the sun,  
with just your smile.

The stars truly gleamed for you,  
the constellations were jealous of the way  
You swam effortlessly in Orion's belt.

And you are, a symphonic siren  
that can lull any skilled sailor to their death.

I would've crashed on your rocks.

I promised myself,  
that I would not make you,  
the sun, in my life.  
That. Only that. Position could  
be fulfilled by yours truly

But, my god!

You must have been, my moon  
so melancholy, so bright

I use to wrap myself in fairytales,  
you were always the protagonist,  
I wanted to save you, just once,

But I realized I didn't have  
the magical elixir,  
that turned ogres into princesses,  
I didn't have the sword that sleighed the dragon,  
And I couldn't climb the tallest tower.

So what did you do?  
What. Did. You. Do?

I stopped believing in fairytales.

## **Jewel Woodward**

“everything isn’t what it always seems”

everything isn't what it always seems  
that's why at night i have nightmares  
and in the day i daydream

some days i just can't focus  
and it hurts me to the core  
that the memories we made  
we couldn't just make one more

i was only five when it happened  
but it seems like it happened not long ago  
i can only imagine the pain on our mother's face  
when they lowered your body into that cold empty space

how could they shoot you in the head?  
over something that you said  
then they turned the gun on everyone else  
and made them clean up the bloody mess  
as you lay there without a breath within your soul  
they put plastic bags over your skull  
and after that they threw you in the trunk  
just like you were a worthless piece of junk  
i guess no one in sight cared  
that's why at night i have nightmares

some days i just think about  
how nothing will ever be the same  
all i have left of you are memories and photos in a frame  
i just daydream about how things could've been  
i don't even know where to begin  
all the fun times we could've had  
and all of the times you would've been proud of me  
especially for becoming a high school grad  
i daydream of what you could've been  
i daydream about how on the football field you loved to win

you are my heart because  
i need you to keep the blood flowing in my veins  
so that nothing within me will fail  
i need you to keep me going through high water and hell

you are my heart because

i know you're inside of me  
and there's no way i can touch you  
but i feel you, because forever here you'll be

you are my heart because  
i can hear your heart beat  
as if i had a stethoscope to my ears  
just like my headphones  
i hear your music  
it gives me hope  
and dries away all my tears

my heart is broken because  
i can only see you through pictures  
and sometimes it makes the pain worsen  
i yearn to see you without the nightmares and daydreams  
oh how i wish i could see you just once more  
in person...

## Cory Clark

### "Broken Memory"

During a stride through winter lanes  
I cursed the drifting snow  
Carrying a sigh with my hindered gait  
I wondered where to go  
With every forgettable face  
And unfamiliar home  
I happened upon a place I did know

Stories were told on the winter winds  
About a home of rich pine  
Where the clearest glass met sturdy steels  
Wrapped in a complex design  
With the snow at my back  
I gazed with surprise  
For I saw a home much better than mine!

But despite all the glowing windows  
There wasn't anyone to see  
No shadows wandered the halls below  
It was as silent as could be  
But hidden higher up  
In a tiny window  
Were little blue eyes looking down at me

A youthful gaze watched from way up there  
Surprised and dazed, she froze  
Then cocked her head to the side childishly  
In an almost cute pose  
Wearing a hint of fear  
I started to draw near  
But she quickly drew her curtains to a close

My curiosity swept with the wind  
I turned back to face the road  
When the squeak of an old door called  
I looked back at the warm abode  
That girl did peek  
From the cracked door  
And said quietly, "Come in if you're cold."

I was drawn inside the heated home  
Leaving behind the winter

But to say I was comfy would be a lie  
For the halls heard not a whisper  
I couldn't help but ask  
For it was bugging me so  
"Where are your mother or father?"

Her grin faded and eyes met the ground  
A quiet tear tapped the floor  
And the warm air turned tense and dark  
She stood quietly at the door  
Paused in place  
She whispered  
"They aren't alive anymore"

A meek apology was all I could spare  
She accepted it with a smile  
Before charming me with happier words  
Chatting calmly for a while  
And though I wasn't warm  
I had to leave soon  
The winter storm had grown hostile

Before stepping out into the whipping winds  
I asked, "What's your name again?"  
She gave me a soft giggle and playfully said  
"You can just call me a friend"  
She left it at that  
And bid me farewell  
Our brief talk at an end

I thought to myself, "What an odd girl"  
But despite her weird manner  
I would go out of my way to see her  
Standing at that aged manor  
I'd wave to her  
And she'd wave back  
As we'd start our daily banter

When winter shed its shell for spring  
And the snow'd be swept aside  
Clad in a white sundress and rose garnish  
She'd finally be outside  
Watering vivid roses  
Trimming green hedges  
And clearing out small shrubs that had died

We exchanged our careless daily words  
While the sun was falling fast  
I knew it was time to scurry home  
Because the day wouldn't last  
Before I could leave  
With a quick motion  
She stole a rose from green grass

And with a gaze aimed at my heart  
She thrusted that rose my way  
Wearing an almost haunting smile  
"Just for you," she'd say  
I could only accept  
Thanking her aplenty  
And heading out while it was still day

But as I walked my solemn route home  
People's faces turned sour  
They looked at me with bewildered eyes  
For at least close to an hour  
But I didn't care  
Not in the least  
Still admiring the cute girl's flower

Time dragged on with those merry days  
Every wave and talk the same  
It was a loop of cheer meant just for us  
I surely couldn't complain  
But I still wondered  
Much about that girl  
Since I still didn't even know her name

Spring had passed and nothing changed  
While the summer reached its peak  
I would still visit that lonely girl  
Every day of every week  
And on one late night  
With a sullen march  
My cheery friend I would seek

For I had a spat with mom and dad  
And sought comfort  
In that sweet girl's soft voice  
That would ease any hurt  
At her bright home  
I could see her

Prancing casually in the attic, hardly alert

Too afraid to knock on the door  
And too hidden by night  
I found a place to hop up on the roof  
Grasping any foothold in sight  
I scaled the rooftop  
Reached for the window  
And flung it open with all my might

Startled, the girl quickly rushed to me  
Fleeing her quiet estate  
Following me out, perched on the roof  
Wood groaning under our weight  
She crossed her arms  
And asked with a pout  
"What brings you here so late?"

"I was wanting to see my friend."  
I softly uttered  
Her pout turned into that sweet smile  
Not whispering a word  
Her cold, pale hand  
Rested on my head  
And I spilled all complaints unheard

What comfort she offered to me  
I took without respite  
With every hushed word she gave  
Into that glistening night  
It was more than I wanted  
And more than I needed  
Seeing her was such a delight

And when my hopes were lifted  
And the tears had passed  
She'd ask me the silliest things  
Questions about my past  
Like where I was from  
Or where I would go  
"What did you want to be?" she asked

I never thought about something like that  
"I guess a musician."  
She'd giggle softly in response  
"Sounds fun!" she'd grin

That innocent smile  
Led her hand to mine  
Grasping tight with her soft, pale skin

"What about you?" I asked her  
Wearing a blank stare  
She tilted her head aside in deep thought  
Her cute pose she'd wear  
Ignoring the world  
She'd think long and hard  
The wind fluttering her long brown hair

"I think I just wanna marry a cute boy!"  
She said with glee  
I expected no less, leading me to ask,  
"I suppose you mean me?"  
Her head corrected  
And her smile strong  
She replied , "Of course, silly!"

Such an odd girl, but so sweet with words  
"I still don't know your name!"  
I had to reply with a calming smirk  
She carried no blame  
"Names aren't needed."  
She'd firmly reply  
"Because our memories are still the same."

No longer clear if she was just being silly  
I took it to heart  
Because I couldn't easily forget her  
From our forlorn start  
That silly girl meant much  
To the simple, young me  
And nothing could take that apart

My energy waned and so did the night  
She'd done what she could  
Carrying myself down the jaded roof  
And on firm ground I stood  
I'd send my farewells  
Wearing a calm smile  
Thanking the one person that understood

"She's been so kind and caring,"  
I'd tenderly thought

"I need to give her something"  
So any store I sought  
But this late at night  
They all were closed  
Making my midnight raid for naught

It was when I had arrived back home  
My sorry's were said  
Once my elders had been appeased  
I trotted off to bed  
And when firmly snug  
I dreamt a dream  
Tending the thought of being wed

When I woke that midsummer morn  
I shot straight to the store  
Aimed for the counter of gold and silver  
And pricey jewels galore  
There, somewhere between  
All the glimmering chains  
Was a simple necklace that I knew she'd adore

At the noisy front, I paid for the meager token  
I fled with my receipt  
Passing pedestrians, trees, and the sunlight alike  
I'd meet the windswept street  
Aiming far ahead  
For a distant design  
Rushing my feet along the roasting concrete

When I arrived, the worst had come true  
My friend was missing  
There wasn't a glimpse, not a single call  
That quiet winds would sing  
Not in the yard  
Nor in the halls  
I wondered where that girl was hiding

Thrusting open the doors with an eager heave  
"Where are you?" I'd call  
Up wrenching stairs where the dust had settled  
I'd scour every hall  
But no matter my words  
Despite my search  
I just couldn't find that girl at all

My final destination at the peak of the stairs  
Was the lonely attic door  
Stopped right before it's faded wood  
Breath fainter than before  
My head was light  
My heart was fast  
"She's gotta be in here, I'm sure..."

Resting my hand on the ice cold knob  
I slowly pushed on  
My eyes searching every inch  
Through the door's yawn  
As it was opened  
Time drew to a close  
Trapped in a world where my friend was gone

Unable to breathe, unable to speak  
I found nobody  
She wasn't at her little window  
Her chair cold and lonely  
Silent tears fell  
With hardly a breath  
I harshly whispered, "Where could she be?"

When I looked to her bed of vivid pink  
I saw a faint outline  
Resting within the cotton sheath  
Was a bedridden sign  
Peeking from the covers  
Was a pinch of white  
It was a hand of a rigid design

When I rushed to grasp that peeking hand  
I made a grim mistake  
That once gentle palm was devoid of flesh  
Now fragile enough to break  
Limp, cracked, and frail  
Cold, chalky, and still  
Frozen in time, never to awake

It didn't matter how much I wished  
It wouldn't raise her head  
No matter how much I begged  
She'd stay confined to bed  
Dressed in sheets  
To hide her state

She'd never reply to what I said

Gripping tight the trinket I got her  
I'd rest it on top  
Of her tear soaked, cotton coffin  
With a quiet drop  
I urged myself  
To leave her side  
But just like her heart, I'd stop

Her sweet words, her enchanting smile  
Her vivid, calming scent  
"Our memories are still the same"  
I'd recall with lament  
She'd been so right  
Those words were true  
Dead or alive, I could never forget

"Sleep well. You'll never be forgotten."  
I said tenderly  
The house stolen by bittersweet silence  
With that home empty  
My breath returned  
And time crawled on  
That girl kept safe in home and memory

Year after year passed  
No eyes peered out of that window  
And the lights never came back on  
The flowers and hedges stayed dead  
As did my flower back home

But one thing that never fled  
Was the memories wrapped in my head

Those cherished, broken, beloved, bittersweet memories...

## **Cory Clark**

“In the Dust”

When he was young and bound to home  
He'd dream of when he could roam

And when his folks had settled down  
They said he'd get to roam the town

It was at the old diner, a quarter after two  
When he locked his blue eyes on you

A little worn, a little torn  
And certainly forlorn

But it was good enough for him  
When he picked you up on a whim

It was the summer of fifty-five  
When he took you on your first drive

Said it was the best choice he ever made  
And by his side you always stayed

Do you know what you meant?  
To that merry, wholesome gent?

Driven down to his last cent  
To pay for all the years you spent

For all the memories still on repeat  
For all the friends you'd go on to meet

But you were going past your prime  
And quickly running out your time

Those times would come to end  
To say goodbye to your old friend

Seeing those cracked eyes  
He would have to realize

When your colors started to fade  
A painful decision was to be made

Bringing you to your last stop  
He'd leave you one last teardrop

And never be back again  
To see you in your gloomy den

With broken eyes you stare  
To those passing without a care

Who will never know the tales you hold  
Of treasured friends and a love so old

Just rest at ease and fall apart  
With years' dust atop your heart

Trapped in bittersweet serenity  
What once was, what used to be

A timely beloved memory  
Now left to rust for all to see.

## Austin Middleton

### “Days Gone”

Days gone by and I simply go through the motions  
I'm out of control, not even the captain of my ocean

My thoughts constantly dwell on the miles behind us  
My mind struggles but there's no one that I trust

Some look for safety behind bars  
Others shed pain writing their memoirs

I chose the latter when I let love burn me like a fire  
But then again who could stop the heart's desire

The pain I feel has become so immense  
Surely pretending it doesn't exist is the best defense

This sorrowful life makes me yearn for more  
Although I'm sure this is just the calm before

They all say that I need to be tougher  
But it feels like I have been made to suffer

I hope one day I see the world without such disdain  
Yet here we remain

I sit and think about what we become  
I can see how slowly we've come undone

Fear the hunters, they try and conform you to their ways  
I just wish and pray for better days

As I've grown everyone else has become quite salacious  
Life among them has made me quite tenacious

I spend my time wishing and wishing well  
Hoping that one day we find ourselves

Hoping that one day we can let go of all that occurred  
Hoping that one day we can join a larger world

But I will always believe that there is something to fear  
No matter what comes after, year after year

One day I could meet this march to war  
Maybe then I wouldn't feel this pain anymore

I like to think someday I might have a shot at winning  
All I want is a new beginning

It's hard to tell if these are just delusions and daydreams  
All I know is they turn the whispers into screams

Maybe I just need to take a breath  
It feels like this is life and death

This enemy that I can't attack  
I know there's no turning back

It may feel as though I've done myself too much harm  
But I swear I'll answer my call to arms

And I don't just sit here and assume  
I know there's more to my future than a certain doom

Because of all that I have slowly lost  
When I look back I can't regret all the lines we cross

I'll try to remain hopeful for the things in store  
And remember there is more to this life than the rotten core

## **Curtis Pointer**

“Sound”

Drip, drop, plop; the sounds of a pond.  
Slight rain makes for a good musical.  
Learning, living, laughing, lots of lavish living kids play.

The boots splash.  
Waves of water crash.  
I sat on the porch not watching, but listening.

My ears were on high alert  
But my eyes only babysat when I didn't hear feet pitty pat.  
Soon the kids' heads bashed.

The kids and I free time came to a crash.  
Hot coco and power rangers  
It's always one adventure after the next.

The kids heard the doorbell and cried out stranger danger  
I opened the door, the kids nearest  
And it mother dearest.

## **Curtis Pointer**

“Ekphrastic Poem”

Many colors, many shapes.

Elegance is the word.  
Silence is what I heard.

As I walked through the door I was unimpressed.  
The air felt too familiar to be impressed.  
I stepped further.

The texture of the walls changed.  
Not the touch, the sight.  
It was the art, the pictures that were hanged.

For someone who has no interest in art,  
the atmosphere was comfortable.  
Originally foreign, now my own personal fortune.

Home, I was home

## Aaron Mendenall

“This Evening”

You were all I could think about this evening  
You wouldn't leave me alone, but that's okay  
I tried listening to the music, but your cries drowned out the beautiful melodies  
I tried following the musician's every move, but you were always one step ahead tonight

You were all I could think about this evening  
You almost brought tears to my eyes, but that's okay  
I tried to find some happiness in the music, but your presence only made me sad  
I tried to forget you and focus on the music, but you were too selfish tonight

You were all I could think about this evening  
You smothered me with our memories, but that's okay  
I tried to look away at the ceiling, but you followed my every glance and glare  
I tried to close my eyes and just not think at all, but you wouldn't let me be tonight

You were all I could think about this evening  
I held my breath until there was nothing, and that's okay  
I tried to climb out of the darkness so I could finally see the light  
I tried to chase after the day and leave behind this lonely tonight

But you are always there, and you always will be  
You are always present  
in my nightmares  
and in my dreams

When I think about you it hurts me, but that's okay  
Because I would rather hurt  
than feel nothing  
at all

## **Aaron Mendenall**

“Don’t Blame Your Diagnosis”

You knew there was a problem  
The doctor told you what was wrong  
A medical professional said you need help  
And you know that he’s right  
But you chose not to fix it

Instead, it became an illegitimate excuse for your actions  
I only cursed in front of the kids because I had an episode  
I only threw the pots across the kitchen because I didn’t like what you said  
I only raised my fist because dinner wasn’t ready when I got home

You don’t take your meds so you can do what you want  
She would never leave you because you convinced her she was the problem  
It took finding out you had been cheating on her for her to kick you out

It’s been three years since she died, but somehow you still get to live  
You haven’t reached out to me in a year and a half even though you said you’d never give up  
It seems like God always takes the good ones

Maybe there isn’t a God  
If there is, how could He do something like this?

**Kaylee Gundling**

“Meshes of the Afternoon”

I found your face  
shattered to pieces  
on the floor  
and my own eyes  
reflected back in it.  
I had a dream  
that a shard of you  
cut my foot  
on the beach  
so I set it up in the sand  
and watched the ocean  
from the reflection.  
My plastic finger tips  
reach out  
‘til they fade into  
shadows  
and I wander  
from room to room  
until I realize  
the dream never ends.

## **Kaylee Gundling**

“Letting Go”

### *Part I: Fall*

You're a distant  
memory.  
The safe  
forgettable  
desire.  
I drowned you  
in the oceans  
I found in his eyes  
and the tides  
swept me away.

### *Part II: Winter*

Cigarette breath  
on my cheek.  
Safety  
in a dangerous world,  
in a dangerous mind.  
Memory sharp  
and white  
as the snow  
in the image,  
the last day  
you were mine.

### *Part III: Spring*

Before the lilacs  
could bud on the trees  
I created  
for myself  
freedom.  
And once the lilacs  
turned from purple to brown  
I drifted off  
in the breeze  
with them.

### *Part IV: Summer*

Warm air  
surrounded by the stars.  
They fell around us  
in waves

and I wished for one thing  
every time.  
I thought you wanted me,  
but now I realize  
you were drawn to the summer air  
in my lungs.  
Once the winter set in  
I lost you.

*Part V*

Only now I've discovered  
you were never mine  
to let go of.

## Kaylee Gundling

### “Director’s Cut”

We start with an extreme close up shot of my eyes, closed. You can tell I’m asleep because of the pillow framing my dark hair. You can tell I’m a man because of the shape of my eyebrows. You can tell it’s the morning because of the soft light on my face, streaming in from the windows you won’t see until the panning shot of my bedroom.

But for now, we’re in a close up, and my eyes open. The camera jumps back, a wide angle shot of me sitting up. I look at the picture on my nightstand, another close up of my face shows that my eyes are as blank as they were in the first shot.

The shot cuts to the picture and you can clearly see a dark-haired woman. Her big eyes are shining and her red lips are turned up in a huge grin. She’s looking up over the camera at the person holding it, me. But you can only infer that it’s me. You won’t get this flashback. You won’t see our first anniversary, six months ago. You won’t see me bring her to the guitar shop down the street. You won’t see me tell her to pick her favorite, any one she wants. You do see which guitar she picked though. It’s in the picture. An electric guitar with a sparkly red body, like Dorothy’s ruby slipper. That’s why she picked it. She loves *The Wizard of Oz*.

Later, you’ll learn her name is Georgia. Later, you’ll learn I was going to propose to her. There will be a flashback sequence of me looking at rings. But for now, all you get is this shot.

What you’re about to see would never have made it to the theatrical release. This will be the director’s cut.

The camera cuts to me in the bathroom, but you are looking at the back of my head. In the mirror, past my head, you can see my face clearly. A particularly inspired director may use a dutch angle here. He would also use side lighting, illuminating half of my face and letting soft shadows

fall on the other half. In the mirror, my lips are quirked up in a hollow smile. Only my mouth cooperates in the moment, my eyes are blank, unreadable. The right corner of my mouth is pulled up farther than the left. The whole image looks like a puppeteer in charge of my facial expression has a slacking string and didn't bother to pull up the corners of my eyes to make me look human.

The camera starts to move, panning around my head, keeping the mirror focal. The camera angles so you can't see my face past the eclipse of my head. When my face slips out from behind, the camera angle has straightened out and the angle of the lighting has shifted too, casting a soft light on my full face. I have a new smile fixed to my face. This time it reaches my eyes and my lips are even. This new smile is far more attractive. Perhaps you'll even find me charming.

The next sequence of shots shows you my morning routine. The steam of the shower, the white foam of my toothpaste circling the drain, the buzz of my electric razor. I'm in the kitchen holding my cell phone. I hit a button on it and you hear a woman's voice, "one new voicemail". My jaw is tense and my eyes slightly narrowed as I listen to the message.

"Julian," Georgia says, voice grainy sounding through my phone speaker. Even through the low sound quality, her voice is rough, like someone who's been crying. "I'm at Mary's house." My eyebrows draw together at Mary's name. I've never quite been able to keep Georgia away from her. "I just--" she breaks off. "I just couldn't stay with you last night. Not after-- anyways, I know what I did was wrong, but." She takes an audible breath. "You hurt me, Julian. And I know that I," her voice cracks. "I did something really bad too." The screen stops showing me, and instead you see a flashback, you can tell it's a flashback because of the altered coloration, of her getting into a car, black and shadowed to denote mystery. "And I'm sorry," she's crying again now. "I wish I could take it back. And I know you," she stops. After a moment she starts again, "I had to go to the hospital, Julian. I just-- I told them I fell." A flashback to her falling down the

stairs, I'm standing at the top. It isn't a lie. "I think they bought it. But, Julian, I can't keep doing this. You keep saying things are going to change but they never do. I love you, but this time was different. This isn't just you yelling or throwing things, this crossed a line. I don't want this to be the end but--" she cuts off again. "We should talk about this. In person. I want to try to fix things. Call me. Please." She pauses. "No alcohol, okay?" She pauses again, for longer this time. "I love you," she says, voice trembling. Then the message ends.

I stare at my phone a moment, the camera pans around me as I calculate my next move. The score here would surely be something airy and ominous, with piano at the foreground, some strings in the background, so light you can barely hear them. Maybe the dutch angle would come back while I'm listening to the recording, but it would straighten out when I hit the call button. I hold the phone in my palm out in front of me, a clear signifier that I will be using speaker phone. It rings three times then goes to voicemail. "Please leave a message after the beep."

"So, I guess we're just doing this through voicemail now," I start with a sarcastic tone. My voice sobers up, "look, you know how sorry I am about what happened. I don't want to apologize over voicemail though, I think you need to come over and we need to talk. Like adults," my voice hardens on the last word. I take a breath and soften my tone. "I love you, Georgia. This doesn't have to be it. We can get through this, just like we always do. It's just-- you know about everything with my mom and--" I cut myself off. I know I've hit a nerve. "Let's just talk when you get here. I'll be here all day." I pause, I drop my voice to barely above a whisper, a pathetic sound but I know it'll yield the results I want. On the camera, though, all you see is my incredible delivery. "Come home. I love you." I end the message.

The next sequence shows me gathering empty bottles from the counter. They're mostly beer bottles but there are two whiskey bottles in the mix that I also pick up. I put them all into a

trash bag. They don't fill it, but there is a bulge at the bottom from their weight. The camera follows me as I take the bag outside and throw it into the dumpster. When I get back inside I check my phone, which I left on the counter. I have a message from Georgia. It says "I'm on my way over". Maybe the director positions the camera over my shoulder so you can see it. Or maybe the camera is positioned in front of me, at a slight upward angle, and you can see the words of the message floating over my shoulder in a clean, white font. Either way, the next shot shows me sitting on the couch, and the next sequence is a flashback.

I'm in a brightly lit store, there are glass display cases all around with shiny things catching the light. I'm standing at a counter with a glass top. I'm looking in. There's a thin, middle aged woman on the other side in a tailored suit and emerald earrings. She's beaming at me and I have that smile, the perfected one you saw in the mirror earlier, fixed to my face.

She pulls out a ring, a silver band inlaid with small white diamonds and a blue opal stone set in the middle. "This Georgia is such a lucky woman," she tells me as she hands me the ring for closer inspection.

"I'm the lucky one," I reply, and I hear the woman make a noise of endearment. It was the right thing to say.

We're back in present time, and I'm holding the ring. I put it in my pocket when I hear the click of the deadbolt as Georgia lets herself in. I stand up and turn around to face her. She looks like hell. Her eyes have dark bags under them and they're rimmed in red. She's wearing clothes that are too baggy--they must be Mary's--and they hang off her small frame. Her black hair is pulled back in a sloppy ponytail.

"Julian," she says, her voice light.

"Georgia," I say back, moving towards her. She flinches and I stop.

“I’m sorry,” she says. Her shoulders droop.

“Let’s just sit and talk,” I answer, expressionless.

We sit on the couch. The camera pans around us in a long take as we talk, going around and around in circles.

She starts with apologies. “I’ll never even talk to Eli again,” she promises. “It was just a stupid one-off thing. It won’t happen again.” I ask her why she did it then, but this was a mistake and it just makes her angry. “Because living in this house is hell, and you’re the one who made it this way!”

When she starts to get mad, when she says, “I don’t have to put myself through this anymore, Julian! This isn’t just a broken bottle or a hole in the wall, you broke my fucking rib!”, when she’s stood up, ready to leave, maybe for good, that’s when I strike.

“I know what I did is wrong,” I say pleading. “And I’m so sorry. You have to know it isn’t easy for me, either. I’ll never forgive myself for what I did to you.” I conjure up tears, I can see her softening up. “It’s just-- with what my mom did to my dad. And what he did to me. I can’t help it, it just surfaces sometimes. You remember what the therapist said about trauma.”

She stops then, and sits back down, on the piano bench this time instead of on the couch. Another flashback sequence starts. We’re sitting on a different couch, a stiffer one that’s a pale yellow. There’s an older woman, probably in her sixties, sitting across from us in a matching chair. I’m talking and they’re both listening intently. “My mom cheated on my dad when I was seven,” I tell them. “When he found out, he was pissed. He hit her and he wouldn’t stop. I didn’t know how to stop him so I had to just watch--” my voice cracks and I let a tear drop from the corner of my eye. Georgia cries and hugs me, the therapist takes notes but I can see all the information I need in her sad eyes. I don’t tell them that my mom deserved it, that if she just hadn’t gotten caught

she wouldn't have had to deal with my dad's wrath. I know they feel sorry for me now, and that advantage would be lost if I kept talking.

Back in our living room I can tell from her flared nostrils, her wide eyes, and her thin lips that my comment didn't land. I feel confused for a moment, it must show in my face because she starts talking again.

"You can't just push me down the stairs because you're pissed off, Julian," she shoots back, getting angry again. She's back up on her feet now. "I don't have to put up with this anymore. I'm tired of you hurting me. I'm tired of your excuses. I'm tired of feeling like this is all my fault." She's pacing, her voice is raising. The camera is positioned so you can see the profile of my face, my eyes are obscured by the shadows. You can see Georgia past my face, she's turned now to face me, still on the couch. "You're not your dad, Julian, and he can't be your excuse anymore."

"Let's not get angry," I tell her, standing to be on the same level. The camera watches us from a low angle, looking up at us. The lighting casts harsh shadows over our faces. "Let's go back to therapy," I propose, taking her hand. "Let's work this out. We can make it better."

She pulls her hand out of my grasp. "Therapy didn't help anything," she nearly shouts at me. Her eyes are filling with tears that haven't spilled over yet. "In fact, I think it made everything worse. You make me feel like I'm going crazy, Julian. I know that you throwing things at me and manipulating me and pushing me down the fucking stairs is wrong but you convince me it's all my fault and we just keep going in circles. I stay with Mary a few days, you apologize by making me think I'm the one who fucked up, and then I come back, things are fine for a few days, then you throw the tv remote at me and I'm sick of this!" She's shouting at me now, tears are streaming down her face. "I'm not crazy!"

I grab her shoulders and she jumps. I speak to her with a low, calm voice. The camera is in a close up now, and you can see the profiles of both of our faces, looking at each other. We're both breathing heavily. I know I'm losing right now. "Let's talk about this tomorrow. When we both have a clear head. Go stay with Mary for the night and we can talk in the morning."

"Here you are, telling me what to do again," she spits at me.

"C'mon, Georgia, do you want this to all end because we're pissed off. Let's talk again tomorrow. If you still feel this way, we'll go from there."

I see her deflate. She turns and walks quickly to the door. She pulls it open and then pauses. The camera jumps closer to her, a close up of the back of her head. "Fine," she says finally, and then leaves, closing the door behind her.

Once she leaves, the camera jumps back to me. I pick up the vase on the side table and throw it hard against the wall. It shatters, raining down water, old roses, and shards of ceramic. I go to the kitchen and the camera follows me, travelling behind me at an upward angle. I open the cabinet and pull out a bottle of whiskey. As I walk back to the couch, I take a long swig from the bottle.

For the first time in our relationship, I don't know what to do or what Georgia is thinking. I drink more as I contemplate the situation. The camera is panning around me again. Going in circles. I keep drinking, I keep thinking. Georgia has never walked away from a fight winning before. I know I've lost control. I went too far. Everyone has a limit and I found hers. I close my eyes and breathe deep. I don't know how to get it back. I keep drinking. It takes a while for the alcohol to affect me. Eventually, I break the panning circle. I stand up and punch the wall, putting a hole in the drywall.

Another flashback sequence: Georgia and I are in the hallway upstairs. I'm shouting at her, there's a bottle in my hand. "Whose fucking car was that Georgia?" She's crying and shrinking away from me.

"I'm so sorry," she sobs over and over again.

"Who was it?" I demand, grabbing her by the shoulder and holding her against the wall with my free hand.

"You're hurting me," she cries out. I don't let go.

"Tell me who that was," I demand.

She pauses. "It was Eli," she says quietly, tears still falling down her face.

"What the fuck were you doing with him?"

She cries more, big dramatic sobs. I tighten my grip and she yelps in pain. She finally tells me, "I slept with him. I'm so sorry. I'm sorry, Julian. I love you. I'm sorry." She's practically in hysterics.

"I can't fucking believe this," I shout at her.

"Let me go," she cries. The camera switches angles to be over my other shoulder, a high angle this time, you can see the staircase next to us. I pull her away from the wall and shove her to the right, sending her stumbling towards the stairs. She falls, twisting and sliding down the whole flight. She screams as she falls but resumes her sobbing once she's at the bottom, holding her torso. The camera angle is over my head now, facing down on her at the bottom of the stairs like I do as I take another swig from my drink. I throw my bottle and it shatters on the wall opposite me, over her head. She lets out a yelp of surprise as the glass falls around her.

Back in the present I approach the bottom of the stairs. A tile is cracked and I don't remember if it was like that before last night. I've already cleaned up the glass, but the wall is stained from the alcohol that trickled down it.

I go upstairs, stumbling now but not spilling my drink. I reach the bathroom. I look in the same mirror I did earlier, but the lighting is different now. It's much harsher and I'm lit from underneath. My smile isn't charming anymore but it's positively manic. I know what I'm going to do.

Georgia loves me right now. But if I let this go on, she won't. She'll move on, she'll probably start dating Eli. She'll tell everyone about her crazy ex, about the hell he put her through. There's only one way to make sure she never stops loving me. We'll never have that conversation tomorrow, the one that would inevitably end with her leaving and feeling like she's doing the right thing.

I open the mirror up to access the medicine cabinet. I grab a bottle of pills. They're Georgia's, for when her anxiety is so bad she can't sleep. I go back to our bedroom and sit down on the bed. I don't particularly want to die, but this is the only way I can win.

I open the bottle and pour the pills out in a pile on the nightstand and set my bottle next to it. I take the ring out of my pocket, the blue opal ring you saw me buy earlier. The camera zooms in on it. Blue is Georgia's favorite color. She would have loved this ring. I put it on the nightstand, next to the pills and the booze, and the camera tracks my movement. It's a startling image, really. A director's wet dream.

I take a handful of pills and use my alcohol to wash it down. It isn't long before I feel tired. I lay down on my bed--our bed. The ring is still positioned on the nightstand, the perfect prop for

the moment. The camera focuses on the ring, I'm out of focus in the background, laying on the bed, dying.

Tomorrow morning, Georgia will come to talk this over. She'll probably be ready to end things. She will have practiced with Mary all night long. She'll be confident, this time. No more red rimmed eyes, her hair will look nice. She will have showered. She'll let herself in and see the mess of the vase on the floor. She'll have to brush shards of vase off the piano. This will convince her that she's making the right choice. I'll never change. She's right.

The camera will follow her up the stairs as she climbs them carefully, trying to not let emotion overcome her as she revisits this site, her ground zero. She'll call out my name, she'll probably assume I'm passed out drunk in the bathroom. She'll check there, see the medicine cabinet open. This will be her first red flag. She'll go to the bedroom, moving with urgency. The camera will follow her, but the director won't use a track. He'll use a handheld so you'll get that shaky effect, so it feels more dramatic, more real.

She'll stop in the doorway of our bedroom and the camera will stop behind her, still this time. She'll take in the scene, me, lying peacefully on the bed. The pile of pills. The bottle. The ring. They're all on the same nightstand as my picture of us.

She'll rush to me. She'll check my pulse. She'll dial 911. She'll be crying. She'll be apologizing. She'll be calling my name, asking me to come back, begging for this to not be real. It'll be too late. I'll be dead.

Right now, Georgia loves me. She'll always love me, she'll feel too guilty not to.

The sunlight will stream in from my window. The camera will move to an extreme close up of my eyes, closed.

**Morgan Cusack**

“this place you made”

the lost and tormented crying out into the eternal night  
fallen leaves dance to an eerie symphony  
here the raven watches with judging eyes

i dream of it every night, holding your pages close to my chest

a land of madness  
of sorrow and loneliness  
here the dead can rise

i trace your words, whispering them to the shadows lurking on the walls

a world of darkness  
of sickness and despair  
here where ghosts linger

i found solace in its residences, peace among the decay and carnage

you made this place  
with its dark beauty  
and broken starlight

and i love calling it home

**Morgan Cusack**

“Chasing the Sun”

Why do I follow her?

Because I have spent too long in the dark  
She is like glimpsing the sunrise  
Gentle and warm and so beautiful

Because she always finds a reason to smile  
She laughs like it's nothing  
She pulls me to my feet and we dance around the fire, free and joyful

Because she is stubborn and brash and won't listen to anyone  
She is brave and loud and unapologetically optimistic  
She has a soft heart but it has never stopped her from loving freely

Because she can see all my broken pieces  
She has touched the jagged edges and came away with bloody hands  
Yet she still tells me I'm beautiful

I walk by her side because she allows it with a smile and a bandaged hand clutched in mine

## **Morgan Cusack**

### **“Those Left Behind”**

Eden had a lot of pictures. After Michael broke the news that he couldn't afford her ballet lessons--and Eden herself realized how expensive soccer and softball could get--finding the old film camera felt like fate. Her art teacher had been more than happy to show her how to work the camera and develop the film. After that Eden couldn't put the thing down. Now her room was wallpapered with her photos; she was proud of her work, more than happy to show it off to the world. There were a few photos though, the very personal ones, that she kept hidden from view. Buried at the bottoms of drawers, stuck behind her mirror, pressed between the pages of her favorite books like precious flowers.

James stumbled upon her hidden pictures a lot; that's why he wasn't really shocked when he was reading one of Eden's books and a polaroid fell from between the pages. What made James pause, though, was that there was a couple in the photo; they looked vaguely familiar but James couldn't place them. Something in the woman's smile as she looked up at the camera struck James. It was in the man too, in the way he looked down at the woman with such obvious love and adoration on his face.

James felt Eden lean forward over her knees, trying to look at the picture as well. “Which one did you find now?” She asked, affection and amusement warming her voice.

“Who are they?” James held the photo out for her to see. Eden tensed. Her feet left James' lap and she set her homework on the coffee table. She stared at the picture for a long time, the unease clear on her face.

Finally she said, “Those are my parents.” Eden tried to keep her tone light, like she didn't care, but James could hear how strained it was. James looked back at the picture and it clicked, he

could see Michael in the woman's smile; Eden in the man's eyes. That look the man wore was one that Eden gave James more often than James could count. Even seeing the similarities, from the things Eden had told him about her childhood, James found it hard to believe.

"*These* are your parents? But they look so--"

"Happy? I know, I hate them for it." Eden pulled away from James, going back to sorting her newest batch of developed pictures. Eden deliberately ignored the gnawing ache that settled in her chest whenever she looked at that polaroid.

"It was from when they were still dating," she continued, trying to sound disinterested. "It was way before Michael or me. Before everything turned horrible."

"Eden," James said softly, unsure what else to say.

"I hate that stupid picture," Eden muttered, not lifting her gaze from the coffee table. "We should have had that, Michael and I. *They* should have been our parents."

"I'm so sorry." James hugged Eden and she squeezed back. "You deserved better Eden."

"*Michael* deserved better," Eden corrected. "It sucked watching my dad walk away and my mom kick my brother out. Those four years were absolute hell, but they are nothing compared to what Michael's lost because of them. Because of *me*."

James raised an eyebrow, "What are you talking about? You haven't done anything to your brother."

"No, but look at what he had to do for me." Eden was somewhere between anger and guilt, and sadness. "Michael gave up his teenage years to raise me. He gave up college to fight for me. He gave up his dream job because teenagers are expensive. It's not fair. I was never supposed to be his burden."

“You are not a burden!” James said, grabbing Eden’s shoulder to make sure she was listening to him. “Michael made those choices because he loves you.” Eden seemed to wilt with those words, all the fight draining out of her.

James wanted to say more. He wanted to argue; that Michael was happy as long as Eden was, that Michael did everything because he wanted what was best for her. But Eden was on the brink of tears and James didn’t want to make it worse by pushing the subject. He decided to slip the picture back into the book and set it on the floor, out of sight. James took Eden's hand and gave it a squeeze, Eden squeezed back but didn’t look up from her lap.

James racked his brain for something to say, anything that would make Eden feel better, but he couldn’t think of a word. He was saved from his struggle by the sound of the front door opening.

“Princess, you here?” Michael’s voice suddenly filled the small apartment. Eden was already half off the couch before James could think to let go of her hand. Michael barely had a moment to set his things down and take off his shoes before he had his arms full of Eden. The teenager wrapped her brother in a tight hug and he laughed softly, hugged her back.

“You know, I’m really glad you never grew out of hugs.” Michael muttered into his sister’s curls. Eden held her brother a little tighter, burying her face deep in his shoulder.

“Hey, kiddo, what’s wrong?” Michael stroked his sister’s hair, feeling like he was fifteen again comforting Eden after a nightmare.

Eden pulled back, looking up at her brother. “I waited for you, last night. I was worried all day.”

“I’m so sorry.” Michael gave his sister another tight squeeze. “I picked up an early shift so I just slept in my car. I was going to call but I was out as soon as I sat down.”

Eden frowned and crossed her arms, “Mikey, you promised!”

“I know, Princess, I know.” Michael sighed, rubbing his temples. “It’s been a really long day, so can we table this argument for later?”

“I think that’s my cue to get going.” James said, reminding the siblings that they had an audience.

“You’re welcome to stay for dinner.” Michael offered, gesturing to the bag of takeout he left sitting on the floor. James smiled and shook his head.

“Not that I don’t want takeout for the fourth night in a row but I think Maria will report me missing if I don’t show my face at the apartment soon.” James pressed a quick kiss to Eden’s forehead, making the girl smile. “I’ll call you later, okay?”

Eden nodded, “Bye, James.” James slipped out of the apartment, leaving the siblings to their dinner and night in.

“Are you okay?” Michael asked softly, his hand brushing her shoulder. Eden gave her brother a weak smile.

“Yeah, it was just--” Eden bit her lip, their parents were never a good subject and Michael was right. It had been a really long day. The last thing Eden wanted right now was to start something; so she just shook her head. “Nothing, don’t worry about it. What did you get for dinner?”

“Chinese,” Michael said, deciding it was best to let this one go. “I’ll get the plates, you take this to the living room and pick a movie.”

“Alright,” Eden grabbed the bag and went to pick a movie from their collection. Michael followed behind a few moments later with plates and silverware. Eden already had a movie in and was setting the takeout cartons out on the coffee table.

“Scoot, kid,” Michael shoved his sister over gently. Eden complied, giving up the spot and taking the plate he offered. Michael watched as the preview started playing on the TV. “What did you pick?”

“A classic,” Eden said, picking up the carton of rice and putting some on her plate.

Michael looked up suddenly, “I swear if it’s another slasher flick—” Eden burst into laughter, cutting off her brother. Michael smiled, hearing his sister laugh eased the tension in his shoulders.

“It’s not, I promise,” She said between giggles. “What happened to my tough knight? You’ve fought dragons, yet a little movie blood makes you squeamish?” Michael made a face and stole the rice from her in retaliation for the teasing.

“*Nightmare on Elm Street* has far more than just a little blood, Princess. That movie was disgusting, I can’t believe you could eat while watching it.” Michael’s face scrunched in distaste; Eden couldn’t tell if he was just playing it up to get her to laugh or if he was serious. Either way Eden found it entertaining.

“Alright hush, you baby. See, it’s Disney.” Eden pointed to the screen as the Disney logo appeared. “Nothing is more dinner friendly than Disney.”

Eden kept glancing over at her brother during the movie, the conversation that she had with James playing over and over again in her head. Michael could have been so much more. He could have been happy. If only he hadn’t had to deal with her.

“Do you ever regret this?” Eden asked quietly, half hoping that her brother wouldn’t hear.

“What?” His eyes skip from the TV to Eden, his brow creased with confusion.

“Taking me in.” Eden elaborated, staring at her lap.

Without hesitation Michael said, “Never, not for a single second.”

“But I ruined everything.” Eden clenched her fist in her lap and tried to stop the tears gathering in her eyes.

“Is this why you were so worked up earlier?” Michael asked softly and Eden nodded slowly.

“You wanted to be a teacher, Mikey,” Eden cried. “Not a library janitor or a cashier at freakin’ Walmart. You wanted out of this God awful town.”

“I was a kid when I wanted that stuff,” Michael shook his head, trying to find the right words. “Taking care of you is far more important to me than going to college ever was.”

“Dammit,” Eden muttered, angrily wiping away her tears. “Sorry, I’m crying like a baby.”

“Hey, come here, Princess,” Michael pulled his sister into a tight hug. “Never apologize for crying. You’re allowed to be upset about things.”

Eden dropped her head on her brother’s shoulder and they watched the rest of the movie in silence. It wasn’t until the credits started to roll that Eden realized Michael fell asleep. With a sigh Eden set about cleaning up their dinner. After the dishes and take out were cleared away Eden went back to collect her things and head to bed.

Walking around the coffee table to grab her English paper, Eden felt her foot bump against something. Glancing down she saw it was the book James had been reading earlier. She was tempted to kick it under the couch and forget that it-- and the picture inside-- ever existed. She couldn’t bring herself to, though. Picking the book up, Eden flipped open the cover and looked at the Polaroid again. The younger versions of her parents smiled up at her, looking so happy and in love. Eden felt the sadness and rage well within her again. Part of her wished that she had never accepted the photo, that she had thrown it in the trash the moment her father pressed it into her hands.

*I'm sorry, but it's better this way, I promise.* He kept saying that, over and over again. *One day you'll understand why it had to be this way.*

Eden had always thought that was crap. That it just another stupid excuse to get out of explaining himself. For most of her teenage years she had hated her father; thought he was a coward for running away and not even giving them a good reason. How could he just pick up everything and walk away from two children that were crying for him to stay? How could things get better? Glancing up at Michael, looking pale and so utterly exhausted, Eden couldn't shake the thought that maybe she did understand.

After things with her parents Eden knew about toxic relationships; she knew how blinding they could be. Sometimes you could want someone in your life *so badly*, you did not see how they were destroying you piece by piece. Sometimes you could not see how terrible things got until one of you walked away. Sometimes people did not know what was best for them until someone made the decision for them.

Watching the slow rise and fall of Michael's chest, Eden knew she had to make the decision for him. She draped a blanket over her sleeping brother and turned off the TV. After that Eden set to work. In her room she grabbed her school bag and turned it upside down, spilling the contents onto her bed. It took all of fifteen minutes for Eden to fill the bag with clothes, her camera and film, and a few of her favorite pictures.

Eden stood at the front door for a while, her hand on the door knob. She couldn't stop second guessing herself. Michael was going to be so worried when he realized she wasn't at school the next day. He was going to drive himself mad looking for her. The thought of hurting her brother even more almost made her turn back and forget the whole thing. He'll get over it, a treacherous part of her mind thought, when he realizes how much easier things are without her. He'll be fine.

With one last glance at her sleeping brother, Eden slipped out the front door and shut it quietly behind her. She pressed her forehead against the door and sighed.

“I’m sorry, Mikey, but it’s better this way,” She whispered before steeling herself and walking out into the night alone.

## Emilie Hahn

“Overcome: A Sestina”

A man, weighed down, filled with sadness to brim  
Felt grief and solitude yet wanting nothing  
Embracing sweetness of that intrusive edge  
Desire and revulsion, a dissonant quest to end  
And yet exist in the hold of that blissful fall  
That, once done, leaves everything still.

Waxing false of self, both breath and heart still  
Held desperately to the unknowable brim  
Of what it means for a man to fall.  
Those creatures past whose tales nothing  
Speak of the war within which has no end  
But only plunge, grasping air, past celestial edge.

But curious, challenge, the movement to edge  
Away from damnation, yet further still  
From redemption, with no means to end  
Suffering. And so, with mouth full of brim  
Stone and fire, a man should shout nothing  
Of repugnance, but repentance for those who fall.

Ask, to what end does it serve to fall  
Into ash, never again to fear that impossible edge?  
Fondness grows with span of space, but says nothing  
Of time, in which distance only makes greater still  
Proof of minute sins that, in the pool of time, brim  
Over and become a single drop. Again, what end?

A man, in refusal to accept this feeble end  
Removes those weights of mourning. Laments fall  
Soft, once latent behind him. Relief awash, brim  
Tears of grace from humbled eyes. A Man on edge  
Once before, remembering those halcyon days, still  
Overcome with loss unrealized, weeps and says nothing.

What debt of life repaid with life satisfies? Nothing  
So poorly fills a cup as breaking the glass. And so end  
The trials that man partake to manifest harmony alone; Still  
Body and mind from temptation of sorrow. The fall  
Is much greater a consequence than the brevity of grief, the edge  
A devil who challenges those to be as weak as he.

Let the sound of no thing, devil or man, promote fall  
Or even stumble! The end is not a vicious edge  
But triumph in still beating hearts, and in love brim.

## Emily Trenter

“Frozen Patience”

So in love that once he went away  
she didn't want that feeling to fade  
She wanted no sadness, no grief  
So she placed her soul in the heart of the tree.  
A split second of time  
forever frozen in ice.  
Never allowed to move  
Never allowed to breathe  
A love so pure  
In roots so deep  
Someday he shall retrieve her.  
But for now she's frozen  
and awaits his return.  
Forever frozen yet she feels his touch.  
She feels his touch at the rise of the morning sun.  
Hears his whispers in the wisps of the wind.  
Then at night when the moon goes up  
She knows another day has past  
aware that soon,  
here soon  
She will see him again at last.

**Connor Sullivan**

“Evil Crow”

Evil Crow—  
steals my Child’s food at night.  
Takes it all away,  
leaving my Child with none.

I despise that Crow—  
that who ruined my Child’s appetite.  
He pecked at my Child’s peace of mind,  
disrupting my Child’s playful pippet.

It raged—  
On and on, that Wretched Crow.  
It did unspeakable things that spooked my Child’s slumber.  
On the window sill at night, he scratched so sinister—

Evil Crow—  
I grabbed my blaster—  
and shot, I did, into that Evil Crow’s eyes.  
I watched as the life slowly drained from its Evil Crow eyes.

## Connor Sullivan

### “Unlocked”

The initial contact was brutal. It hit hard and struck the surface, rippling into small waves. From the dock, she stood watching as it descended. As it hit, she looked unphased — as if it didn't affect her. She thought, *And how could it? For what it's worth...it isn't worth the tears.* As she walked off the dock, not once did she look back.

As the locket cascaded down the deep waters of the Atlantic Ocean, its cheap silver chipped away leaving fragments of manufactured metal. It drifted smoothly and slowly as it took its time before reaching the sandy floor. The locket held secrets—dark, formidable secrets that wreaked havoc on those who wore it close to their heart. “A simple picture is worth a thousand words,” as they say. Inside, a picture was beginning to wash away, it had been quickly jammed into place. A couple posed for their picture, looking with a gay delight toward the photographer. They smiled and embraced each other as if they'd done no wrong. Their smiles reflected the camera's flash, giving their teeth a pearly white finishing. Most painful of all — they looked natural. Their happiness couldn't be wrecked by a violent sea storm, no, their love affair would be perpetual.

The water was bitter and snappy. Rust accompanied the chaffing metal, as the salt rubbed away at the metallic finishing. Its lock grew weak by the water's beatings, fluttering open to reveal the dark secret that burnt their relationship to ash. A secret that Aun-leigh mistakenly discovered as she was digging through his things with an unwavering sense that he'd been handsy somewhere that wasn't her chest. Somewhere that wasn't *her*.

Inside its chamber, the miniature polaroid of the couple, happier than she'll ever be, again, begins to dissolve in the salty water. Its edges fringe and the polished finish bubbles as the

water splashes. Wearing thin, the plastic film gives way and floats separately as the locket drifts in the deep blue waters. Slowly and beautifully, it etches into the sandy floor at last.

“How could *you*,” she yelled at him, her voice shredding with sorrow and anger. “What happened to ‘forever and always?’ Our vows — ‘until death do us part,” she faltered into a hurricane of tears. “Samson, the sight you alone makes me want to scratch my eyes out with my own nails—I know you couldn’t help it, but dammit, it still doesn’t fix the pain in my chest!”

There were only a few choice words that he could say to ease her rainfall of grief. His attempts to comfort all go deflected by the slight of Aun-leigh’s hand. She snapped and swatted until he got her message. “I know, I know... I can barely face you right now—I can’t describe the feeling. My stomach aches, I can’t change how I felt—how I *feel*. I don’t know what else to say, except—I’m sorry. I’ll do anything to make it up to you, but I know that there’s probably nothing that will ever undo the hurt. I love you, no matter what happens. No matter what comes of us.”

He removed his hand from the back of her neck, the hair on his knuckles stood on end as the coldness of the air met their follicles.

“What’d you say?” Her voice has deepened. Suddenly, the oxygen has left the room.

“I’m sorry, Aun-leigh. I’ll always *love* you.” She flinched at the word as if he stabbed her with its jagged steel.

“No, no, no, NO! You lost every right to say that—we’re *over*. There’s nothing left between us. Don’t you get that? You fucked up. You just said it yourself, you can’t fix your mistake. You can start by getting the hell away from me. Pack up your shit and just *go*.” The sobs continued to increase, growing in intensity. Her heart had truly been shattered.

“Aun-leigh—” he said as he reached for her shoulder.

“*Don’t!*” She slapped his hand away from her and made her way out of the kitchen swiftly before he had the chance to chime in.

Hurt and upset with his failed attempts at mending what’s been broken, he began to pack his things into three suitcases. He packed his essentials: ample shirts, pants, socks, and boots to get him by, for the time being, hoping he’d get the chance to return for the rest. On the back burner of his mind, he thought when he’d return for them when things settled down between them and a silver lining would shine through, leaving room for a friendship. Leaving without a clue of where he’d stay, he drove out of their apartment complex in his 2006 Toyota Tundra. White-knuckled, he gripped the steering wheel. Tightness swelled in his shoulders and his heart. Her reaction was all but dramatic; he’d expected it, almost demanded her boiling-over reaction. Holding himself together was harder than he’d ever predicted. There wasn’t a speck of regret in his mind—just disappointment. However much he tried to guard his heart, he still came out disappointed by Aun-leigh’s reaction, for it meant things were over for good. They couldn’t be mended back together *this* time.

He didn’t have a destination in mind, he simply drove. Driving through town, he headed east. He left Boston, hoping he’d think of a place once he had some room to breathe. His folks lived about two hours out and down, surely, he could stay there for a couple of nights while things settled in the city. Another idea flashed in his mind, but it didn’t seem right—given that it’s the sole reason everything burns like Hell right now. Seeing Zander would be classified as insane. After all, their relationship killed his with Aun-leigh. No, he couldn’t. He shouldn’t—so, he won’t. He’ll simply drive away from it all — clear his head.

Aun-leigh changed out of her clothes after he left, but the feeling of him still lingered on them. It crept up on her skin like a caterpillar on a leaf. It unnerved her and made her want to

purge in the bathroom. Purge her feelings, purge her thoughts, purge everything down the toilet. The scent of him on her pink blouse made her skin itch and it grew too uncomfortable for her to bare. She changed into cliché breakup attire: oversized hoodie, sweatpants, ankle-high socks with a hole or two in them, her dried mascara was smudged under her eyelashes. Her appearance was the least of her worries at the moment, given she'd lost what she referred to as her true love. Her world had stopped and she didn't know how to start it again. But she sure as hell would. How could she? She'd been made a fool by—no. No, she won't even *think* his name. She will get over this, in time. With all things, she needed time. Time to heal, time to grow, and time to move on.

After scrubbing off her cosmetics, she also needed to remove the essence of his touch on the back of her neck. Taking a hot pink hair clip, she hooked her hair up, letting her neck air out his touch. Air tickled at her neck, making the baby hairs on her neck stand on their ends.

Tink barked as she slammed the door on her way out. His wagging tail accelerated as did the frequency of his pitch, telling Aun-leigh that she'd forgotten him and she needed to come to fetch him, or else there'd be a puddle for her clean up once she'd returned.

Her 2007 Ford Focus roared to life. She backed out of the parking spot faster than normal. Her tires spun as she turned onto 82<sup>nd</sup> Street. She headed toward the docks, where she could process the heartbreak.

Aun-leigh always spent her sorrows at the harbor, something about the incoming vessels soothed her. The stress and anxiety floated away with the passing boats and ferries. Salty air kissed her face as she sat on the edge of the furthest dock. Her feet dangled, nearly touching the Atlantic Ocean. Her nose filled with the fragrance of travel and sea. Pungent smells filled her

lungs, almost burning, but it did the opposite—it calmed her, acting as a clutch to take her back to peaceful memories of the ocean with her father.

*“Dammit,”* she muttered under her breath to herself. *How could this have happened—especially to us? We were happy...weren't we? We were high school sweethearts, dammit!*

She rotated the cheap metal between her fingers. Its coolness tickled her clammy hands. A token that was in part to blame for stealing her life from her rested in her grasp. Shakiness stopped her from opening its clasp, revealing what she didn't want to see. If she saw the photograph, it was true. It was really happening and she couldn't deal with such a trauma right now, given that today—today of all days—was the anniversary that pulled her heartstrings and jerked out tears every year since his passing. Her father dances through her mind and into memory.

Memories filled her thoughts, each flashed quickly, not lasting more than a second or two. Boat rides on the ocean with him made her tear up. Fishing stories made her smile. Hiking up the mountain trails made her knees sore. Just simple memories of being around her father made her lose all sanity—her chin became a delta of tears. They fell down her cheeks, flooding her vision with streams of tears.

Painful memories quickly replace her happier ones. Her father's heavy hand made her liver ache at the memory of compulsive drinking. His random aggression made her shake with fear. Images complimented the jabbing memories. Her father drinking bottle after bottle – it didn't matter the substance, just anything that gave him the fix he was craving – cursing at her mother for no apparent reason. “God ‘ammit, Josie! Can't you do somethin' for shit?” Not seeing the logic in yelling back when Josie knew there hadn't been a reason to his insistent yelling, she

left him to his self-wallowing and pity. He had plenty of reason to be the loser that he was: lost his job and was starting to lose his hair and sense of morale.

She hears a bone-curdling sound that evokes a shiver. *Bang!* The sound of the gunshot made her lose her breath. Its memory still haunts her. The details she remembers, replay over in her mind like a movie. Reliving coming home from school, dropping her book bag off on the table by the front door in the washroom. The way the sound shot through each room of the house. *Bang!*

Eight years later, she sat on the docks stronger than before. She'd survived his death then, she'd overcome a painful divorce now. Her tears eased up as she stared across the cerulean waters, mesmerized by the blazing sunset of vibrant corals and golden yellows.

She looked down at her hands. The locket sat in her palms, urging her to open it. *Let the truth ring free*, it sang to her.

It clicked as she undid its clasp. Inside, she saw their picture. They looked happy—truly happy—and it sparked sympathy within her. *He's happy, really happy. I'd never seen him this happy*, she eased herself. Both of their cleft chins and dark hair looked almost fancy—like a picture out a magazine. Their white teeth reflected the light of the camera's flash. His arm wrapped around his secret lover's broad shoulder. They were happy—*genuinely* happy. Samson and whatever his name was, looked happy—like two soulmates who stumbled upon each other at the end of their roaring twenties. Their smiles were contagious—she grew a smile that mimicked theirs.

Aun-leigh pulled her feet up from the dock's edge and looked out onto the clear, crisp water. With one pebble, it'd shatter and ripple as would shards of glass. Her gaze was frozen,

looking into the water is if it were a crystal ball revealing her future. *Great acts of courage, prosper over those of hatred*, the locket speaks to her.

She breathed deep and released it into the dry air. Her breath fogs the exiting autumn air — winter is on the horizon. A season of change greets her on the harbor's bay. Its initial jabs of icy air will plunge into her, but over time, she'll warm up in time for spring.

The city will become a labyrinth of snow and ice, and in it, she will be alone. Not forgotten, but alone. Of course, she'd imagine a life with him, but he wouldn't experience the joys of the winter months with her. For him, it'd be an act he'd have to force a smile in. Christmas wouldn't be enjoyably spent with her, for whom he isn't capable of becoming physically attracted towards, anymore.

She struggled to gain a sense of acceptance, but with time she assured herself things will find their happy ending. Once her tears ceased and she gained clarity in that she couldn't find happiness if she continued to leach sorrow off of her heartbreak, no, she would have to stand up. Not only physically, but for herself, she would stand up and fight for her future happiness.

With a heavy heart, she knew the decision she needed to make.

Knowing she'd lost the battle of love and war, with all her might, she let the truth ring free as the locket flew out of her hand and started to drift to the ocean's floor.

## **Angelique Herrera**

“Abandonment”

You were young  
and dumb.

A man from Juárez,  
driving around Aurora.

Banda music blared  
from the speakers,  
of your red hoopty.

Spanish rolling off  
your tongue,  
as you sang along.

Unaware of the car,  
pulling out in front of you.

**BAM!**

Fear etched its way into your mind.  
Anxiety set in.

You were from México,  
Not Aurora.

You were illegal, and insurance-free.

You had to  
make your move.

*Rápido,*

or the cops would send you back.  
Back to Juárez, México.

You flew out of the car  
running down the uneven roads.

Not caring enough to look back.  
Not caring enough to look back

At what you forgot.

At what you forgot?

The baby carrier.

At who you forgot.

At you you forgot?

Your newborn baby.

You forgot your baby.

*You forgot me,*

**But I still can't forget about you.**

## Angelique Herrera

### “Just a Bite”

Her skin glistened like cocoa beans; shiny, deep, and beautiful. Her almond-shaped, chocolate-colored eyeballs looking down at me. Always watching, sometimes with adoration; sometimes in frustration, but always with love. This was my person, my protector, my home, but most importantly my mother. Always looking out for me, guiding me towards what was right, and telling me what is considered wrong.

Grandma’s house was our home early on in life. We shared a tiny sky blue bedroom. The floors were wooden, a soft brown color from years of wear. The floor creaked against every step I took. Grandma given us a gigantic blue rug to drown out the noise from the creaking. In our room, sat our two beds. Her bed sat across from mine, taking up most of our bedroom. It was a queen-sized bed, perfectly fit for my mother. She was a queen. However, her bed looked monstrous compared to my wooden, twin-sized bed in the corner of our room.

Momma’s bed was my favorite place to hang out, because my bed was always covered in “Little Critter” or “The Berenstain Bears” books. They were piled up to the point where I couldn’t see Cinderella on my Disney Princess comforter underneath. Momma’s bed was silky smooth, her pillows filled with feathers. I only knew that, because they would poke me every now and then. Her blankies always had tigers on them. I roared, my hands shooting out in front of me like claws every time I’d look at it. Yet, my favorite thing about her bed was the smell. The scent of her Aussie mousse clung on to every part of her bed. I’d dive under her covers, wrapping myself up like a burrito, breathing in the scent of my momma.

Momma joined me some days, tackling me playfully with her cocoa colored arms. She smiled so widely, you could count every top tooth. Taking note that her two front teeth were

shifted forward ever so slightly. Smile lines forming soft etches around her mouth. She smelled like Skittles, and laughed like Tinkerbell. You could hear her age within her laugh. Only twenty-two years to my three. Her hair; wild like a lion, it sprung in every direction as we play fought. Continuing to play, until we were out of breath from laughing too hard.

Mommy was tired. She always seemed so tired. She worked all day as a preschool teacher, then she'd come home to another little one. Too young at the time to understand her irritability. I just wanted to keep playing, but she was exhausted. I was too riled up, not listening to my momma warning me to settle down. Instead, I tried to get her attention by sinking my crooked little baby teeth into her arm.

Momma's face got grumpy, lines formed at her forehead.

"Angelique Noel...that wasn't very nice." Momma said, still sounding like Tinkerbell when she's mad.

I did it again, thinking I was being playful. Momma looked at me in shock.

Then, Mommy grabbed my arm, and sunk her big teeth into my little arm covered with baby fat. My eyes widened, trying to process what had happened. Looking down at my arm then back at Momma. I looked down once more, and let out a wail. Tears welling up in the corners of my eyes; eyes way too big for my round little face.

Momma laughed a bit, then scooped me up in her arms; wiping away my crocodile tears. She proceeded to tell me in a soft voice. "Liquey, when someone tells you something isn't nice, you don't do it again. When you do something that hurts another person that gives them the idea to hurt you back. You have to remember that you treat people how you want to be treated. You got that? Also, stop crying baby, you are not a cute crier."

“Yes Mommy.” I said pouting, as I snuggled in closer to her. Taking one of her springy curls in my chubby little fingers. I sat up, grabbing momma’s arm placing a soft, wet kiss on the spot I had bitten earlier.

“Kisses make me feel better. Does your boo-boo feel better now?”

My mom let out that youthful laugh of hers, “Yes Lique, it feels much better. I love you.”

“I love you too Mommy.”

My mother’s words and actions still resonate with me almost twenty years later. Treating others how you’d like to be treated, it was and still is a fundamental rule within my household. My mother, Tressa, is a big believer in the functionality of karma. She believes, that if you give out goodness and love, you will receive that in return. If not, negative attributes will come your way. However, as I grew older I recognized that her actions from that memory had contradicted the karma mentality. Which left me puzzled. Not on the biting, but more so the reasoning. The whole purpose of her biting me was to teach me a lesson, yet she had inflicted pain upon me. So, wouldn’t that bring upon bad karma to her as well? Instead of her biting me, should she have taken a less harsh approach that wouldn’t leave her in a contradictive place? Yes, most likely. Although, the belief in karma is a vast grey area. As I go about my life with a more realist outlook; I believe in the concept of positivity. If you are able to stay positive and respect others in a positive manner. If that positivity is reciprocated all will be okay. If not, you move on. Yes, my mother’s choice was a good way to prevent biting. However, it led to confusion in the long run when trying to explain her reasoning behind it to a three year old. Aside from the reasoning, I do know for a fact, that I never have and never will bite another individual ever again. That, and an amusing story to tell for years to come.

**Kate Birr**

“Caught”

Stick to the story, don't get caught  
At that moment  
Those were the words going through my head  
Back straight, metal chair,  
Cup of water and cuffs, that looked used

They tried to make me sweat,  
Didn't think that I would lie  
Two faced in fancy suits  
Hidden window  
Even though there is a two-way, crystal clear view

Too bad for them I used my head,  
For something other than a hat rack.  
No evidence to be found at the scene  
No case to be known

Their coffee is not hot,  
Into a cold case  
Folder already starting to be covered by dust  
When in doubt, blame someone else

Hands like ice  
They think they can take me down  
But they haven't gotten me yet  
And there is a secret still, six feet underground

**Sidney Bottino**

One sip  
Running through my veins  
Like water through a river  
Flowing upstream  
First to my Heart  
Then to my Brain  
Inspiring me to Work  
Whilst distracted by my Dreams  
One day I'll get there  
But First,

-Coffee

## Casey Hendrickson

“Cold”

You left me behind, for what reason,  
one that I may never know.

It all seemed perfect, just me and—  
well, just me now of course.

I miss us. I miss when you would listen,  
for hours upon hours, how sweet of you.

I miss the way it was, everything was perfect,  
but something changed.

You left me and your life behind,  
behind in the cold.

Not a care in the world to what happened after that.  
It seems as though it was never important to you anyway.

I catch myself wondering every day, just why I didn't see it,  
just how cold of a person you were all along.

The feeling of being used, wasted, non-important,  
it is something that no one should go through.

No one should ever go through the pain,  
especially from something so cold.

What did I do? How could I have been better?  
The wrong questions. How come you were so cold?

Just don't forget what you have done to me,  
how you have wasted your life, and left us in the cold.

## Casey Hendrickson

“Human”

Unique, special, our own.  
All words of a human.

Times get tougher than the last ones,  
this can shield us from reality.

Reality that no matter what happens,  
we are all still human.

Human. Can mean different things to different people,  
and the truth can be over looked.

When we cause violence, death, anger,  
are we still human?

Can we become something less?  
Society thinks so.

One's race, gender, way of life,  
is sadly the decision maker.

We are more than just that,  
we are all unique.

One's race should not define them,  
but show how unique and important they are.

Male or Female, typically one above the other.  
Why not view both as humans next to one another?

The way you live, is your way of life!  
Not for someone else to change for you.

We are all human, no matter what society says.  
Even those who say otherwise, are humans with us.

## **Jacob Taylor**

“Living in Chicago”

The beautiful city lights  
So many buildings stars don't exist  
The youth matter and money isn't hard to get  
Yet gang members would still beat on you and take all of your bread  
Play it smart and be careful they said  
Wind blows all day long  
Portillos or Giadonos can't make up my mind they're both so delicious  
The Bulls Sox Bears Cubs and Blackhawks  
We love Them Dearly  
South East West North  
Chicago so huge  
Hundreds of Public Schools  
1.8 Million Citizens living life by the racist CPD  
Messing with young men because “suspension”  
When they've done no crime and happened to have his hood on his head  
The lake sensational in the summer breeze  
Chicago what beautiful city it is indeed

## **Emma Dayhoff**

### “Greenwood”

My mother told me that the most important thing to know about surviving is that you have to fight. No matter what.

“You have to fight to survive, Moth. Trust is a luxury in this world. When it comes down to it, you’re on your own.”

For my mother, Margaret Greenwood, trust nearly killed her. My father, Robert Jones, was a cruel man. Abusive on multiple fronts- a straight up tyrant. She tried to get out of the relationship on numerous occasions, but he was violent and wouldn’t let her leave. She learned quickly that she couldn’t fight back, not without risking my safety and of course her own. She got pregnant with me when she was nineteen. He was twenty-seven. They met in a club, which of course she was too young to be in. My mom was taking shots of cheap tequila and half-heartedly dancing to the thumping electronic music with her girlfriends when Robert approached her. The multicolored lights flashed on his sun-kissed skin.

“You from around here?” Robert asked Margaret in a booming voice, lightly touching her shoulder to get her attention, holding a bottle of Budweiser in his free hand.

She turned to face him. “Yeah, I’m only, like, twenty-five minutes from here.”

“Me too,” he nodded. “So what do you do?”

“I just work at a gas station. I’m thinking about taking a few college courses.”

“Oh nice. I loved college. Some of the best years of my life,” he said. “I’m sure you meet a lot of interesting people working at a gas station,” he said, keeping up the conversation.

“Not really. Mostly just old men buying menthol cigarettes and light beer. And high schoolers trying to buy Fireball with their shitty fakes.”

He chuckled and reached out his hand. "I'm Robert."

"Margaret," she replied. Her face flushed as she shook his firm hand.

My mother told me that when they met he seemed like a very nice and stand up guy. She'd had other asshole boyfriends before she married my father and became Margaret Jones. She said she thought Robert was going to be her savior, but she was young and naive. Really, he was her downfall. He left her scarred, both physically and emotionally. He died last year, may he rot in the fiery depths of hell. He was hit by a train, of all things. We're not really sure how he managed to get hit by a train. Drunk, I assume. We're just thankful that he did.

The day after I learned of his death, I legally changed my last name to Greenwood, my mother's maiden name. I didn't want any affiliation whatsoever with that wretched man any longer than I had to. He was dead to me long before he died.

I remember the first time I witnessed what he was truly like, at least the first time I remember, anyway. I was seven-years-old. I was sitting in the new living room on the hardwood floor I didn't like. Our old house had carpet in the living room, which was much more comfortable to sit on. I was lying on my stomach, coloring in a *My Little Pony* book in front of the flat screen, watching *The Backyardigans*. My father and mother were in the kitchen, arguing about I don't know what. I was too busy trying to block them out and focus on listening to my singing animal pals and coloring inside the lines on Twilight Sparkle. They fought all the time, so I didn't think much of it.

Their voices kept growing louder and louder until suddenly I heard a *SMACK!* I snapped my little white blonde head toward the new kitchen with the granite countertops and long oak dining table, my green eyes wide with fear as the purple crayon in my hand slid across the page.

From that day on, he only got worse. Every single argument, every dispute, big or small, led my mother to fear for her safety. And for mine.

When I was in high school, she told me that the first time she tried to break up with him was when I was eight. That's when he really beat her, left blue and purple bruises all over her arms and some on her neck. They were in their bedroom, and he grabbed her by her long yellow hair, alcohol staining his breath. He threw her to the floor in sheer rage. He held her down by her neck and gripped her arms tightly with one hand, throwing her around like a rag doll. I was in the house, just across the hallway. I had no idea.

She didn't cry once.

He also hit me for the first time when I was eight. I was bringing him the pork chop, green beans, and stuffing my mom made for dinner and I accidentally tripped over my own two feet and spilled the entire plate all over him, causing him to drop his beer. His five o'clock shadowed face wrinkled at the mouth as he yelled at me viciously, his widened dark brown eyes piercing a hole into me as I started to cry. He slapped me. I cried, and my mother told him to "Get the fuck out!" He stared at her, and quietly threatened that he would hit me harder if she ever tried to kick him out of his house again. I was too young to fully grasp the situation. All I knew is that I was scared.

Growing up I always questioned why she just didn't take me and run away somewhere far from that abusive jerk she was forced to call her husband, and when I asked her, she told me I was too young to understand and when I was older I would get it. Of course in my teenage years that answer made me furious. It wasn't until he was finally gone from our lives forever that I truly did understand. It only took me twenty-one-years.

I love my mother. Is she perfect? No, not by a longshot. But I respect the shit out of her. She is my role model, the one I look to for strength and guidance.

My mother named me Moth for some ungodly reason. “Yes, like the bug,” is what I always feel inclined to tell people so I don’t have to hear them say it. There are three things I care about most in this world and that’s my mother, nature photography, and becoming a famous painter. Right now I work as a security guard at the Coos Bay Art Museum in Oregon. Essentially, my job is to stand against the white wall and be blinded by the bright ceiling lights and watch people walk by, scanning to see if they potentially have any weapons on them, make sure people don’t touch the artwork, and on very rare occasions break up fights. It pays decently well and has good benefits. I genuinely enjoy it because I get to be around all different types of paintings, drawings, photography, mosaics, ceramics, sculptures, woodwork- you name it. Occasionally visitors will ask questions about the artwork and I’ll talk to them and tell them what I know, and given the opportunity I am able to publicize my own work to them as well. It’s a sweet gig.

Plus, I have this massive crush on another security guard who works there. His name is Kameron, with a K. Kameron Kilowoski. He hates his name, but I think it’s cute. We bonded over the hatred of our names and our appreciation for this one painting by Kim Osgood called “Nurse Stump.” It’s a painting of just a tree stump, and beautiful flowers are sprouted around it, almost ready to bloom. I love the artistic style- realism, but not dull. And the way Osgood utilizes the color scheme- warm colors, bright and vibrant, but not overbearing. When I look at it, it feels like I’m standing right beside it in real life. It’s a simple painting, but it’s simply beautiful.

Kameron thinks the flowers could also be unable to bloom and that they're withering away around it and that the stump is not going to grow into a tree because it's dead. He's definitely a pessimist, but if you call him that he'll correct you and tell you that he's a "realist." Everybody knows that's just a bullshit word for pessimist.

He wants to be a security guard in a correctional facility, so he's working here to gain some security experience. Though Kameron is a year older than me, we both got a late start on college. As of right now we are both taking classes at our local community college, but I plan to transfer to a four year university after I get my associates. Kameron thinks that he shouldn't need a bachelor's degree to work in corrections, which I don't totally disagree with. He's hoping he'll just be able to get his associates in criminal justice and use this job as field experience and be able to get a guard position. It doesn't seem unreasonable to me, but I know it's getting harder and harder to get a law enforcement job without a bachelor's. I'd hire him, but I'm bias.

Right now I'm at home, sitting next to my mother in the carpeted living room on the sunken brown leather loveseat, staring at my phone and waiting for a text back from my crush like a lovestruck school girl. After Robert died we moved to a smaller, more comfortable house closer to the gas station that my mother works at. I love it so much more than I ever did our big, fancy house in the suburbs.

The TV is on, but we don't watch as the cheery *Today* show hosts talk nonstop about something pointless I'm sure. I think they're talking about some nutritional breakfast smoothie. Yuck.

This is what we do on Saturday mornings. We sit on the old loveseat, the *Today* show playing in the background as I drink my sugar-loaded coffee and take pointless BuzzFeed quizzes while I wait to text Kameron at a decent time. I am the epitome of a morning person and he is

most definitely not. Once, when his truck was in the shop, we wanted to get breakfast together before work, so I went to pick him up at nine o'clock and he wasn't even out of bed yet. I had already been up since seven.

Mom drinks her nasty dirt coffee and reads outdated magazines, drawing mustaches and devil horns on the models.

I catch her peeking over my shoulder.

"Stop it!" I whine.

"When are you gonna ask him out? You're driving me crazy staring at your phone like that."

"I'm trying to get him to make the first move."

She rolls her eyes. "Oh lord. Quit acting like a fifteen-year-old girl."

"Maybe you should take another look at that model with the sharpie on saggy boobs, handlebar mustache, and eye patch before you go judging my maturity level, mother," I say, smiling.

"Touche," she responds with a grin, adding a unibrow. My smile widens.

You know how girls always say that their mother is their best friend, but it isn't really true? For me, it's the real deal. My mom and I go hiking together and to movies and coffee shops and bookstores and art shows. We do virtually everything together. Gossip, talk about boys, paint each other's nails, cook- everything. It's why I'm a twenty-two-year-old woman still living with my mother.

God, no wonder Kameron won't ask me out.

I also have my own little amateur art studio here in the basement. Not that I really need the whole basement for an easel and some paint, but I've made it my own personalized crib down there. It's my safe space.

When my father was still alive, my room was my safe space. It was where I went to escape from him and his bullshit. He was always telling me about how my pointless art would never get me anywhere in life. If I wanted to be successful I had to do something practical so I wouldn't end up cashiering at a gas station like my "useless mother." She never went to college because she got pregnant with me. Yet my father had the audacity to blame her for "not getting a real job" even though she was busy taking care of me. He never helped around the house. Never. My father was a fancy engineer so that meant he could do whatever he wanted, apparently. Like beat her until she ran out of tears.

He treated me badly, sure, but I hated how he treated my mother so much more. My father is one of the reasons I work security, so I could learn how to defend myself and help others. I wanted to save my mother from that monster invading our house.

Even as shitty as my father was, he could never ruin Oregon for me. Coos Bay has amazing scenery. I practically never run out of things to paint. I like to paint nature. I'm trying to branch out and paint more of a variety of things, like people, but somehow I always get pulled back into trees, flowers, plants, the sun, the ocean. The outdoors is just so peaceful, so open and spacious. So free.

My mom wants me to paint a portrait of her, but I just don't like painting people. I'm not necessarily bad at it, it's just not my forte. Maybe I'll indulge her one of these days. She would be a stunning model. I would have to resist the urge to paint on saggy boobs and devil horns though. I'm sure she wouldn't find it as amusing on herself as she does on the magazine models.

Since I worked last Saturday, I don't have to work. I'll probably go hiking and take pictures of the outdoors as inspiration for my paintings. Looking up pictures online isn't the same as actually going out in the wild; they look too photoshopped. They're not genuine. I want my work to represent the natural beauty of the earth in all of its glory. My mother always says that I was born in the wrong time. Now there's all this pollution and global warming and an increase in natural disasters. Mom says that Mother Nature is "seizing her vengeance" on us. I think there's still hope that things will get better.

My phone dings.

*Do you have any plans for today?* I read, smiling.

My fingers type speedily. *Not really. I was just gonna go hiking.*

*Can I join you?*

I throw my phone up in the air and squawk with glee as it lands across the room on the tan chair that nobody ever sits on.

"Was that Kameron?" Mom asks with a knowing grin.

"Yes!" I screech, and my mom winces from the noise.

"Stop that!"

"We're going hiking later. How romantic is that?"

"I don't know where you get your girliness from cuz it sure ain't from me."

"Mom, you're wearing a pink robe and fuzzy slippers and you're literally painting your fingernails right now."

She sticks her tongue out at me like a little kid and points to the bathroom. "Go get ready and seduce the shit out of that nice boy."

"Mom!"

She gives me an ornery smile and continues painting her nails. “Will you be home for dinner?”

I nod. “I’ll text you when I’m on my way back.”

Her expression turns serious in an instant. “Be careful. He may be nice but he’s still a man,” she warns. “That Y chromosome of theirs is a real mess,” she says, shaking her head.

“I’ll be careful, mom. I always am.”

Quickly, I take a shower and slip on my worn denim jeans that I wear solely for hiking, and a gray t-shirt with the words “Coos Bay, Oregon” printed in faded blue letters. I have my camera and two bottles of water and some granola bars in my small brown leather bag. We’re going to my favorite trail, the Cape Arago Loop. The entire loop is 4.3 miles, most of it uphill. Hopefully, Kameron can keep up.

He picks me up in his navy blue Silverado. It’s a mess, as always. Empty McDonald’s takeout bags invade my foot space. For how fit he looks, I can’t believe how much McDonald’s he ingests.

We talk and jam out to The Doors and Pink Floyd and occasionally Prince, when he caves to my whining. Maybe I really was born in the wrong time.

When we get there, he deals with me stopping every couple of minutes to take pictures. Even though I’ve been coming here my entire life, I always find something new to capture.

Not a lot of people take this trail because it’s relatively long and physically exerting, so we venture slightly off the trail, unseen. We stand side by side near a ledge of land that overlooks the Pacific. Three thin, leafless trees stand guard behind us. It’s breathtaking every single time.

Kameron takes out his phone and takes a few steps back. “Say cheese.”

“Ew no, don’t take a picture of me!”

“I’m doing it! Say cheese bug girl!”

I give in and smile at the camera. “Alright, your turn,” I say.

“Ew no, don’t take a picture of me!” He mocks in an exaggerated high pitched voice.

“Shut up Kameron Kilowoski,” I say, grinning. “Say cheese.”

He does just that, the sun shining at the perfect angle at the perfect height in the sky over the glistening Pacific waters. The breeze of a mid-autumn afternoon gently blows back his shaggy dark hair, revealing the lightness in the brown of his eyes as he leans casually against the tan-gray tree trunk, looking at me. I just want to stay in this moment.

“Now was that so hard?”

“Yes. Agonizing, actually.”

We stand beside each other, looking out at the rippling ocean waves, our shoulders pressed together in silence.

Kameron turns around and I turn around with him. He extends his left arm and holds his phone, pulling me in closer by my slim waist and into his broad chest. We smile. He smells of pine and salt, his scent lingering as he pulls slightly away.

“Lemme see,” I say, and he shows me the picture of us. “Aww that’s cute. Send that to me.”

I turn my head to see him, and he’s looking at me, his strong jaw only inches from my face. Is he going to kiss me?

He’s not doing anything. Kiss me, dammit!

Oh screw it, I’m making the first move.

I close my eyes and firmly touch my lips to his. He tenses up for a second, then relaxes and rests his hands on my hips, kissing me back. *Finally!*

Our lips release from one another's

We hike the rest of the trail, talking, laughing, and holding hands. This has been the best day. I can't wait to tell my mom all about it.

I tell him that I have to be back for dinner, and we make our way down the trail, pushing and shoving each other playfully and goofing off as if we'd known each other our whole lives. I jump on his back and he spins me around with ease, the nearly leafless trees a blur all around me. His spinning is too fast and he loses control and stumbles over his feet. We crash to the ground, entangled in one another.

"Oh god are you okay, Moth?" He asks me frantically, the lines on his tan forehead prominent with worry.

I laugh so hard that my cheeks hurt from smiling so much, my laugh lines unable to stretch any wider.

"You are sooo not smooth," I tell him, shaking my head and laughing hysterically as he tackles me onto the dry dirt, bathing me in the crunchy leaves. I lie on my back and he holds himself up in a push-up position on top of me, gazing into my eyes. I wipe my thumb across his dirt-splotted cheek, my eyes keeping in contact with his. Sweetly, he touches his soft lips to mine. My whole body shudders on the inside. It's a feeling I've never experienced before.

Kameron bounces to his feet and holds a firm hand out to me. I graciously accept and he gently pulls me to my feet, and we walk the rest of the way back to the parking lot, talking about how we both look like we got attacked by a bear. We're both dusted with dirt from head to toe.

We drive down the highway, singing various Queen songs at the top of our lungs the whole way back to my house.

When we arrive, he parks in my driveway and gets out of the truck and runs around to the passengers side and opens my door.

“Such a gentleman,” I say, blushing.

“Do you wanna go out on Friday? Like, on a date?” He asks shyly, his stance stiff and upright.

I nod with a smile and he takes my hands in his warm ones and leans down and kisses me delicately on the lips. He’s so sweet I could melt.

“Goodbye my beautiful four-foot beauty.”

“Hey! I am five-four, bitch.”

We both laugh and I pull him into me by his wrinkled band t-shirt and shamelessly kiss him again. We’re already the gross touchy-feely couple that my mom and I always make fun of.

I walk up to the front door, waving goodbye to Kameron as he drives off, giddy to tell my mom all about what happened on our hike. I turn the knob and push the door open with ease. As I’m about to walk into the living room, my eyes widen as I look to my right and see my mom standing in front of the TV, the loveseat facing her. Her hands are in the air and she has a bloody gash on her left cheekbone. I turn my head to the left towards the kitchen and see a man I don’t know standing with a gun pointed at my mother’s head.

The rat-like man aims his gun at me and my heart skips a beat as I stand frozen in the doorway. He’s holding a small gun at me in his right hand and is gripping a large black duffle bag in the other, at least half full of various items that I can’t see. His thin ashy hair falls to the side of his bony face, blocking part of his vision in his right eye.

I can take him.

“Moth run,” My mom tells me in a voice that is somehow both calm and frantic. I feel a pang of panic punch my stomach.

“Shut up!” The man shouts, revealing his yellow teeth and returning his aim back to my mother.

My phone is in my back pocket. I slowly begin to reach for it, trying not to let him see me as I dial 911 and hit the green call button.

“What are you doing?” The man yells, once again, pointing the pistol at me. I throw my hands up, dropping my phone on the paved stairs.

“Did you call the cops?” He screams furiously and takes an aggressive step at me, his boot echoing off the hardwood floor. I flinch, knowing that I have to do something right now, but not knowing what to do.

My mom sprints forward and leaps over the loveseat, charging him. I scream, and before I have time to move or react in some way I see a flash of light and hear a *BANG*.

Her head smacks the round wooden kitchen table. She fumbles over the top of the kitchen chair, taking it down with her as her body lands with a *thump* on the hardwood floor.

I stand there, stunned, staring at my bleeding mother as the man bumps my shoulder running right by me and out the door.

The blaring of sirens is muffled in the background.

“Mom?” I feel myself whisper, but I can’t hear myself speak.

The police come running in. I have no idea how much time has past, my thoughts clouded by my utter disbelief. The second they go near her I scream and cry and flail, trying to reach her, my body finally reacting to what just happened.

They hold me down and pull me out of their way as I fight to be by her side.

My aching heart beats rapidly and my breathing becomes uncontrollable, my chest rapidly pumping up and down and up and down.

I fall.

\* \* \*

The police arrested the man who invaded our house, stole what little possessions we had, and shot and killed my best friend. My beloved mother. Apparently the man had been a part of a string of robberies in the area, but he had never been caught until he decided to pull the trigger, and that was it for him. For my mom.

Kameron stands next to me in front of my mother's gravestone, his hand clasped in mine.

Margaret Jean Greenwood

1977-2018

Beloved Mother

A picture of her that I took when we went to the beach on my twenty-second birthday leans against her stone, her hazel eyes burning holes into mine.

*You have to fight to survive, Moth. Trust is a luxury in this world. When it comes down to it, you're on your own.*

Those words keep repeating in my head. I was supposed to be the one to fight. I was supposed to be the one to protect her like she protected me my entire life... and I let her down.

She put her trust in me. She counted on me to be there for her and I wasn't and she had to step in and save me like she always did. And this time it killed her.

My mother fought her whole life to keep me safe from my shithead father, just so I would survive. She fought even when she couldn't fight and even when she wasn't really surviving. Not a day in her life did she ever put herself before me. Not even when I wished she would have.

Now I'm all alone.

I already gave the speech about how much I loved my mom and how much of a wonderful person she was and how she impacted so many people's lives and how she'll never be forgotten. Now everybody's gone and it's just Kameron and me left standing in front of her grave that sits next to hundreds of other graves on the dying grass. The chilly October air lines my bare arms with goosebumps, the sun trying so desperately to break through the thick wall of clouds. Kameron sets his suit coat over my shoulders.

"You were right about Nurse Stump." I turn to Kameron, who looks at me as I continue to face forward. "The stump is dead. It hasn't been a tree for a long time. The flowers around it are withering, not blooming."

He turns to face mom's gravestone again and doesn't say anything for a while.

"I don't know shit about art."

I pull him into my body and weep into his shoulder.

\* \* \*

A year has past, and my grieving heart slowly became easier to ignore, though I still think about her every single day. I've just gotten better at dealing, I guess.

Kameron and I bought a small house together. He just recently got a job at a correctional facility in Coos county, which he loves. He comes home with a lot of crazy stories. We're taking a day trip to Cape Arago Loop this weekend, where I plan to propose to him.

I'm in art school studying to earn my bachelors degree. I still work at the museum, but I am also selling my paintings on the side. I'm happy where my life is heading.

I'm in my little art studio in the basement, standing in front of my easel, a stack of my mom's old sharpied magazines piled next to me. Pictures that I've taken cover an entire brick basement wall from floor to ceiling. On the opposite side of the room I have one side of the wall dedicated to my finished paintings and one side for my works in progress. I'm working on a painting that has been a work in progress for months now. It might be my best one yet.

My mother was right about trust. It is a luxury in this world. I trusted my mother with every fiber of my being, and I would trust her a thousand times over. I loved her so much that when I lost her it nearly killed me. But I'm here. I'm surviving. No- I'm living. Living happily in a house with the love of my life and doing what I love every day. I know my mom would want me to be happy.

I make the final touches to my painting, moving the thin tipped brush swiftly, but cautiously, across the canvas. I walk it over to the finished side of the wall and stare at the watercolor painting. A mixture of forest green, teal, a hint of blue, and daisy yellow make up the background, the colors of the trees, sky, ocean, and sun. Her golden hair cascades down her slender shoulders, complimenting the honey glow of her skin tone and oval jawline, her hazel eyes in contrast with the naturistic scenery.

A portrait of my mother, Margaret Greenwood, smiles at me.

I smile, too.

## Joshua Miller

### “No Longer Alone”

I had heard of a large azure wolf running amok throughout the Valerian Woods. Clearly, the wolf's fur color was of interest but what was most interesting about the rumors were they all said the beast was alone. I know there are some wolves that hunt alone or in small groups, but every sighting of it has seen the beast alone, on certain nights of each month. Coincidentally, they are within a couple days before and after the occurrence of a full moon. Intrigued by the possibility of a werewolf, I set out to the forest to investigate the rumors.

Upon arriving in the village just outside the forest, I talked to the locals to get a feel for what was really going on and a primary concern I had going in was answered promptly. The beast had not been seen by people in the forest, instead it had only been seen at the outskirts of the forest. *Seemed like it was acting more akin to a guardian of the forest. Interesting.* The townspeople had tried many a time over the years to hire hunter after hunter, both alone and in groups, to deal with the creature; though each time they were either never heard from again or deliver messages in the form of their shrieks and cries of terror before a monstrous howl reigned over all on those dreadful nights. The particular detail of the wolf only being seen on nights around the full moon was false though, with the sightings on almost any possible night. Otherwise, the stories were accurate enough. I chose not to gauge much more instead choosing a more direct approach to understanding my prey. Delving straight into the forest.

The townsfolk thought I was a six foot tall madman but I mentally laughed at the thought. I knew the danger but still threw caution to the wind to explore the forest and get to know the environment the villagers feared. Troublesome underbrush dotted the first couple tens of yards, requiring a bit of climbing and nimble movement to get around downed trees, bramble, and other

difficult foliage. A loose stick on a tree snagged my unkempt short brown hair for a moment, but was fixed easily. Otherwise, I was happy to know my choice of gearing up light was good thinking.

Along with the bag holding my sleeping gear and food and water, I had on slacks and a tunic for basic clothing. Considering what danger could be present, I chose to also wear a leather breastplate complimented by leather greaves and armguards. *Still doubt I will need them though.* Fortunately, the rest of the trek became easier the further into the Woods I went.

I will say I underestimated the size of the forest for its massive scope made it difficult to judge how far I'd already hiked. The tall pine and sequoias almost entirely enveloped the sky above, deflecting all but a few rays of light. This unfortunately made the horizon darker and harder to see through, even with my distinct eyesight brightening the world around me. Combine that with the almost never ending number of trees, I could've sworn the forest went on forever; at least the density of the trees kept out any unpleasant breeze or gust of air. Though thanks to the trees competing for the sun's favor, it left less able to grow, thus made for an easier walk through the forest and easier to see the pretty shades of green everywhere.

It was hours later when I chose to set up camp with the setting sun, despite not being able to see much of it. I laid out my comfy yet tough blanket, an ordinary pillow, lit a fire with ease, and pulled up a nearby rock to sit down. I didn't think about anything in particular while I sat, instead listening to the peaceful noises nature had to offer. The fire crackling away as it illuminated and fought back the surrounding darkness under the trees. The crickets and grasshoppers out in force, chirping away through the night. The occasional deer, rabbit, and other animal passing by, trying to avoid my attention. The trees rustling in the slight breeze above the

forest. I couldn't help but smile at all the life this environment had to offer, quite different from my home. It was while I sat, enjoying nature, I heard footsteps approaching from behind.

The person coming up was either very good at tracking, hunting, or remaining quiet in general as they expertly made very little to no noise. I was impressed but my ears were certainly able to pick up on light steps. As they neared, I slowly reached for the dagger at my right hip. "Hello?" I heard a distinctly female voice call out. The voice was soft with a curious tone.

Taking hold of the dagger's handle, I turned my head to see who was coming around.

She was a five and a half foot tall beauty to behold. Youthful fair skin with smooth round lips. Her eyes were a vibrant blue, shining even in the middle of the night. Obsidian black hair tapering at the end and long enough to touch the small of her back. She wore a blue kirtle over a leaf green dress with leather sandals and had an aromatic and exquisite scent. There was also another particular smell that stuck out. I won't lie, I was awestruck and entranced as she walked up with a torch in hand. Standing to greet her, I let go of the dagger handle. "Yes? Can I help you?"

"I was going to ask that myself," she responded. "What are you doing in the forest?"

"Honestly? Enjoying nature," I said, looking to the landscape in the dark, seeing every rock, tree, blade of grass with ease. Returning my attention to my visitor "Where I'm from, it is quiet and almost lifeless. The life and sounds around this forest are quite pleasing. If you don't mind, why are you here? Especially at this late hour."

She paused a moment, clearly thinking over what she would say. "I actually live here. I was out picking berries and herbs and did not realize what time it was. My house is not too far, if you'd like I have some extra room."

*Really?* I thought. *She couldn't tell what time it was?* "If you don't mind, I will take you up on the offer. My name is Drake," I said outstretching my hand.

"Lupa," she said shaking my hand.

With our greetings out of the way, I quickly doused the fire, packed up my gear, and followed her to her house. Along the way I wondered how big a cabin she had as I examined the dark woods. If this supposed wolf was here, there had to be some kind of tracks. While I still investigated, the short trip to Lupa's home proved uneventful. Approaching the house, light began pouring through the trees as we came to a large clearing and walked towards the house.

The clearing was a several acre large, nigh-perfect circle. The sky was completely clear tonight with the light from the moon illuminating the entire area. In the middle, and to my surprise, sat a well-built log cabin. To the building's right were tilled fields with growing crops. There was a chicken coop and barn, each large enough to hold a small number of animals. The grass around was verdant and well-trimmed from the animals chewing on it. Though a few spots in the field caught my eye.

Lupa led me to the house, opening the door for me. "I thought men were to be the chivalrous ones?" I said jokingly.

She chuckled a tad. "You're the guest tonight so I thought I should be a pleasant host."

I kindly thanked her as I walked through the door. Just inside the door, I was met with a hallway stretching from the front of the house to a door leading out the back. To the right sat a set of stairs leading to the basement. On the first floor, there were two rooms, a bedroom with a fairly comfortable looking bed (large enough for two I think) and a kitchen. The kitchen was fairly sophisticated, a similar set up for what a lord would have at their own manor house. Just as she came through the door, I heard a metallic clang as the deadbolt on the door locked in. I

turned around to see Lupa's eyes had changed from the beautiful blue from before to this almost blood red.

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As I followed him into my home, I locked the door and turned towards Drake who had just turned around, locking my gaze with his brown eyes. "Now that I have you all alone, want to explain what you're really here about?"

Crossing his arms, "Considering you have just locked me in, I am pretty certain you know why. Wolf."

I was taken aback. "How...how did you..."

"Not too hard for those that are looking. There weren't many tracks but when I saw them, they clearly led through foliage. Tells me they ran fast with wide strides to intentionally mask their path. And said tracks clearly led towards this clearing." Pointing towards the floor. "There are also hints of freshly clean boards. Makes me think you were cleaning some of the mud you brought in barefoot."

"So clean floors tell you I'm a werewolf?" I questioned mockingly. Though my blood was starting to boil with him around.

"No, though the paw shaped depressions in the grass help. What ultimately confirmed it for me was the one wolf print you left in the dirt outside the door." My eyes shot open. *How could I have forgotten?! I'm usually so cautious. Though I am impressed he was able to see such small details.* "There was also a slight air of canine around you. Something I noticed upon first sight. The red eyes right now are not helping you. Should I go on?" he asked almost snarkily.

“Fine,” I surrendered, “you caught me. Guess if you know I am the werewolf everyone hunts, that means you are out to kill me.” I slowly prepared to pounce as he broke the tension.

“Nope.” As soon as Drake said that, I almost lost my footing from the shock. “I was more so curious if a werewolf really existed. Never seen one before.”

“Seriously?!” I exclaimed regaining my balance. “So I’m just, what? An oddity to you?”

“No no no. I just wanted to see or meet one. Even where I am from, werewolves are a myth,” he said crossing his arms with an inquisitive look about him. “That and I am kind of curious as to why sightings of you always tell of you being alone. I always heard wolves and werewolves lived in packs.”

I could feel my anger rising. “You really want to know?” He nodded yes. “Because **your** kind hunted them.” Gesturing to the entire forest and the clearing where I called home, “We used to call this entire forest home. This clearing used to be larger. Used to have more buildings. A larger field. All enough for twenty of us. And we caused no trouble other than to those who would do us harm. But when I was not even 13 years of age, many hunters came and sacked our home.” As the memory burned into my mind again, I dropped my arms to my sides again, and lowered my head to hide the expression of both sadness and anger. “They had numbers and silver tipped arrows and alchemical silver bonded onto their swords and axes; they had everything needed to exterminate us. They burned our houses and crops. They murdered my mother and father. They slaughtered my family! I ran away and when morning came, the hunters were gone and there was nothing but ashes. I have spent my life rebuilding everything I could replace.” Returning my gaze to Drake, I pointed to the door leading out the back of the house and his eyes followed. “You go through there and then step into the tree line, you’ll come across a small graveyard I made for everyone I lost on that day.”

Returning his attention to me, Drake inhaled and exhaled heavily, leaving him looking curiously deflated, though I did not think much of it. "I'm so sorry. I understand though," he said apologetically. "Some enemies came and killed my own family..."

My anger boiled to the top as I interrupted him. "You don't understand anything!" I shouted him down. "I lost almost everything. They took my family, my friends, my home! I have spent years trying to get things back to the way things were but the hunters who keep coming here keep ruining everything. This forest, this little homestead is all I have left. Don't you dare think you know anything about me!"

"I'm sorry. I didn-" Drake tried to say before he noticed I stopped listening. Something in the distance caught my ear. I unbolted the door and rushed out the door. From outside, I could smell them. Death lingered on them. It hung on them like a pungent, putrid odor. And they were proud of every moment that bathed them in such a stench. Hunters.

"Look, do what you want," I said coarsely. "I doubt you're much of a threat. I am going to cool down by dealing with these invaders." Removing my clothes, I also shapeshifted into my werewolf form, my figure reshaping itself to a large, bipedal wolf. With my transfiguration complete, I stood just short of seven feet tall with dark blue fur covering and concealing my formerly human form from head to fluffy tail. While my dark hair receded, the blue fur transitioned to black along my spine and on the very tip of my tail. "Maybe if you're here when I get back, I will be in a more... pleasant mood. Maybe." I looked back towards the forest, first leaping and then running as fast as possible to get rid of my mortal enemies.

I could smell them, the hunters. They were here and there were more than usual. Normally, only a small team of maybe three to five came after me. This time though, there were at least eight or ten, and with them was a strong and eerie scent present. As I ran ahead with

breakneck pace, I jumped to the branches above and waited for them to pass. From there, I could see it was a group of nine who were walking closely together. They were outfitted lightly in leather or chainmail armor, each complimented with either a hat, helmet, bandana or nothing at all. Among the bunch, all but three carried torches with swords drawn. The three without torches walked in the middle of the group, swords holstered but crossbows in hand, bolts but a trigger away from being loosed.

As they walked by, I slid down the tree but stopped halfway down as I realized what the familiar stench was. Each one had a single pelt draped across their torsos like a bandolier. Each pelt recently stolen from their original bearer. Wolf's pelts. My blood boiled as I could feel my claws dig faintly into the tree I clung to. With even greater conviction and eagerness, I quietly lowered myself to the ground and crept up from behind. When I was close enough, I grabbed the two at the back and quickly tore their throats out before jumping away into the darkness.

The others startled to the ready as two of their own dropped to the forest floor, blood pouring out of their now gutted throats. The three crossbows pointed around almost frantically, looking for a target while the swordsmen reformed a looser circle. I climbed up another tree and hopped the branches to get above them. Falling from above, I landed on two of the crossbowmen and tossed the other away with a backhand, paralyzing the others in fear. With the opening, I jumped and mauled the nearest hunter, gouging out his neck with my fangs.

The remaining hunters rallied and ran at me, but a howl from my lungs scared them once again. It was just before I went to pounce on the three they seemed out of character. The trio calmly took steps back and I paused before I felt the consequences of my folly. Suddenly, a crossbow bolt screamed through the air into my left shoulder. A cry of pain let out from my maw as several more hunters began to approach from behind the ones who drew me out. Each one in

darker leather armor which was washed in mud, masking their scent from my detection. I dodged another bolt zooming my way, but I failed to notice a third that impaled my left thigh. I had been too careless and got myself caught off-guard. Now I sat there, crippled and unable to think from the pain. As one of the nearby swordsmen retrieved a crossbow from the man I tossed away and readied to end my life, I came to terms with my fate. The memories of everyone I knew passed through my mind. A tear of both sorrow and joy raced down my cheek as I relived each and every one of my memories with the now deceased. I only hoped I would see my family in death or enjoy their company longer in my next life.

As luck would have it, just before the bolt was loosed, a hand grasped the crossbow and pushed it into the air. Looking, I saw a familiar person arrive. The crossbow now cracked and splintered from the pressure Drake placed on it as he began crushing it with his bare hand. Following up his redirection, Drake delivered a right hook to the threatening hunter's face and sent him flying into a tree. As the hunter collided, a horrendous cracking noise was heard as his head impacted the tree, followed by his body ragdolling out of sight. Almost fluidly, Drake then breathed in air and exhaled a torrent of flames, engulfing the closest hunters to us and then directing it to create a wall of flames between us and the remaining aggressors. Drake turned back towards me and his eyes were now this a light orange with slitted pupils. His face expressed only anger and hate, and he seemingly panted as smoke slowly flowed from his mouth.

Twisting round back towards the hunters, and in the same motion, Drake shapeshifted into a terrifyingly massive and toned western dragon; the immense release of pressure from his growth snuffing out much of the flames. As his clothes vanished from existence, scarlet red scales grew on his hide and his underbelly became armored by pale scales. His tail was thick but slenderly tapered at the end. Four large horns protruded from the back of his head and sharp

claws extended from the ends of his fingers and toes. From his posture as he towered above all present, Drake's dragon form was clearly quadrupedal more than bipedal.

Drake roared louder than the wind in a storm as he crashed a claw into the ground, crushing a hunter underfoot. Two hunters to Drake's right shot bolts in complete fear, but the projectiles merely bounced off the scales and only drew his attention. He bathed the two fools in flames, rendering them charred before reflexively reaching his head around to grasp another victim in his mouth. Drake crunched twice on the helpless victim before launching him into the air, his figure disappearing into the tree line with a shriek of terror. The last hunter was already running when Drake took sight of him and roared. He turned around and grabbed me with his tail, carefully lifting and placing me onto his back before giving chase.

The retreating hunter bobbed and weaved through the trees trying to throw off Drake's pursuit. However, the dragon would occasionally crash through a tree rather than avoid it. Eventually arriving at the edge of the forest, the lone survivor found out why I allowed the thickets, bushes, and other plants to grow as such. To impede the retreat of my prey. While Drake looked for an easy and safe way for us to move through the trees, having realized his aggressiveness was possibly dangerous for my health, the hunter struggled to cross the threshold, misstepping and tumbling occasionally from his haste. Just as the hunter was about to be in the clear, Drake reached out with his tail, grabbed the hunter, and drew him back in, the man clawing and wailing in terror. Drake lifted his victim, glaring deep into his eyes before clamping down with his jaw and tearing head from body, both of which he promptly threw away like trash.

Drake and I looked to the village, who had gathered in mass at the horrible sounds they had been hearing. There they all squinted, trying to pierce the darkness of the forest but only saw the shining eyes and shadowy silhouette of a dragon with a werewolf passenger. They all

dropped to the ground in fear as Drake released an ear shattering roar into the night sky. He stood there staring them down, waiting for someone to make a move but soon stomped back to the clearing to my house. Along the way, he stamped out what fire and embers still remained using both tail and claws. Arriving at the house, we reverted back to our human guises, he helped me in and to the bed so as to tend to my injuries with medicinal herbs, salves, and other ointments. He even used his fire breath to heat a dagger and cauterize larger cuts and gashes, though I might have screamed his ear off from the pain. After tending to my more serious wounds, I felt healthy enough to change into my chemise, so I was not naked the remaining time he was . While he continued to patch me up, I asked “So... those enemies you mentioned... they were hunters, weren’t they?”

His voice became sullen. “They had watched us intently over the years, planning out how to exterminate us, even using a potent poison coating their weaponry. When the hunters struck, I was so young and exponentially more scared as what seemed like an army invading our cave and killing one dragon after another. I ran while everyone I knew died around me.” A tear rolled down his eye as I could see the memory causing him pain. One rolled down my own cheek as I listened to his story, one we both knew I was familiar with. “I flew away faster than ever and never looked back. All I did from then was run and run, occasionally picking a single cattle animal to tide me over for days. It wasn’t until I was lucky enough to come across a kind wizard who taught me magic, enough to where I could change my shape. After that, I begun to turn my life around as I spent years learning to live and fight as both man and dragon. In the process, I traveled the world see many a different sights, though I never once returned to my homeland.”

“I’m so sorry,” I said remorsefully. “I shouldn’t have said... I was angry and defensive...”

“It’s alright,” Drake said calmly, wrapping his hands around my right hand. “I understand. You have had to live your life one way for a long time now. You felt very tied down to what you knew and vengeful at those who tried to take it away. On guard to protect what little you had left.”

“But why would you help me? After all I sa-”

“Because I couldn’t just let you die.” he said endearingly. “Your dedication to your home and your beauty have smitten me. If love at first sight was a thing, I have been stampeded by it. At the end of the day, both reasons willed me to chase you down and fortunately too.” He paused. “I’m hoping you’d be willing to at least let me protect this forest with you.”

“You’re staying?” I asked with a raised brow.

“Wanted to at least. Sure beats a mountain. They are peaceful but too quiet and the lack of life compared to here is astounding. Even compared to other forests I’ve seen, this is something else entirely. The animals are lively and the plants are awash with a multitude of vibrant colors. I love it, and hope I am welcome here.”

I smiled, hearing someone else talk about my home so passionately was heartwarming. And while I did not know how to respond to his confession of love, it was still very endearing as I came to the realization I was not alone anymore. I carefully leaned in close and pecked him on the cheek, leaving him with a shocked look on his face. “Welcome to the Valerian Woods.

**Matt Barry**

“Birdcage”

*Larus Dominicanus*, otherwise known as the kelp gull, dines primarily on olives.

However, when olives are scarce in its environment, mother gulls have been known to peck out the eyes of dead or wounded seals and carry them back to their nest to feed to their children. The young chicks, so overjoyed with the prospect of being fed, are blissfully unaware of their grotesque dinner, swallowing every morsel without a second thought. Birds are intriguing like that; so curious, so well-versed at capturing the imagination. They can be here and gone with just a few strokes of their feathers; flying without burden, without a cage, ever so free to live their lives.

Isn't it strange? Humans have always been accredited as the superior species and from a physiological perspective that would seem correct. Evolution has bestowed them with the advances of bipedal posture, opposable thumbs, and developed brains to enable speech, complex emotions, and abstract thought. However, for all that superiority, humans are flawed by nature. Each and every one of them can be so easily ensnared by the world around them, slaves to the lives they lead. Demanding jobs, fantasies of power, divisive families—human beings were designed to be caged, and they do not seem to mind.

How then can they truly be superior if they are not *free*?

I have found that humans have trouble grasping this concept; people are quite stubborn when they don't want to face the truth. Take, for instance, the public's reaction to the failures of my students. I assume what they heard on the news made them all afraid—fear is the greatest of human cages, with the uncanny ability to shackle the best of us. I did not take offense to their fear—I hadn't had the chance to teach them all the way to freedom—but it was their impatience

and their insistence on stopping me that I found quite rude. All of them are so weighed down by their desire for what is *real*, what the *facts* are, when all *I* wanted was to lift them up and show them the way. But what line had I crossed that made them brand my work unjustifiable and appalling?

“You’re running out of time, Nestor.”

I’ve grown to admire Rene’s direct bluntness. As a budding criminal defense attorney, her naivety and lack of experience haven’t taught her to respect the decency of one quietly brooding alone with one’s thoughts. Even now she sits across the interview room table, the sound of her hands tapping nonchalantly on a thick file, one I imagine is filled to the brim with photos and coroner reports. My posture is craned to the side, eyelids closed, and head lowered as to deter eye contact from the spunky lawyer. She’s so adorably eager; the state could not have given me a quicker route to the death penalty.

“The DA is getting impatient, they won’t draw this out for much longer,” Rene continues in her best big-shot lawyer voice, “You have to cooperate, or else he won’t be so keen on offering you another deal.”

Rene has an exquisitely attractive voice—measured, innocent, but with a firm seriousness to it when she’s determined to prove herself. It would be wrong of me to say that I dislike her personally, however she’s obviously jumpy; worried that she will mess up her first big case. Work was *her* cage—the drive to prove herself the locking mechanism, and her future ambition the cold unforgiving bars. I would gladly help to set her free if given the chance. After all, she’s told me she’s fascinated by my work; but then again, who in this city isn’t?

Sensing no reaction from me, my lawyer proceeds. I hear Rene open the binding, the multitude of enclosed documents crinkle and slide over one another as she rifles through them,

perhaps searching for a new strategy. The sound of her fingers dancing over the papers soothes me; soft plastic taps resonating through the otherwise silent room. Despite how clean cut she must be dressed, the harsh aroma of acetone hangs heavy over the young lawyer. The pungent odor may have washed away the color on her nails, but what deeper stains remained? How many glasses had they tapped against? How many rolled up papers had they pinched? How many men had they left painted scratch marks on?

And *I'm* the guilty one, they all say.

I hear the rustling of papers halt abruptly as the young attorney stops sifting through documents. It wasn't my indifference and seeming lack of attention that scared her stiff to the point where she halted her work. No, even better—she found the paper she was looking for.

“I know you don't care about getting locked up,” Rene states, her voice beginning to lose its validity. “But you have no chance of avoiding a needle in your arm if you don't tell them where *she* is.”

I can tell by her tone exactly who she is talking about: Melody Brown, if I had a nickel for every time I've heard that name. It's hardly left my ears since I was taken into custody. The same name attached to the same questions; where was she, was she safe, what I had done with her, what had I done *to* her, over and over again.

The media frenzy that had grown rapidly since I began my work was always so keen on reminding the paranoid masses of the faces that went missing off street corners and alleys. None of them were more prominent than that of young Melody Violet Brown. It was impossible to walk past a newsstand without seeing those bright green eyes staring hopefully back. Miss Brown, top of her nursing class at Loyola, loving and worried parents and fiancé, beautiful and young, life planned out since age 8—if ever there was a caged bird, it would be sweet Melody.

Her dear better half had reported her missing after Melody never made it back to their apartment. Of course, I remember that night well—anyone could see how overwhelming the burden of Melody’s life was; the weight of her cage so unbearably heavy. I simply could not resist. I needed to make her my newest project—if I did not help her soon, she’d never be free. I took a tremendous risk taking her on as a student, perhaps that was where I went wrong.

“Nestor,” Rene’s voice pierces through my reminiscent state, but I still do not shift my head to respond to her call.

I was already gone from this place; gone from the world of today and off in the world of then. Somewhere at some time I had made a mistake; one small monkey wrench in the well-oiled machine of my work. What was it? How had my perfect dream of helping those most in need of freedom brought me here? In the past I found freedom in staring at the world through glass, in the movement of bodies in dance, in the birds that flew without a cage. Surely none of those could be where I went wrong; they were what set me free from my own cage. Why hadn’t they worked for my students?

“*Nestor*,” she repeats. Her harsh tone has impeded my transition once more and I find myself back in the cold hard chair at the cold hard table, shackled hand and ankle with metal chains. The interview room stinks of cigarette smoke, a smell that has always put me on edge. How humans find it soothing to inhale toxic fumes—to shorten their lives with every puff of smoke—I will never know. Daddy always seemed to enjoy it. He always did enjoy things that hurt people, enjoyed clipping wings, caging birds—

“Nestor, I need you to cooperate,” Rene’s voice has grown strained, desperate. I still do not move my head or lift my eyelids; she’s not ready look me in the eyes yet. Rene is tired—I can hear her beginning to waver. Likely enough she’ll pass over my case, ask her boss the

district attorney to be reassigned, and forego the springboard to a life-long career that the media spotlight brings with it. I almost feel sorry for the poor girl; it isn't her fault that she's failing sweet Melody.

“You think I like listening to myself talk,” Rene snaps, the strain giving way to venom, “You won't talk about this case, you won't even open your eyes and look at me. How am I supposed to convince the jury The Scarecrow Killer *isn't* a real scarecrow?”

Scarecrow...scarecrow...why would I scare a crow?

Crows are the wisest of the creatures of the air; they see all, travel everywhere, eat everything. Long ago, my old home was a nesting ground for the black-winged things, a migration hot spot away from the inner city that would one day be where I would teach my students to fly. The crows were always silent; perched like sentinels on fence posts and shingles of the roof, their black eyes piercing every window of that old house. Daddy and Mommy never saw them, never took any notice or care for the birds. But then again, there was never any love for caged things in that house, not even in the cage I was kept in. So little room to move inside those cold bars, so much that I never could extend my arms or legs. Unfortunately for my parents, you can only keep a little boy in a cage for so long until they get bigger; they soon traded in the dog cage for the isolation of the attic.

I was locked inside that hollow room with no one save for the black crows outside my window. I watched the birds for years before I saw how their movements made them free; I made my body move in ways that it shouldn't have in order to correct the damage of early life. It was painful, torturous, but I knew I needed to break out of my cage—my chrysalis of a body—to be free. I taught myself to dance like the birds did; moving my bent and broken frame to be free like

they were, short of sprouting wings and flying. Dancing was what kept the despair at bay; the movements of my body the only way of unlocking the larger, metaphorical cage I was put in.

I had to share my discoveries to the world; every human being was trapped in a cage and now I was the one with the keys. My skills caught the attention of professionals, who took me seriously only long enough to gawk and dismiss me.

“Unnatural,” critics called my performance.

“Unprofessional,” the choreographers named it.

“Bizarre, disturbed, dangerous,” the dancers claimed.

To them I was nothing more than a cheap contortionist, a double and triple-jointed freak who thought breaking his bones into different shapes would help his act. They just didn’t understand—they weren’t watching a dancer prance about for their own entertainment, they were watching a higher being offer his hand in rescue. The dance I did was not for the minds of lowly humans; they couldn’t possibly appreciate the movements I could do—what *we* could do, the birds and I—without my help. Humans keep their spirits caged within the restraints of their corporeal vessels whereas I was one with the beasts of the air. I was free; from the moment I first broke out from my body, knitted the shackles of my bones back into new shapes, and danced to the silent song of freedom the crows showed me. Surely, though, the world didn’t have the patience or the wisdom to seek the guidance of birds—they needed a teacher, someone that could show them the true path to freedom and *make* them break their cages.

“Maybe you just don’t remember,” Rene’s voice is once again determined and I hear her hands begin to sift through papers again, the volume of her actions the only assertion I need.

“Allow me to remind you,” she stops her aggressive filing and slams something onto the metal

table. She's probably hoping to spur a reaction from me, but I keep the lids of my eyes closed and my body cast to the side.

“This was Jeannette Ryder. A jogger found her leaned against a park bench at the crack of dawn. Key word ‘*leaning*’—every bone in her body was broken *before* she died, but no mortal wounds to constitute murder.”

Rene's frustration has gotten the better of her. I imagine a small, determined frown spreading across her brow. The thought of it is almost enough to bring a smile to my lips and coax my eyelids open...but not quite.

Another slam, most likely a picture.

“William Benjamin Andrews, school teacher. Found with his limbs wrapped around the bars of the jungle gym on the playground outside his elementary school. Every single bone in his body was broken, cause of death: dehydration.”

Ah, yes, that's right, Mr. Andrews begged and begged for a drink. I would have given him one, but he still preferred his cage rather than freedom. The shackles of his body had been broken, but his spirit was unwilling to embrace the chance to leave its prison. Day after day I asked him and every other individual I took on as a student if they wanted to return home—back to the cages they called lives. They all said yes, of course expected, but still unfortunate. The human body is the most important cage the spirit must break free from before it can soar above the world without any restraints—breaking their bodies was the first step in reaching that. I allowed their weary spirits to leave their vessels and fly among the birds that flew so carefree above them, but all chose to succumb to the physical limitations of their bodies instead. Mr. Andrews and all those others found getting themselves a drink of water rather difficult with all their bones broken.

A true shame, but on the bright side: with every new student vacancy, there was always another I could take to replace them.

Rene continues with name after name of the students that had failed their tests and died, the sound of her voice growing strained as she pleads with me to cooperate and to tell her where the police can find poor sweet Melody. The interrogation is interrupted by a loud buzzing noise, effectively silencing Rene: the interview room door is opening. The sound of papers sliding catches my ears sharply, but I still do not move. A heavy thudding fills the room as the door swings open, followed by rapid footsteps and loud yelling from someone outside.

“Detective! Ms. Evans is with her client you can’t—detective, stop!”

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*Three weeks earlier:*

*After seven months of dead ends and dead bodies, Detective Lombardo finally had him cornered. The elusive serial killer’s bizarre methods of maiming his victims—breaking their bones to leave their limbs as useless and weak as a scarecrow’s, only to die from lack of nutrition after being left helpless—had led to the media dubbing him “The Scarecrow Killer”. Despite his years of experience, the frustrating lack of evidence or motive had almost driven Lombardo to the point of quitting the case; not to mention the gruesome state of the victims that nearly pushed him over the edge of his own sanity and back to the comfort of the bottle. Detective Lombardo poured countless hours into the case, desperately searching for a connection or some form of clue that the sick bastard was giving him. There had to be a reason for everything the killer was doing but what was it?*

*After the disappearance of Melody Brown, the department felt personally responsible to the girl’s family to catch the Scarecrow before he could do any further harm. Lombardo tried to*

*reassure them, but without a single lead he felt that he was only selling lies. That all changed a few nights ago; while working late—and nursing his fifth glass of scotch—a small sparrow had flown straight into his dining room window. The thick glass had snapped the bird’s neck instantly, but in that small broken body Lombardo saw something: the final piece had finally clicked into place.*

*How had he been so blind? The scarecrow-like state of the bodies, the neglected state of the victims, all disappearing and reappearing from their jobs and it took a bird flying straight into his window for him to see the pattern. He read somewhere once that birds couldn’t see glass; birds evolved to fly without anything holding them back, so their brains hadn’t developed the concept of barriers or cages. All those bodies, each one had every bone in them broken with expert precision, after all scarecrows had no bones.*

*“The Scarecrow isn’t just killing people, he thinks he’s transforming them.”*

*The killer was making a statement, one that Lombardo had yet to discover. That didn’t matter to him, though; all he needed was the bastard in a prison cell. Fueled by determination, and no shortage of booze, Lombardo began making headway on the case. The lab boys had been running tests on samples taken from the bodies, trying to piece together where they had been kept. Lombardo had a hunch in a closed-down area of the city zoo; namely, the old conservatory. The good news kept rolling in for the detective; a partial print had been found at the scene of the latest victim—that poor schoolteacher—and finally found a match in the database. Lombardo was honestly disappointed at the image of the man he had hunted so long and hard for: Nestor Weber, a former dancer at some Cirque du Soleil-type show, a long history of mental instability that went hand-in-hand with violent behavior against both himself and others, and a list of residential psychiatric institutions a mile long. The gangly suspect looked enough like his media*

*namesake, but not a crazed killer. Lombardo had expected his big grey eyes to be full of malicious intent, not the dreamy, removed stare of one lost in thought.*

*Lombardo was the first inside the abandoned conservatory, leading a raid of police officers to find the missing Melody Brown and put an end to the Scarecrow's murder spree. The overwhelming stench of dead flesh choked him as he and his team swept the stained-glass interior. The zoo's conservatory was home to hundreds of different plants, left to grow wild after the city had cut the funding for the seasonal garden. Oddly, the place was full of birds; local species that seemed to have been brought in after the fact. Lombardo himself opened the central greenhouse door, backed up by half a dozen rifles trained on the faded glass entrance. Normal procedure dictated that the SWAT team breach the door, but the liquid courage Lombardo had holstered in his jacket pocket said to hell with procedure.*

*As confident as he was, Lombardo didn't expect what he saw inside.*

*The walls and ceiling were glass, but not the same translucent, two-way glass that the rest of the greenhouse was constructed in—they were covered in mirrors. The room was in pristine condition, all save for the figure in the center of the room. He was long and gangly, just like the name the media had dubbed him, and sat very still with his back to the door. The Scarecrow was clothed in a filthy matted leotard and each of his limbs were bent awkwardly in sickening positions, his hands smeared with fresh blood that dripped onto the glass floor in front of him.*

*Lombardo was the one to apprehend him. The killer never resisted, never jeered at the officers nor clamored for a lawyer; he never even opened his eyes to look at his captors. His face was a mess: eyelids red and swollen, keeping his eyes perpetually shut, dried blood caking his*

*cheeks and coating his eye lashes. As Lombardo wrestled his suspect up to his feet and led him out to the waiting patrol car, he wondered about the condition of Weber's eyes.*

*Maybe the killer's feathered friends had pecked them out, the detective joked to himself...*

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Detective Lombardo's hands lock tight around my shoulders, wrenching me up from the metal chair, "You know where she is you son of a bitch! Give her up now or I swear to God I'll fucking kill you!"

The stench of whiskey perforates my nostrils, just as it did the day Lombardo arrested me. His voice is deafening, but the ringing in my ears cannot hold back the ever-growing smile on my lips. I'm sure Lombardo wouldn't have dreamed of barging into an interview room like this, but alcohol does interesting things to people, as I have found. Interestingly enough, alcohol can be mixed with a few other ingredients to create quite an effective tranquilizer. A concentrated dose into the muscle fibers can cause severe tension almost to the point of immobilization, which made taking in new students from off the streets in front of their places of work incredibly easy. I never wanted to kill any of those I had taken into my care, only to break them free of their bodily cages like I had done to myself, and what could be a more perfect prison than the human skeleton?

Years of experience learning how to stretch and maneuver a dancer's body teaches one to avoid broken bones, but also, how easily and efficiently it is to break them. With the skeletal prison out of the way, every single one of my subjects had a simple choice: release their spirits and finally be free, or succumb to their cage. They all rejected my proposal, but failed to understand that eating, drinking, and escape require the aid of a whole and mended skeletal system, a luxury they no longer had.

Lombardo's fist collides with the left side of my jaw, but he does not release me. Those men that yelled at him as he came barging into the room finally reach him, but I assume he's tossed them aside as easily as he tossed back bottles trying to find Miss Brown.

"Where is Melody!? Where are you keeping her!?"

The smile on my lips is almost too wide now, and I can tell the detective has finally seen it. He shakes me once before punching me again, but this time as my head snaps backward the smile on my lips breaks into words, my first in weeks.

"Melody...Melody has been staring you...right in the face...this whole time."

Lombardo grabs me by the throat, forcing me to face him. Before he can utter a vulgar retort, his breath catches in his throat as I finally open my eyes.

Well, not *my* eyes, of course; *my* eyes have long since been gobbled up by the winged inhabitants of the conservatory. I knew that Melody would not have time to make her decision before Lombardo and his team found me, so I regrettably made her decision for her. I had just enough time to carve out sweet Melody's eyes—the emerald windows to the soul that had been printed on every newspaper in the city—and give them a new home in my own head. Now her spirit is free, and she can watch the world go by without the burden of being caged any longer. I may have blinded myself, but after all, isn't it the greatest thrill to fly without knowing the destination?

"Those...those..." Lombardo barely chokes out before he drops me. The shouts of officers coming in to offer back-up grow louder. Rene begins to scream. The sound of the detective vomiting breaks the mental wall holding back my laughter long enough to for me to chortle out a mocking, throat-ripping crescendo as I feel arms tighten around me.

*"Cause I'm as free as a bird now, and this bird you cannot cage!"*

**Shelby Davin**

“The Boogeyman”

The nightmares have yet to subside,  
but they've drastically diminished.  
I remember when he appeared every night  
torturing me relentlessly,  
as if once wasn't enough.  
I see his shaggy brown hair,  
clothing tattered,  
smelling of cigarettes and desperation  
I watch as a slime trail follows behind him  
and he makes way to my bed  
I'm stuck, paralyzed by fear  
He silences me,  
and I let him  
I watch closer as I become malleable,  
like putty in his hands  
my face is distorted into a woman I've never seen before  
as I watch myself begin to slip away into nothing,  
I awaken  
swimming in my own sweat,  
I throw my covers to the side  
and check beneath the bed for you.

## **Marshelle Kellum**

### **“Me a Writer?”**

A specific writing experience that I feel has the most impact on me as a writer is the time my English teacher freshman year of high school handed me back a paper and said “ It Doesn’t meet the requirements, Marshelle”. First of all you don’t know me like that, don’t be walking all up on me like that! After I came to terms with what was going on and being bombarded, I kindly turned to my right and asked her “Well, what do you expect me to do? You asked me to write a paper about me! That is me! Shelle, just Shelle.” Silence. After lecturing all morning about adjectives and nouns this teacher was at a loss for words. I then smiled and asked very kindly, with a sarcastic smirk, “What do you suggest I do?” She tried, as an instructor, to guide me without really guiding me. You know how teachers try to get you to guess what’s in their head like you’re some type of psychic. They say stuff like “No not that but close, not exactly though. Come on you know it!” Only difference I highly doubt that she even had that idea she was looking for in her head. We were starting from scratch. She couldn’t give me any hints because I got the feeling she was waiting for me to come up with some bright idea and if it was great she’d just agree with it like ‘That’s it! Yeah.’ Like no baby, no. Help me out. She was saying the cliché teacher sayings like “What can you do better? How can you give it that umph? What would make your paper go over that top?” Blah, Blah, Blah. I thought to myself ‘Do you think we would be having this conversation if I had any answers to that same but ‘restated fancily’ question? My Gawd’.

That conversation went back and forth until I simply told her I could not and would not comply to the “requirements of the prompt” no matter the outcome of my grade because you can’t ask someone to express themselves, yet put them in a box. She then tried to convince me to

make revisions. She asked “Do you think that’s best for your grade?” At that point I wasn’t even worried about my grade. Like dude I will stop coming to this class altogether, talk bout a revision. F&k a revision. F&k this class. I won’t have to worry about this grade then. I’m thinking in my head about all the other students sitting in that same class. It had to be about 25 of us. Yet, this lady is sitting here wasting class time talking to me about something I already told her wasn’t gonna happen. I started to think that she found conversations with me amusing. I then started to play along and keep it going asking, “So, Ms. Hand. You mean to tell me that out of ALL these students in this Freshman English class, room 321, here at Lindblom Math and Science Academy, class of 2017, on this fine Morning at 9:00 o’clock, I’m the only one who didn’t fit in the box?” “Now, Marshelle...” she responded. “Nah, Nah, Nah, Ms. Hand.” I cut her off. “I see what it is. My fat ah clearly need to lose some weight.” Although I was being funny, I didn’t crack a smile. She then knew that she had picked the wrong one to try and coddle. Before I could act a fool she simply said “All right, revised draft due Friday on TurnItIn. But I hope you try and come up with something.” Of course I did come up with something. I made sure in my revision I ‘apologized’ for not being able to make better revisions using the sad critiques written in the margins of my original paper. I also didn’t forget to mention the in-class discussion I had and the “help” I received then. Now if that didn’t push my paper over that top, or give it that umph, I seriously don’t know what I could’ve done better.

Of course when I got my paper back I was ecstatic. I couldn’t wait to see what she said this time. After class I went up to her and asked her how’d she like my new and improved paper along with those revisions I ‘tried’ to make of her advice. I mean I love being an a\*\*hole sometimes. She started, “Now Marshelle...” I cut her off with a chuckled lifting my hand up and walked out of room 321 at Lindblom Math and Science Academy, behind the rest of my fellow

class of 2017 freshman English classmates at 9:41 that fine morning. Thinking to myself “She loved it.”

From that moment forward, I decided that I would not be confined as a writer to any prompt, the margins, or lines of any page and that a part of my true self would be implemented into every piece of writing I create.

## Alisa Davis

### “Deadbeat Dads”

We think about your smile  
We think about your laugh  
We think about your love  
We think about your presence  
We wish it wasn't an option  
For you to be absent  
See  
Let me tell you about some of our thoughts  
To learn lessons that you could've taught  
Purchasing love that shouldn't be bought  
To fight battles that you could've fought  
Do you know that your kids think about you?

See this is for all...  
The Deadbeat Dads  
The Drop out Dads  
The Walk out Dads  
The  
Please don't expose my flaws type Dads  
The  
I love you but won't call type Dads  
The  
Give 5 percent instead of their all type Dads  
Do you know your kids think about you?  
They wonder...  
If they weren't the key to your heart,  
Were they the key to your destruction  
They wonder...  
Will there ever be another man they can trust in?  
They wonder...  
Will their insecurities ever be loved?  
And  
They wonder...  
Why for you, they were not enough...

You resigned from a job that you created.  
It's sad to say even your kids have replacements  
We  
Didn't know your love came with limitations  
But I hope that your son don't imitated it  
You  
were the first to make your daughter feel unappreciated

Because you neglected your duties and obligations  
She tried to find puzzle pieces to fix the situation  
But then you want to just show up to graduation

This is for you

The Deadbeat Dads

The Drop out Dads

The Walk out Dads

The

Please don't expose my flaws type Dads

The

I love you but won't call type Dads

The

Give 5 percent instead of their all type Dads

Do you know your kids think about you?

They wonder

if they weren't the key to your heart,

Were they the key to your destruction

They wonder,

Will there ever be another man they can trust in?

They wonder,

Will their insecurities ever be loved?

And

They wonder

Why for you, they were not enough...

They think about you,

You children think about YOU,

But the question is...

Do you think about them?

**Alisa Davis**

“Best Part”

I wonder if the sun shines brighter when it sees you  
If the moon is full in your presence  
I wonder how big Gods smile was after he created you.  
I wonder how much time it will take  
To seal you to the basement of my heart,  
Staple you to the walls of my mind  
Tape you around the edges of my lips,  
So that I know,  
Your presence will forever be near me

They say love is a battlefield...  
But you  
Have turned love into a garden  
That produces new beginnings  
Love into a bakery  
With flavors I have yet to taste  
Love into Handmade hopes  
You put my dreams in the oven  
And it bakes them into realities

I just want to see how  
Beautiful you are underneath your skin and scars  
Delicate hands with a gentle touch  
Carmel layers smothered in love  
Peaceful presence  
Soft kisses  
I can't wait to be your misses  
Mist of love is in the air  
At my love is where I stare  
May my eyes be focused on the handsome one over there  
And my heart and mind be centered on the king upstairs

I wonder how many times you'll make me laugh between now and our 50th anniversary,  
I wonder how much tighter your hugs will get  
I wonder what the recipes to your smile are  
(I wonder if it's me)  
I wonder how many tears you'll catch from the corner of my eye  
Fold in the palms of your hands  
And wipe in love and forgiveness

They say love is a battlefield...  
But you have turned

Love into a blueprint  
That my sons will build their house from  
Love into a song  
That my daughter will one day dance to  
Love into a chemical  
That's placed in the pool of my heart

I just want to see how beautiful you are  
Cause this love can go so far  
Progress, growth and self-control  
May those be the morals that we hold  
Quick to listen  
Slow to speak  
And slow to become angry  
Lifetime concepts that's never changing  
Cause if life does cause us pain  
May the foundation of love still remain  
And even then,  
You will be  
My best part

## **Marissa Purdum**

### “The Dog Days”

Imagine the beginning of the summer of 2009, about a year and a half after the Great Recession had started. Imagine a small city, about 25,000 people, in the southeast corner of Iowa called Burlington. Imagine a duplex, split top floor and bottom. Both the top and bottom had the same layout. The living and dining room were connected to a small room. Then that room connected to a hallway which had the kitchen, bathroom, and two bed rooms branching off of that.

Now imagine a twelve-year-old girl, brown hair, blue-green eyes with a family that consisted of a jobless mom with the same hair and same eyes, and a golden retriever puppy, named Pumpkin, living on the top floor of the duplex. The bottom floor housed my grandma, who also was the landlord. The last day of school was finished and now it was time for summer. It was also time for me to leave my childhood home forever.

My mom was packing up the last few boxes into our blue Chevy Impala as I was sitting on the wooden floors of my old room. With a small knife in hand, I carved my name, along with the words ‘Fuck you’ and ‘Bitch’, into the floorboards, right where my bed was once. I looked at my handiwork and I didn’t feel bad. I felt vulnerable, like this naked, white room. Everything that was in this room was already in the storage shed my mom had rented. However, we weren’t leaving on our own accord. My grandma decided to sell the duplex and move into a new house, so she was kicking us out. I never understood why she decided to leave me and my mom homeless and I still don’t.

I had just gotten up and hid the knife in a box when my mom came in.

“Hey, I’ll get the last few boxes into the car. Why don’t you take Pumpkin for a walk in the park?”

I nodded and asked, “Alright. Is the leash still next to the door?”

She shook her head and her expression changed from calm to sorrow.

“No, I packed it up. Take her,” she paused, “and lose her.”

I clenched my jaw. I knew what she wanted me to do. She expected me to walk around until she ran away from me, and then I come back home, without her.

I nodded to her. “C’mon, Pumpkin. Let’s go.” Then me and my dog went outside and walked across the street to Perkins Park.

Perkins Park was a relatively small park. The playground was filled with kids plying, so I directed Pumpkin away from them. I didn’t want her running off to one of them. Eventually I came upon a random bush, so I stopped behind it with Pumpkin.

“Oh sweetheart,” I hugged her and cried into her light golden fur. “I don’t want to leave you here.”

She nuzzled me in response. Pumpkin had always been smart like that. She picked up on a lot, and this scenario was one of them. I think she knew that this was meant to be goodbye. I sat there crying into her shoulder for around thirty minutes, and she didn’t move an inch. That’s how I knew I couldn’t lose her yet, so I told myself I needed to compose myself before I returned home.

I wiped the last tears from my eyes and said, “Alright, Pumpkin. Let’s go.” I started to walk back and close by my heels, the dog I loved so much followed.

We had been camping for a month now at Geode State Park, since it was all we could afford. This campsite in the middle of nowhere was our new home since we were kicked out. Our campsite rested under the shade of this big oak tree, which we used to tie up Pumpkin. We had a pretty large orange tent that had three sections. The middle section was our living room, and the two smaller side wings were our changing room and bedroom. We had a totally of four folding chairs, two outside and two in the living room. Our campsite also included a fire pit with a iron grill attachment. We were trying to come up with creative foods to roast over a campfire, such as bacon or grilled cheese. However, most days we ate hot dogs and cheap burgers.

In order to shower, my mom and I would drive into town and walk into the hospital. Geode normally does have showers, but during that summer they were closed for maintenance, so we had to make the drive into town. My mom had worked there once upon a time, so she knew where the hospital's family shower was located. The shower was a privilege that we allowed ourselves every three days. There, I would shower first, in a small, blue tiled shower stall. I would dry off then get out and wait for my mom to take her turn. During this time, I often thought of my childhood home. The one I ached to live in again. The home where I etched her name into the floorboards to claim the house as my own.

My thoughts were interrupted by my mom's shower ending. We would then return to the campsite because Pumpkin was there. Once back at the campsite, my mom would turn on the radio, and we would both sit singing to "I Gotta Feeling" by the Black Eyed Peas or "Fire Burning" by Sean Kingston in the blistering hot sun. When we got tired of doing that, we would play whatever card games we had on hand, which was usually either Skip-Bo or Crazy Eights. Sometimes we would explore the trails with Pumpkin, but after awhile of that, it became older

than hearing the same songs on the radio five times a day. It was a boring existence, but at least I still had my best friend, Pumpkin.

The summer of '09 had brought a lot of changes. When we first moved out of the duplex, we had rented a storage unit for all of our belongings. However, as the summer continued, we could no longer afford to rent the storage unit anymore. So, all of our things were locked up and out of reach. Not only were our possessions locked up, but the cheap storage unit that we had rented was at the bottom of a hill, and every time it rained, it flooded. So I thought everything was ruined by the water.

During the summer of '10, in the heat of July, an auction was taking place at the storage unit facility where our things once resided. So my mom and I decided to go to see if any of our stuff had survived.

When we arrived, there were over a hundred people there, hopping from one unit to the next looking for their next hidden treasure.

“Mom! Look!” I pointed into one of the units. It wasn't our unit but I recognized my pink stuffed animal dog named Mama along with a few of my other stuffed animals and my baby blanket. That gave me hope that some of our other stuff survived the flooding as well. We ended up finding a lot of our old VHS tapes, our old TV stand, and some more blankets.

“Next item up for bid is a couple of stuffed animals with a blanket. Who wants to start the bid with a dollar? Do I hear a dollar?” said the auctioneer.

I looked at my mom with pleading eyes.

My mom raised her card to bid.

“A dollar over there, do I hear two?”

A man and his wife raised their card next. And thus the bidding war commenced.

One by one, my personal possessions were sold to the highest bidder. My mom tried to bid on some of the items, but the price was always too high. When everything was sold and the auction was over, my mom and I walked away empty handed. I wondered why it seemed like everything I cared about always became “lost”.

The end of the summer of '09 neared and it was also the time for a new chapter of my story. We were packing up our summertime campsite because we had to move on due to the new school year approaching and the cold weather. So, my mom did what she had to do. She got a hotel room for me that night, so I could rest comfortably while she went and started her new job at a weed killer factory. Then the next day we were going to live with the cruel woman who had made them homeless in the first place, my grandma. She was reluctant to let us stay with her, but she knew we were desperate, so she agreed to let us stay at her house.

Once we were in town, my mom pulled into a neighborhood a block away from the hotel. It was a small and quiet neighborhood where little to no traffic ventured.

She stopped in the middle of the street. I was so confused as to why we were there.

“Let her out,” she said, referring to Pumpkin. She refused to make eye contact with me.

“What?” I asked in shock. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I thought we were taking her with us.

“Let her out and take off her collar.”

I paused for a brief moment before I got out. I opened the back door and rubbed behind Pumpkin's ears then kissed her forehead goodbye. I removed her collar, then got out of the way so she could jump out.

“Hurry up and get back in,” my mom ordered.

I close the back door and hopped in quickly. My mom immediately drove off. I looked back and saw her running after us. Then she stopped to sniff something on the ground as we turned the corner. That was the last time I ever saw her.

Then I started to bawl. It was an ugly cry, complete with gulps and gasps as I tried to catch my breath between my screaming cries. As my mom pulled into the parking lot of the hotel, I was still bawling. This was the first time my heart was broken.

“You need to stop crying. I can’t leave you in here bawling while I go get the room key,” my mom said.

That only made me want to cry harder, but I slowly choked it down. She went inside, by herself, to get the key then we went up to our room. The lonely bed was draped in a dark red blanket. Once we were settled, my mom got ready for work and left. As soon as she was gone, I stood by the window for hours, hoping to see Pumpkin run down that street and find me. When it turned dark, I gave up my spot next to the window and went to bed, accepting defeat. I never got my gold trophy back. Instead, my consolation prize was crying myself to sleep in the fetal position as I gripped my best friend’s collar.

## **Marcus Sweeten**

### **“A Dose of Change”**

I stole \$35 from my mom. It was just sitting on the kitchen counter, left out like a steaming hot pie or some damp dishes set out to dry. I needed the money to buy Valium and some weed. I was a good kid, I promise. I would have bought the drugs myself if I had a job or a source of income, but I was just a little punk if I am being honest. Later I would cop to stealing the money and she would kick my ass. I had planned to leave that detail out of the story because it doesn't necessarily fit the grand narrative, but I guess every point of conflict needs a resolution.

You could have called me a kid on a mission. I was goal-oriented. I hurriedly bought a single pill of Valium and a few joints from a dealer who lived a few blocks away. My plan was to split the pill with my girlfriend and maybe smoke a little with her. Later, this will turn out to be the last time I will see her. No, not for the reason you think. She didn't overdose or anything. She was actually going to college -- Columbia, in fact -- on a full-ride.

For the sake of conversation, let's say her name was AJ. You know, protect the names of the innocent and all that shit. Her parents immigrated to America from Poland and they had just recently within the last year moved to my town from Chicago. She was the most darling person I had ever met. I was utterly fascinated with her. Her hair was thick and dyed black and had faint curls that slightly danced when she moved her head. Her pale skin never burned and would always reflected in my eyes as if I were a deer caught in the high beams of a semi. Glasses rested on her nose that would just faintly obscure her green eyes from me. Which was probably a good thing, because I would have devoured them like candy. Her nose slightly protruded and so did her chin. It made her beauty more unique, though some of the bullies in school said it made her

look like a witch. They were just typical Polish features, I figured. I was just so utterly captivated by her.

She was so smart, obviously so since she was leaving for Columbia. Every word she spoke enlightened me. The accent she had developed from her parents was so cute that it hurt. She would always stumble on her words and smile with a tint of frustration. Her smile, God, her smile, made my heart skip beats at a time. I was madly in love with her. A love that was intensified by my age. I was only sixteen. While I had just gotten my license, she was going to a prestigious university in New York cost-free.

I was her first love, too. Other guys never saw what I saw, at least up to that point. She was the new cute girl at school who kept to herself and would always wear the shirts of bands that I loved. I always saw her roaming around in the hallway, diverting attention from herself. I knew I had to talk to her. Soon we befriended and I took every opportunity to learn everything about her. She used to tremble and shake when she talked to me, partly because she shared the same fascination with me, but also because she was inexperienced with guys and her father damaged her. He was a miserable bastard. An incorrigible drunk that her mother never had the heart to divorce. He used to hit AJ. He defiled her. He robbed her of the recognition of her beauty. She was a sight that was too gorgeous for even me to bear, yet her trauma often controlled her. If I had ever had half-the-mind, I would have shot that motherfucker for what he did to her. But that would have complicated everything, rather than solve any problem.

If there was ever a thing as a soul mate, then I suppose she would have been mine. And, on a humid summer day in August, I decided that the best farewell to AJ that I could think of was to get high as hell with her. We would smoke pot together from time to time, but I hadn't ever done any other drug. I did a little research on Valium and I thought that it was safe enough for us to

try. She had always expressed interest in doing drugs with me. So what better method of parting ways than to be utterly vulnerable together on a drug we had both never tried?

I walked to her house with a ziplock-bag full of the drugs in my pocket. I had to jump the fence into her backyard. Her parents were at work, but I had to sneak around or else I ran the risk of catching the attention of her neighbors. They would have ratted me out to her parents. Her parents didn't really like me at all. To them, I was just some punk kid whose hair was too long. They thought I wasn't worthy of her because she was smart and had a future and I was just some poor kid. They thought I was some sort of exotic attraction to AJ that she would soon outgrow. We would always just sneak around together. It made everything more fun, like our love was forbidden or something.

I sat on her patio in the backyard and stared into her outdoor underground pool. Her parents were more well off than mine. The \$35 I had stolen from my mom was what A.J.'s mother made in an hour. It was a nice pool, but sort of unkempt. There would always be loose strands of leaves floating and maybe a few bugs who had succumbed to the elements and drowned. The water was crystal clear, despite those blemishes.

I sent her a text that I was in her backyard. Readily enough and without much hesitation, the backdoor porch had swung open. There she was: my love. Sometimes I would have to do double-takes when I caught glimpses of her, just to make sure she was real. Her hair was in a bun. She was wearing loose shorts and a tight Joy Division shirt that showed off the wondrous shape of her body. I have always been told that it was impolite to stare, but I must have missed the memo with AJ. Gladly she didn't mind being admired.

Her resting face was always full of anguish. Though when she saw me and our eyes caught each other, her smile would radiate the world and could make even the grayest of skies emit the

sun's rays. Despite the beautiful August weather, it was her gaze that laid upon me that felt more intense than the sun.

“Hey!” I excitedly said, probably with the biggest of grins on my face. “I’ve got the stuff, do you want to do it now?”

“Sure, Marcus,” She said, grabbing my hand and taking me to the edge of the pool. She had a really cute way of saying my name. She pronounced it like “Mardkoose.” Like I said before, her accent was unapologetically Polish and just added to my admiration of her. She sat down at the edge of the pool, submerging her heavenly legs and her bare feet inside the water. “Join me!” She said with a small giggle. Of course I had to oblige. I took my off my shoes and socks, and I sat right beside her. She placed her hand on my lap and her head rested on my shoulder. The most serene scenes that I could ever possibly imagine were when I was able to spend my time with her.

I took out the bag and was hit with the spicy smell of sativa. The joints fell into my hand with grace, though the pill took some coaxing to get out. I held the pill in my hand. It’s blue color and its solid state was so intimidating. I placed it near the edge of the pool, along with the joints. I had an exacto knife in my pocket that I intended to use to split the pill with her. The pill was 10mg, probably enough to put a horse to sleep. I was afraid that if I had gotten two 10mg pills and gave one to her that, with her small frame, only 5’4,” maybe 120 lbs., she would get knocked out for like fifteen hours. So, I decided splitting it would be the most effective option. It wasn’t easy to split the pill open, but after some trouble, I was able to cut it in half. Some of the pill’s coating came off, looking like grains of baby blue sand right near the edge of the pool.

“Okay, here goes nothing, right?” I say as I give half of the of pill to my beloved AJ as if it were an offering.

“Right,” A.J. replied. She was very confident, calm, and collected in her response. I would like to think that the confidence came through her association with me and that I was able to give her the strength she had to conquer the world, but I don’t really know if all of that is true. She grabbed the pill with her left hand, refusing her right hand to leave my thigh.

We downed the pill together. She did it with ease. It was damn-near a graceful display. On the other hand, I struggled with mine. The jagged edge got stuck in my throat and I had to hit my chest a few times in order for it to go down. I joked with AJ, saying that I should have used the pool water to help it go down. She laughed and said something to the effect of the chlorine not being the worst thing I had put in my body.

It didn’t take long to feel the effects. Within the first thirty or forty minutes, I was already feeling very spacey. It’s a very powerful depressant. AJ was feeling it too. It was like a wave of nothingness descended upon us. Everything felt absent and vacant. It was too relaxing, honestly. It was uncomfortable to realize that I was not control of myself and that my inhibitions were so decreased that I had no desire to do anything or to be anything. It was extremely hard for me to breathe. I would like to think that it was symbolic of a death wish that we were beside a pool and that I had planned on smoking. We very easily could have drowned and if I had smoked it would have deprived me oxygen. Though it wasn’t necessarily symbolism for our self-destruction at all. We just wanted to get high together in a beautiful place. That beautiful place just happened to harbor danger. It was all worth it to sit beside AJ and to hear the water run against our legs as we swayed our tangled legs, entwined in the water.

“Marcus,” AJ murmured, absentmindedly. “I don’t know if we can keep seeing each other when I move.” Her words would have wounded me if I were sober. Rather, the words haunted me like a specter. Sometimes I hear those words, even today. They linger in my brain.

Sometimes I wake up to the faint sound of her crying, even though there is no one in my room. Maybe the wind from the window reminds me of her, I don't exactly know.

She was sobbing into my shoulder. I would have been crying too, but the pool had enough water. I wasn't able to cry because I wasn't myself anymore. I wasn't the person that A.J. helped sprout with her admiration and I wasn't normal because my brain was out of sync with my body.

"I'm really sorry, Marcus," AJ sobbed into me. I can only assume that was what she said, because her accent and the Valium made her borderline unintelligible. "I still want you in my life. I will message you all the time and video chat. It's just, such a transition that I am not prepared for."

*"You don't have to lie to me,"* Is what I would have said, if I hadn't been absent within my own mind. But my words were never able to come out. I understood her fully. She wanted to move on and I was just an anchor. She wanted the freedom to experience New York and Columbia without worrying about me. I knew this day was coming. I just didn't want it to happen. Maybe that is where the drugs come in. I don't really know. It's hard to explain because it is hard to understand.

"Stop crying. You're fine, dear." I managed to somehow muster those words. I pulled her closer into my arms and she nuzzled her head into my chest. I could smell the flowered fragrance in her hair. Rather than being enamored by it, it replaced the air in my lungs as I struggled to breathe. Suddenly, I staggered to my feet. AJ slumped over to the cement as I was her only support. My arms and my legs were heavy. Moving was taxing, but I had found a different motivation.

“Do you want to go for a swim?” I asked with a massive slur. I pulled my shirt off and threw it at her, which aroused a giggle from my watery-eyed star-crossed lover. I kept my khaki shorts on as I sat down beside her and gently positioned myself in the pool. The water was shrill and cold. My breath was only coming in spurts now, but I was happy. I wanted to make the most out of these final moments with AJ.

“I don’t know about that, Marcus,” AJ said within a haze. I gently splashed the water at her, soaking her shirt and her shorts. She laughed again. I realized at that moment that her happiness was what I had been living for.

“Okay, I’m coming,” AJ conceded in what I could assume would have been a hurry had the drug not intoxicated her. She pulled up her shirt and threw it behind her, exposing her stomach and a black bra. I can still trace the outline of her body just from memory. I don’t know if I will ever become that great of a writer to truly convey her beauty.

I moved towards her as she was still sitting with her legs in the pool. When I got to her, her legs wrapped around me as I placed my hands on the small of her back. I gently moved her into the pool. She clutched tightly to me. Her arms were weak. Letting go of me, her foot slipped on pool floor. Her head suddenly submerged under the surface of the water, knocking her glasses off in the process. She would have probably frantically tried to make her way up above the water if she had the willpower. Luckily, I was there as I clutched her and pulled her back to the surface. I rotated her so her back was touching my chest. I tightly wrapped my arms around her and held her as we swayed against the pool wall in the water.

Within that pool on that humid day in August, AJ and I created the most beautiful scene where I clutched her and kissed her neck, assuring her that everything would be fine despite the fact that we both knew that it was out of my control to decide that. Within this story, I can create

a timeline where that segment of our life just repeats and stretches itself over and over again throughout the rest of time, ignoring the bludgeon of reality.

Had the story of our love ended here, then it would have been perfect. But I have never been able to let go, not without digging my fingers into the skin. If the story ends here in the scene of the pool, the reader wouldn't know that I showed up to her doorstep a few days later, only to find out she had boarded a plane to New York without saying goodbye. The reader wouldn't know that my texts would go weeks without a reply. The reader wouldn't know that I would call and call and call and she wouldn't answer. The reader wouldn't know that she only responded to me months later, telling me that she met a guy who reminded her a lot of me. The reader wouldn't know that he broke her heart. The reader wouldn't know that a few months later she fell for a marine who fucked her just so he could get his dick wet before deployment. The reader wouldn't know that she would call me in the middle of the night sometimes, drunk off wine, and cry about how her most recent lover didn't kiss her like I kissed her. The reader wouldn't know that I haven't talked to her in a year.

And now here I am, four years removed from you. Going to a university in the Midwest that is far from Columbia. What the reader wouldn't know about me is I can just divide my life into segments of affinities that diminished and wilted. What the reader wouldn't know about me is that I would meet other people. I thought they had outshined you, but maybe that's all due to recency. After sitting down and having to confront the very tangible feelings I had suppressed, I must say that even the image of her in my mind takes my breath away. One of these days, I'll find the person that eclipses AJ. Though I am so grateful to have ever met her.

**Kendrick Keller**

“Flight”

I felt like I was in a straight jacket. I had full range of movement with my arms, but the quick shallow breaths I was taking used up all of my finite attention. On the long black leather couch sits my sinking frame, next to it the TV remote so I can swap between Foster's Home for Imaginary Friends and the Nickelodeon classic Chalk Zone. I do like the mask even though I have to remove my glasses to wear it. The clear rubber mask of the nebulizer forms to my face, covering my nose and mouth. The thing looks like a slimmed down gas mask so I can at least pretend that I'm a 90's movie villain. The inch wide holes in the mask pour out a thin smoke. The vapor careens around my head as I try to breath in as much as possible while simultaneously blowing it from my vision so I can see the screen awash with color. The green band that wraps around my curly mass of low black hair keeps the mask seated on my face. In my small lap is the nebulizer itself, a grey box with tubes that stretch upwards towards me embed themselves in my mask. The nebulizer is loud so I try to get the breathing treatment over with because over its droning washing machine like sound, I can barely make out the TV. When the translucent fluid encased in the capsule connected to the underside of the mask grows low, the nebulizer begins to spurt. The droning becomes a loud stutter that pierces the ear. I had to reach my eleven-year-old hand around the capsule and shake it while attached to my face in hopes that it would stabilize. When the fluid was all either in the air or in my lungs, I could turn the device off. The end of the whirling sound was a relief, but the trade off was a jitter that reverberated through my skeleton.



I was a few months of freshman year of college and I was In the closet. I didn't like dudes or anything. I was sitting in the very non metaphorical closet of my room in the 3rd floor of Bayliss hall. I'm on a chair that I put in there for situations exactly like this. A combination of button ups and superhero shirts hit me in the face, I could feel their full weight on my shoulders because while I can fit in this closet, that definitely wasn't the school's intent. There was no light in my closet, no smell, and I had very little feeling left in my legs after sitting here for twenty minutes. But a sense that did remain was the sound. Even after my disappearing act, I could still hear the group that was gallivanting around my room. There were about five people besides myself in my blue and white colored corner room at Western. I don't know why but today that's too much babble for me to handle without the aid of heavy anesthetics. I was fine with some of them; I was friends with the one girl and my roommate Josh isn't always a total nuisance. Josh's physical appearance can only be summed up as unoffensive; the guy has a medium height and a light muscle tone. I think of him as a Twinkie that used to have a gym membership before he called it quits to pursue music. The short girl in the green sweater with the high pitched voice was so loud that I felt claustrophobic, so ironically, when no one was looking I ducked in the only closed off, dark, confined space I could find. For the first few minutes I counted a few times and breathed deeply while looking up at the ceiling. Once the pressure in my eyes dispersed and I no longer had the urge to chug the gallon of Great Value bleach, I kept on the top shelf, I could relax. I read comic books on my phone for a good 15 minutes before making my exit after everyone left the room to look for me. While in the dark closet, I bent myself over trying to change my clothes. We have to go to the wind concert in an hour so I might as well be dressed. I swapped out of my Green Lantern t-shirt into a plain grey one and threw on a shaggy black hoodie. Maximum effort. Josh and two of his friends returned to the room soon after.

“There you are. We thought you might've been in Jake's room,” Josh said after seeing my in my rotating chair.

“Nope. I was just in there.” I point to my temporary place of refuge.

“The closet? You were gone for like half an hour or something?”

“Yeah. Time flies when you're having fun. And it's been a blast,” I smugly say while making my way around the room to pick up the place. “I'm ready to go so tell the others. You found me.” I leave the room without saying another word. Sure I'm not fond of talking when it's not needed, but mostly I just like how confused Josh gets when I leave without explanation.



The effects of the breathing treatment had begun in full force. My body's small dark frame sat perfectly still, but internally it felt like my bones were doing the Monster Mash. It was late, so I moved off the couch and through the archway in my flat Texas home to get to the hallway. When I set my hand on the wooden white door of my room, every movement looked full of motion blur. To my eyes I pushed open the door two or three times before walking in and climbing the steel ladder of my bunk bed. The climb to the top takes five seconds, but the placement of each hand and foot on the cool bars of the bed frame is a slog that is as difficult as recovering from a bad tumble at soccer practice. Laying down once I reached the summit was easy. My chest cavity could have weighed sixty pounds for all I could tell. My ceiling fan had five blades, all blue. I left the switch up permanently, so it's always in rotation. The lights may be off but I can still track it's movements with my eyes. The fourth blade (or any other number between one and five depending on which you start with) was limp, the thing drug a few inches

lower than the rest when the fan was on. To me the fan looked faster than it could possibly be moving, and that was wrong. The rectangular blades with their inward arched points speed up and slowed down as I watched. The darkness swirled around them and bits shifted in the night below me. I could see movement coming from my closet that lacked a door. I could hear the creaking of the fan every time it went a full rotation. Even count it down.

One, two, three, four. One, two, three, four.

I tried to close my eyes and sleep, but I can still hear the movement, I swore to christ it was speeding up.

One, two, three, four. One, two, three, four.

Knowing nothing was there, I should've stayed in bed, but I couldn't let it go. I wanted to close my eyes and forget. I shut the tight enough to break skin. I waited for about five minutes then threw my sheets off of myself and climbed down. Flipping on the light switch, I looked around and up at the slow moving fan. Before getting back into bed I look at the closet again and refold my sheets and straighten the wine red comforter. Once I'm back in bed with the lights out, I still think about the fan, but it's soothing now.

One, two, three, four. One, two, three, four.



I'm in the bathroom washing up before the concert in Brown Hall. My hands felt like a thin sheet of grime sat between the air and my skin. I soaped and washed quickly. When all the suds fell into the drain, I turned up the heat in full. The water caused my hands to heat up. My palms were clean, so I kept them closed and balled them into fists. When I turned it off, my

hands glowed a soft red. Closing them tightened the up my red/brown skin and even though it hurt, it felt better than before. I could think, I could focus. I left the restroom and after a few minutes of playing video games in the room, the five others and myself went outside to wait on the bus. Mark, a dark-skinned dude with messy hair and a white button up was the first to get off the bus at Brown, followed closely by Josh, the rest of the posse, with me watching the rear. Brown is a sprawling almost circular building that sits upon a hill next to the bus stop. We walk through the grass, pulling our jackets tight because of the brisk night air. When we entered, we were greeted with bright yellow lights and many creepily happy faces handing out flyers with the set list printed on them.

The group moved through the double doors into a large auditorium that had black wires dangling from the ceiling. The wires were so thin and light that they could be used for trapeze; it made this feel more like a circus than a concert. I bet it wouldn't take me long to find a few professional clowns at WIU. Josh had to walk over to the corner of the room to get proof he attended the event. He stuck his face in a circular recognition device that showed a mirror image of himself on screen. He took his fingers and ran it through his blonde hair before smiling cheesily for the camera. After Josh gets his headshots, we trailed off to find our place among the desert of theater seats. We were seated near the back left of the room, no reason the mix too much in the crowd of students, parents, and professors. The concert was John Williams themed, the only reason I was there was to hear overworked music majors play live music from Jaws, Star Wars, and Jurassic Park. They open with the ladder, I'm excited by the deep sounds coating the entire room in an eerie melody that makes you squirm a tad in your seat. After all the metallic groans and lovely sounding whines, I could feel an energy welling up within myself. An energy that after the first fifteen minutes manifested itself in stark boredom.

My eyes darted around and I started thinking of the million things I'd rather do than sit here. My wandering eye eventually saw the double door behind me open and in walk Jess. Walnut brown hair at mid shoulder length, black glasses that push up her face and slightly magnify her eyes to be larger than life, and a shiny black dress that followed down her length to blend in with the dark floor. She looked wonderful and was smiling bigger and brighter than the spotlights filling the stage in front of me. Seeing her turned me into the last guy on the floor after John McClain leaves a room bloody and without bullets. I was conscious but barely and I had no clue what I wanted or where I wanted to go. All this because Jess danced onto the scene clutching the arm of some dude with a blazer.



Falling to sleep took plenty of work, considering it's usually a chore to quiet my brain without an induced panic. Unfortunately, my lack of consciousness didn't lead to a lack of fear. I was burning. My entire being was sweating, when I looked down at my short legs, I could see my skin boiling over, acting almost like rubber in a microwave. The floor underneath was charred and red; looking black and cracked like the tops of a mountain. The terror inside climbed as I realised that I was incapable of movement and had a great pressure that forced me down. I tried to disobey the force, this gravity that compelled me to bend down. I was small and young, there was no way I was going to break free.

When I finally looked forwards, I could see my favorite heroes sprawled out in chains. They would be suspended and held up on a wall ripped straight from Satan's chambers. Blood would run down their torn up multi colored outfits, open sores with flies buzzing around them.

The screams I would hear didn't necessarily match the voices of those yelling, all I could distinguish was the anguish in their voices. Just like every time, I'd cry. I'd weep and my tears would evoke a taste as memorable as liquorice. The heroes changed, this time the cast of Dragonball Z, last time the Power Rangers, once my family. When the pressure reaches its peak, it would break. I'd wake in my bed, sweltering under my sheets. Afraid enough to not wait around to turn on the lights this time. I grabbed my tv remote and sat on the floor. I'd need to be up to catch the bus in five hours and I clearly would not spend them sleeping.



I don't care. I shouldn't care. I'm better than caring. I've always been better.

The thoughts burst into my skull when sitting there watching Jess wrapped around this guy as she took her seat. I whipped my head forward at the speed of sound; she was not going to catch me watching.

I don't care. I shouldn't care. She doesn't owe me anything.

I hadn't known her longer than a month, but time with her was magnetic. Snapchatting her. Texting her. Flirting with her. I needed to move. My legs were bouncing. My upper body tingled while my breathing increased. The music got louder, the crescendo. My spine crawled up my back like a snake wiggling up my shoulders to bite through my neck. I couldn't stop it. I knew we weren't anything, yet I was reacting. My vision focused and unfocused. No one in the row was looking at me but if they did, they could tell I was disturbed. The decision was made, I couldn't do this anymore. I needed to move.

I don't care. I shouldn't care

When the band was in full swing, arms flailing and brass flying, I stood and bolted. I left my skateboard in the back and it was the only thing I was used to at this point. I felt like I was in a game of paintball. Running to the objective so that my cowardice could be hidden for just a bit longer. I grabbed my board, and I fled out the doors and into the cold. I planted both legs on the board and realized I was either breathing too fast or not at all. Seeing her for some reason made me shit bricks. I shat so many bricks you could hire some immigrants and build a house. Then I could live in that house. I could live in my shit house and never go back out; it'd be rent free.

I had no plan and knew everyone would be annoyed when they looked for me. I didn't even last until they played Star Wars. At least I was moving. I pushed my board for so long and so fast that the rusted bolts under my feet transferred the rough vibrations from the road up the length of my right leg. It was painful, but I would not stop pushing, because when I push I don't think. Kick push. Kick push. Count the kicks.

One, two, three, four. One, two, three, four.

## Adam Norris

### “Cheap Rubber Mulch”

The stage is lit to an unnecessary degree; on that, both parties agree. The recently erected stage is gratuitously flanked by several light trusses, courtesy of Fulton State University’s theatre department, that bathe the temporary platform in a flaxen brilliance, slicing the room in half: on one side, an apprehensive darkness, littered with hushed voices (*How long is this supposed to go? This guy isn’t a teacher, right? Do you have a charger for an iPhone?*), on the other side, the battlefield upon which the contenders are to compete.

Who are these competitors? One is a five foot five undergrad by the name of Sharon Stiegler. The other, a five foot ten bachelor named Peter Tumlin who’s two years too late for a mid-life crisis and only just beginning to show the signs of male pattern baldness.

Five weeks prior, neither of them knew the other existed. Sharon attended Fulton State University. She majored in Biology. After only two semesters, she was elected an officer of the Fulton State environmental club. After her third, she was elected president. It’s been 4 weeks, 6 days, and several migraines since the commander-in-chief of Fulton State’s eco army popped up in Peter’s work email. Since that day, a string of correspondence has plagued him.

To Whom It May Concern,

Hello. My name is Sharon Stiegler, and I’m a student here at Fulton State and president of the Environmental club. I’m emailing you today because of an issue we have with the new playground that was just constructed on the west end of campus. We’re concerned about the

rubber mulch, which studies have recently shown leach known carcinogens into our environment. We are attaching a recent study conducted by The University of Santiago in Spain.

Thank you.

-Sharon Stiegler

President, FSU Environmental Club

Mr. Tumlin,

Thank you for looking at the study, but I'm afraid I don't understand what you mean by "take it into consideration." Does that mean the mulch will be replaced? We have compiled a list of locally sourced, environment-friendly alternatives. I'm attaching the word document to this email. Thank you.

-Sharon Stiegler

President, FSU Environmental Club

That kind of shit went on for weeks.

Mr. Tumlin,

I still don't understand why the amount of recognized carcinogens, the zinc, the lead, the VOC's, and all the other nasty things that leach into the environment when that stuff decomposes (which it is proven to do BTW!) doesn't alarm you! And it's not just into the air, that stuff can get into ground water and cause all sorts of problems!

-Sharon Stiegler

President, FSU Environmental Club

Mr. Tumlin,

I don't think I was disrespectful in the last email at all, sir. I think you're misconstruing respect with letting you disregard the evidence I'm presenting you. I'm attaching a page from a recent essay I wrote on carcinogens. PLEASE READ IT!!!

-Sharon Stiegler

President, FSU Environmental Club

Mr. Tumlin,

Dr. Baisden has informed me that you have accepted our invitation. I look forward to meeting you and discussing this matter in a public forum.

-Sharon Stiegler

And so now here we are.

Sharon enters stage right, a confident young student eager to take a logic she can't wrap her head around and thrust it into the brilliant light of this decently-attended-for-a-Friday-afternoon public debate, where she trusts that either her peers will help her make sense of this man, or that this man will be exposed for a fraud, a con artist, or at least a lousy University employee.

Peter enters stage left. He squints under the heavy wash of the PAR cans and mentally kicks himself for getting roped into this (Dr. Baisden is known to be an extremely persistent, notoriously headstrong woman). A student moderator, no doubt another member of the Fulton State Environmental Club, is already seated at his station. He taps his lapel mic, and the corresponding "*thump*" that comes from the speakers confirms that, indeed, it is on.

The champions spar for a redundant 12 rounds of prepared bullet points. Evidence is presented. Rhetoric is employed. Scientific jargon is mispronounced. Credibility is questioned. Nevertheless, Sharon receives a front row thumbs-up from her faculty advisor, that wiry, old Dr. Baisden. The crowd does not notice the mispronunciation.

But enough of this narration, enough of this set up. Let's tune in and see what these challengers are saying...

Fade In:

Int. Fulton State Auditorium – Night

PETER

Furthermore, Ms. Stiegler, had you approached me with questions concerning this matter, rather than some immature campaign where you assume that my office does not know what it is doing, I would have told you that your one study you've provided from the University of Santiago is one of *many* studies on this subject. Though it may shock you, Ms. Stiegler, and any of you students currently working on research projects, one Google search does not provide the full scope of any scientific issue. Here's an even bigger shocker, guys: my office thoroughly researches all of our *Go Green Initiatives* before we ever implement them, and this includes the rubber mulch your club is so concerned over. Did you know, and I'm asking in a purely rhetorical fashion, of course, that the Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental

Protection has conducted extensive studies on the effects of rubber mulch on the environment? So have similar agencies in New York, so have similar Agencies in California. Do you know what they determined, Ms. Stiegler? They determined that certain components in these rubber chips do contain allergens, and that if you or your child should have an allergic reaction, you should see your family doctor. They determined that, indeed, the high concentration of Zinc found in storm water runoff from artificial turfs like our rubber mulch can pose environmental risks. Like so many substances in our world, yes, rubber mulch contains known carcinogens, and therefore can introduce these carcinogens into the environment, but all of these studies I have referenced concluded that the amount of risk involved does not surpass the threshold of an acceptable cancer risk.

SHARON

Acceptable cancer risk? What the hell is that supposed to mean?

(The moderator is blind-sided with inner-turmoil. Should he say something about his colleague's language and preserve the prestige of his title, or is this one of the cool college moments the tour guides told him about? Before he can make that split second decision, Peter beats him to the punch)

PETER

See now, that's better. Questions. It means, disregarding the vulgarity, that scientists with much more schooling than you have determined that the risk of our rubber mulch causing cancer is no greater than that of the beer you're all drinking at parties, or the cigarettes you're all smoking on

our smoke-free campus, or the UV radiation we all enjoy from our Sun. It means that scientists have already determined that you are wasting the time of everyone within this auditorium.

(A single chuckle comes from the back of the audience)

SHARON

So, basically, what you're telling us is that, because the scientific consensus is less than 100%, more research is needed before any action could be taken? Surely, Mr. Tumlin, you must see the irony here?

PETER

You're associating me with climate change deniers now, Ms. Stiegler? Surely you must see the irony in that.

SHARON

Yes I believe we're discussing the same irony, Mr. Tumlin, only you seem to think you're not the butt of this joke.

(The crowd erupts into raucous applause and whooping)

PETER

I will not be insulted in any forum, ma'am, public or private. I was made certain promises before I agreed to this event, the very first of which being that this discussion would be civil and productive. As for your strange accusation, I am, perhaps first and foremost, a lover of science. *Real* science. It's been a passion of mine since junior high. As I'm sure you can tell, that's been a while. I have a Master of Science from Oregon State University, and I have been an outspoken critic of climate change deniers for years. For you to use your privileged position to stand on this stage and insinuate that I am not committed to my job, is...well it's disappointing, and highly inappropriate.

MODERATOR

Perhaps if we returned to one of the prompts...let's see... "*How can an individual best mitigate-*"

SHARON

No, I don't think so. I'm not letting you off that easy, Mr. Tumlin.

(A collective hush spreads throughout the crowd)

PETER

Excuse me miss? I'd remind you, you are still expected to show respect-

SHARON

Explain to us how your lackadaisical response to this legitimate environmental concern is *any* different than a climate change denier's bread and butter. In the face of good, reputable science, you are choosing to ignore- let's say a significant probability – that your cheap rubber mulch leaches dangerous contaminants into the atmosphere, all for the sake of saving money. All for the sake of doubling down on a bad decision you already made. Please, Mr. Tumlin, with every ounce of due respect, please explain to me how you, the director of our school's *office of sustainability*, are any better than any climate change denier.

(The crowd goes fucking nuts)

PETER

Are you kidding me?! Because I'm not making policy decisions here! We're talking about some old recycled, repurposed rubber chips! For the ECD's daycare! At the high school, right over there, people! You can go look at them! So again I repeat, this is NOT even a matter of YOU OR YOUR CLUB'S CONCERN. You know, I don't know why I agreed to this. You're clearly not here to for an informed, civilized, academic public forum, and I have no interest participating in this misguided pep rally any longer, good night every-

SHARON

Do you believe the Earth is heating up, Mr. Tumlin? You say you do, and I'm inclined to believe you, because, despite what *you* may believe, *I* think you seem like a very intelligent man. If you weren't so stubborn, we might even get along. I mean, not in a creepy way. I'm 20, and

you're...but what I'm saying is, I mean what I'm asking is, do you really believe this place is going to burn? Do you believe, as I do, that future generations are fucked? Because if you do, and you recognize the big problem, I am here to tell you sir, those rubber chips over there, what you've done here, what you're refusing to even consider doing...this is the little problem. This is symptomatic. It *is* a symptom of the big problem you claim to be an *outspoken* critic of. This behavior, this ideology... it takes a population to ruin this planet for posterity, but it takes just one person to get the ball rolling. If nothing else, you are one of millions of hands willingly pushing this ball along. What's going to be your legacy, Mr. Tumlin? What will it say on your tombstone? Don't blame me, I wasn't the only one? Don't blame me, I always did my job, and besides, the Connecticut Department of Whatever assured me that the risk of cancer was acceptable? Don't blame me, my lazy response to environmental concerns was no worse than most, and better than many? Do you *feel* like you're sustaining anything other than your salary, Mr. Tumlin?

PETER

Future generations are, as you say it, are fucked...because of our Rubber Mulch? That's your assessment.

SHARON

In part? Absolutely.

PETER

So now I'm a murderer as well as a climate change denier?

SHARON

Is there a difference?

PETER

Sure. One's not murdering people.

SHARON

That's rich. You claim to be an ally of environmentalists the world over, and you don't see a connection between the victims of an insufficient response to the climate crisis, and the forces behind that insufficient response? When the seas rise, and the coast lines erode, you don't think any guilt lies with the generations past who said no, those ice caps are fine, no those maps are here to stay?! I call bullshit, sir; do you not have any sympathy for people of the future?!

PETER

PEOPLE OF THE FUTURE?! I DON'T GIVE A SHIT ABOUT THE PEOPLE LIVING RIGHT NOW!!! I have a job. It's a good job, and it's challenging, and it's rewarding. My office, our initiatives, we do a ton of good on this campus. For the environment. And for the school. You know why your tuition has been stable? You know why you enjoy a beautiful campus, with efficient, innovative technology? It's because my office does a damn good job promoting the welfare of this school and its student body.

But yeah, Ms. Stiegler. Can I call you Sharon? Might as well, this thing has gone as horribly as it could have, I see you all with your parents' phones out...yeah. If you want me to be honest, I don't really give a shit about the people on this planet right now, and I don't really give a shit about the people still to come. And I don't have to. That's not required of me by this university, or anything else, or anyone else. At the end of the day, I'm looking out for myself, just like everybody else, whether they want to bullshit about altruism and community and work themselves and everyone who's gullible enough to believe them into some grand circle-jerk, or they're like me, and they just want to do their fucking job, and do a damn good job at their fucking job, and then go home, and have a beer and watch some television, and not be harassed by some temporal world savior. I told you I'm a lover of science. I know where this is headed. You might even say I know it better than most. Life on this Earth, as we know it, is not sustainable in the long term, not with our species, not with our habits, not with our instincts. Our nature and this planet's nature are opposed, and we are not on the winning side. Not in the long term of this universe, anyways, and there's nothing that this office can do about that. It's going to end. We're going to choke to death on our own emissions! Yes! We're going to flood the earth, you bet! We're going to go crazy in little fucking rooms counting numbers and writing stories and coming up with holidays while the planet burns, sure! And humanity will go to its grave complaining about gas prices and the weather, and just before we all disappear up our own asshole, people like me will get to say "Ha! Told you so! Now let me die in peace!"

So if my time here at Fulton State is coming to a close, and after this fun event, I do believe it is, let me leave you with some knowledge...

There are people suffering, guys. I mean right now. Horrible, terrible suffering. Starvation. Oppression. Heartbreak. There were people suffering yesterday, there'll be suffering

tomorrow. I'm suffering a little right now. I've suffered worse. I'll suffer worse. And at no point during my suffering, or anybody else's suffering that's continued without ceasing for the entirety of recorded history, has Sharon Stiegler, college sophomore, public speaker extraordinaire, or any other member of the Fulton State Ecological Society, jumped in to save the day! No one has ever come to ease our suffering! No one ever started a Gofundme! I never heard about any benefit concerts! Shit I can't even remember getting any words of encouragement or moral support! Tell me Sharon, are future generations going to finally develop that time machine and retroactively make my life easier, save me from cruelty and anguish?

You stand there and act as if victims of tomorrow are any more important than victims of today or victims of yesterday, because what? Because notions of the future are just inherently cool? Because future suffering holds more value than current suffering? The generations that are already here starve and suffer and find themselves pummeled with injustice, but that's a lost cause, let's save the coastlines' future, right? Let's tell Peter he needs to get in line and change out the mulch on a playground, and if he doesn't, well we'll just put him on display for everyone to come see the devil, come see this man who would dare look in the face of something in this universe that might kill something else in this universe, and be thoroughly unsurprised, unimpressed, and uninterested! Well if what you've said is true, Sharon, if my choice of goddamn rubber mulch is the momentum that gets the gears turning, that ignites the engine of abuse and torment, the seed of some trans-generational suffering, well then I say LET 'EM SUFFER FOLKS!

## MODERATOR

...Err-And that's going to be all the time we have this evening, folks! On behalf of the Environmental Club, I want to thank everyone for coming out, and don't forget, tomorrow is Earth Day! Let's all find ways to save the planet guys, thanks and good night!

## END SCENE

As the crowd disperses, additional club members hand out 6x8 flyers, which advertise the following day's activities, as well as the remaining semester's calendar. Peter has already stormed out of the auditorium, and is on his way to his office to pack his things. He's going to beat this thing to the punch. He's going to resign. He's going to move. He hasn't decided where.

Sharon stands with a cluster of her most trusted classmates and discusses the alarming turn the evening has taken. All in all, she says to her confidants, the forum went well, and she has done what she meant to do: expose injustice. She had been in the right all along, she reflects, but she didn't know just how much of a head case that man really was.

A hand on her shoulder interrupts her train of thought, and she turns to find a warm hug from her hero, Dr. Baisden, who tells her that she was *just so good*. The two of them walk out into the atrium together, discussing the debate. No one in the remaining congregation asks what's going to happen with the rubber chips. Most of them assume it's now going to be taken care of by someone, and a few even forget why they were there.

## Angelique Herrera

### “Hush Hush”

The dimly lit chandelier casts a shadow against the stark white vanity and matching dresser, pushed against one of the egg-shell colored walls. Beneath the soft light, two men are splayed across a king-sized bed. Everything is silent, except for the sounds of the men gasping for breath. They face each other, both lying on their sides; only a black silk sheet covering the two of them. The Hispanic man, with dark, sharp features reaches out and caresses the caucasian man’s smooth, angelic-like face, running his long fingers throughout the man’s golden curls.

“Marc,” the Caucasian man says in a sultry voice, as he leans into Marc’s touch.

“Yes, Eric?” Marc says, as a slight grin appears at the corner of his mouth.

“Why does time go by so quickly when we’re together, but feels eternal at the same time?”

Marc chuckles slightly at how cheesy Eric’s words sounded, “It’s because the time we have with each other is usually limited. Honestly, It’s refreshing being able to get a full night together. I do cherish these special moments with you Eric.” He winks.

“I do too Marc,” He sighed, turning slightly red. “I just wish we didn’t have to freaking hide anymore.”

“Baby, you know we can’t bring this out in the open yet.”

“Why not? Don’t you think five years has been long enough?” Frustration slowly building up in his voice.

“Cálmate, cálmate. How would that look on me Eric? I’m married. I’ve been married for seven years, and with the same woman for fifteen. One of your good friends I may add.”

Eric blushed shamefully at his remark.

“Plus baby, I’m up for district attorney next year. I can’t have drama come out of the woodwork. The voters would have an uproar if they found out I’m having an affair, especially if they found out it was with a man.”

“I know, I know. I’m just tired of keeping everything a secret. I’m tired of the lies. What kind of person does it make me, being her friend, yet in love and sleeping with you. Why can’t you just ask her for a divorce? You’re unhappy, it would make the most sense.” Eric looked Marc in the eyes pleadingly.

“Eric, it’s not that simple,” Hurt flickered in Eric’s eyes, as Marc continued to speak. “Now stop talking about this mess, and let’s make the most of this night.” His eyes lowered, looking lustfully at the nape of Eric’s neck. He leaned in, placing rough kisses down his neck.

Eric let out a groan, “Fine, but this conversation isn’t going to go away. It will continue later” He closed his eyes, allowing Marc to continue kissing down his neck. They both slowly sink back into the mattress, their hands roaming once again.

A faint clicking sound made its way throughout the house.

“Marc,” Eric jerks suddenly, whispering, “Did you hear something?”

Marc chuckles, “Relax mi guerito, you know Alicia is away on a girls trip. Your anxiety is getting to you. You’re starting to hear things loco.”

“You’re-you’re probably right, I’m sorry. I don’t know why I’m so jumpy tonight. I might have had one too many glasses of wine earlier”

Marc presses his pointer finger against Eric’s pouty lips, “Shhh mi angelito, enough talking.” He grabs his chin, gently tugging him closer. Their bodies medling together, as if they were matching puzzle pieces. Their lips touching ever so slightly.

A female voice suddenly rings out, “Marc? Mi novio, are you here?”

The door swings open, bright white lights turning on suddenly. Too fast for either men to react quickly enough.

“Marc?” Alicia says in a confused voice. Her eyes focus on the king-sized bed in front of her; registering what’s actually going on. Her gaze drifting towards Marc, then switching to Eric. Her mouth falls open in disbelief as she stumbles backwards. She leans against the wooden door, trying to regain her balance.

“*Fuck.*” Marc thinks to himself, shaking his head slightly.

“Alicia,” Marc says in quiet, hesitant voice, “it’s not what it looks like preciosa.”

He begins to get up from the bed, his hands out in front of him. Alicia pushes herself off of the wall, throwing her fists down to her sides.

“Sit the FUCK down, Marc! Are you seriously trying to tell me that THIS,” She waves her finger at Marc and then to Eric. “Isn’t what it looks like. You’re CHEATING on me, with a fucking DUDE for Christ’s sake!”

He sighs, “Baby. I can explain, if you just could calm down.”

‘Cálmate? Mi Cálmate? Ay dios mío! We’ve been together for fifteen years, and married for goddamn seven years! I just caught you cheating on me with your best friend, and you’re telling me to calm down? HOW DARE YOU!’ Alicia then looks at Eric, “And you! Pinche cochino, I fucking trusted you, Eric! I thought we were friends. We have dinner every goddamn Tuesday; you were in our wedding for Christ’s sakes!” She lets out a hysterical laugh, “But you’re sleeping with my husband? How could you do that to me? All this time I’ve been worrying about him going off and cheating with another woman, but he’s over here sleeping with dudes now too! Damn bastard!”

Eric's face turns stark white, stammering, "A-alicia, I'm so sorry. We just didn't know how to tell you. I never meant to hurt you."

"Tell me?" She scoffs. "Bullshit. Who the hell knows how long you two have been fucking behind my back."

She looks over at Marc once again. "Marc, did our marriage seriously mean nothing to you? If you were unhappy why didn't you just say something. Instead, you fuck our friend. Can you even look me in the eyes and show me an ounce of remorse for this shit?"

He groans in annoyance, totally over the entire situation.

"Look Alicia, I'm sorry...that you caught us. You were supposed to be away"

Alicia screams in frustration, "My flight got cancelled you narcissistic bastard! You do this and can't even apologise? Do you even care how much this hurts me? God you're sick! Four times you cheated on me! FOUR TIMES!"

She begins shaking her head furiously, her black curls springing in every direction. Fury forming behind her caramel colored eyes. She reaches down, pulling off her shiny, black, stiletto heel. Kicking the other one across the floor. She clenches the heel tightly, her petite fingers turning white at the knuckles. Her eyes narrowing in on Marc.

"Y-you," she says through clenched teeth, "You are going to pay for this. I loved you despite all the affairs, the long hours at the office, the cold shoulder, not wanting kids, not wanting to have sex. I loved you through all that and this is what happens! I'm fucking done! No mas!"

"*Wait, Marc has been sleeping with other women too?*" Eric thinks to himself, his blood boiling slightly.

She lunged at Marc, swinging the shoe towards his head. Screams gurgling from her throat as her eyes glaze over, becoming animalistic. He jumps backwards, the tip of the stiletto grazing his nose. A stinging sensation shoots through his face; he grabs his nose, as he falls backwards onto the bed. Eric starts to scream, lifting the sheets over his face to protect himself. Screaming, “Alicia, please calm down!”

“Shut the hell up you homewrecker!”

“Alicia!” Marc screams, “Are you loco!? What are you trying to do, kill me?”

She looks at him, then began chuckling slightly. Realization settling on her face. She looks down at the wooden floor, her breath hitching, as she lets the heel slip from her fingers. Everyone’s eyes focusing on the heel as it falls to the floor. The shoe making a small clunk as it makes contact with the wood.

“You know what, I could be crazy. But...you know, you’re just not worth it anymore.” She pauses slightly. “B-both of you, Get the fuck out of my house.”

Anger begins to overcome Marc, as he sneers, “This is my house puta, my job is what pays for most of this shit in here. You used my money to buy this furniture, all those name brand clothes in your walk in closet, and those fucking Coach bags of yours.”

Eric peeks out from under the covers, slowly putting the sheets down. He whispers, “Marc, I think we should probably leave.” As he thinks guiltily to himself, *“This never would have happened, if Marc would have told her earlier on. Instead of keeping me as a closet freak. Or if I never got in between them, but apparently he’s been lying to us both. God, I love him though...”*

“No Eric. This is my house. If you want to scram, fine. I ain’t leaving though”

“Actually Marc, this is OUR house. You may have bought things, but don’t act like you cutting the checks for things, wasn’t just a way to shut me up. I may have designer labels, but that’s besides the point. We’re married, and your money is my money. I married you before you even had money. I’m tired of you undermining me. I work. I work very hard. I know I didn’t go to law school like you, but I work more days than your lazy ass does.”

“Oh please woman, you’re just a high school English teacher.”

“I may be “just a teacher”, but I’m more literate than you’ll ever be.”

“Again, this is my house. Your salary wouldn’t even cover the electricity costs in this house.”

Alicia threw her head back and cackled.

“Let me tell you something idiot, this house is already paid off. The lease is co-signed under both of our names, so technically, it is mine regardless of whom has paid it. Also, I want a fucking divorce Marc. I’ll enjoy seeing how “sorry” your ass is going to be when we’re both standing in front of a judge, discussing who gets what. I’m more than sure that the judge will empathize with a distressed wife, who just got cheated on AGAIN, by her unloving husband. Her husband who happens to be running for district attorney, and who happens to now be gay,” She sighs. “Now, both of you. Get. The. Fuck. Out. Of. My. House,” She stares Eric directly in his wide, blue eyes as she says, “Before I call the cops on his ass.”

“I’ll go.” Eric says quickly.

“No,” Marc says, “we both can go finish the night elsewhere.”

*“Is this guy seriously just thinking about sex right now?”* Eric thinks angrily.

“Good, grab your shit and get out. You have five minutes before I call the huda”, Alicia says, as she walks out the door and down the wooden staircase.

Eric flies up from the bed, frantically searching for his clothes. Pulling them on as he finds each piece. “Marc, I’m so sorry. I ruined your marriage, and I hurt someone who was my friend. We shouldn’t have kept this a secret for so long”

“Don’t worry about it, that bitch isn’t going to get shit.”

“Stop calling her that.”

“What you’re defending her now? After all this secrecy, and sneaking around. I’m finally free of her, we can be together now.”

“Now you want to be together? I asked you to leave her numerous freaking times. Even earlier today, you said it would cause too much drama if you did. But, she just threatened to take all this to court and you didn’t even bat a fucking eye! You cheated on her with me, and other people too. You weren’t going to tell me that one were you asshole? You could have prevented this shit though, but no. You wanted to keep me a secret. Your dirty little gay secret, huh? The only reason you’re leaving now is because she found out about it. If you really “loved me”, you would have ended things with her two years ago.” He stammers, “I-i don’t think I want this anymore. I know I was wrong on my part, but you’re wrong on all parts.”

“Are you fucking serious? You want to leave me now? What the fuck. Ha, fine. Leave. You and her will both come crawling back to me sooner or later.” He sneers.

“You know what Marc, Alicia is right. You are a narcissistic bastard. You only care about yourself, and boning”

Marc lets out a roar, his tanned arm cocking back. He swings at Eric, nailing him right in his left eye socket. Eric falls to the ground screaming, while holding a hand to his eye. Bruising and swelling begin forming around the area he was hit.

Alicia runs back up the stairs. Screaming, “What the fuck is going on?”

Marc turns and faces the doorway where Alicia is standing, “This bitch wants to leave me too, but he got what he deserved. You’re lucky you aren’t a dude too.” He smirks.

Eric, still holding his eye, inches towards one of the fallen heels that Alicia had thrown aside earlier. He looks up to see Alicia watching him carefully. He puts a finger to his lips, signaling her to hush and not give anything away. He grasps the top of the heel firmly in his right hand. Silently standing up.

“Hey, Asshole.” Eric says tauntingly.

“You shouldn’t have anything to say to me, seeing how I just beat your ass.” Marc says, as he turns around to look at Eric.

As Marc turns, Eric swings the stiletto down. The heel landing directly into Marc’s right eyeball. His eyeball pops and he screams violently, as blood begins spurting from his eyeball. The heel lodging itself deeper into his eye socket. He falls to the floor, curling up into a fetal position. Blood spurting in multiple directions, pooling onto the wooden flooring.

He screams hysterically, “You are sick!” He clutches his face, his breath hitching “You ruined my FUCKING EYE!” Sobbing, he yells out once more, “Alicia, don’t just fucking stand there. Call 911! Do you want me to die? I’m your husband!” He cries.

“An eye for an eye you bastard. I’ll call an ambulance for you. I am going to claim this incident as self-defense though, and I’m sure your soon to be ex-wife will back up my story.” He looks at Alicia, “I’m sorry for sleeping with your husband, he fed us both lies. I know this doesn’t make up for it, but I do sincerely apologize.” He then pulls out his phone to dial 911.

Her gaze towards the pool of blood breaks, looking up at Eric.

“ First of all, I don’t accept your apology. I will not be backing anyone up. You cochinos are on your own, I’ll say what I saw but that’s that. Now get the hell out of my house, and wait

outside for the cops.” She looks over at Marc, “This isn’t even all you deserve. You’re lucky. Get the hell up off of the floor and get out of my house, you’re bleeding all over my floor. The ambulance should be coming.”

Marc sobs, as he attempts to get off of the floor. Grabbing a sheet and putting it around the heel, to prevent the blood from spurting any further. He finally gets up, and hobbles towards the stairs. She watches both men as they walk down the stairs, following behind shortly. They all begin to patiently wait for the ambulance. Both the ambulance, and the police showed up to the scene of the events. The first person to show up to the scene, was an officer by the name of Officer Weathers. He was a younger black man, average build, and a stern face. He cautiously approached the three by the front steps. Taken aback by the distraught looking woman, the half-naked white man, and the hispanic man, covered in blood. With a heel protruding from his eyeball.

“Hello all, my name is Officer Weathers. I’ve come to take statements, about the ordeal that’s happened here tonight.” The officer looks to Marc, “Sir, the ambulance is on its way. Are you light-headed? I’d like to collect your statement, before the medic arrives. If possible. Please sit down on the steps if you’re more comfortable. Meanwhile, the other two can stand over there.”

He points to a tree, about fifteen feet away. Eric and Alicia make their way over to the tree. Marc then gives the officer his perspective on what happened.

“Officer, Eric and I were having an affair. We have been on the low for years, but my wife and I have not been happy for a long long time. Yes, I know it was wrong. I just couldn’t stay away from Eric, he’s the love of my life. My wife was very angry, she threatened my life, my job, and to take away my house. After that, Eric threatened to leave me too. I had a mental

break, and black-out. He said I punched him, but all I remember is the way his eyes looked before he swung the heel down. It was awful officer.”

“Sir, I have all the information I need from you. Thank you. The ambulance is pulling up now.”

The ambulance pulled into the driveway and, Marc was taken to the hospital immediately. Officer Weathers signaled Eric over to give his side of the story.

“Sir, please tell me your perspective on the events that transpired today.”

“Yes officer. So, today Marc and I wanted a night to ourselves. His wife was out of town, and we were having an affair. She ended up coming home, without our knowledge and caught us. She was very upset, and she had every right to be. They did end up getting into a verbal argument over the house, but nothing terrible. She almost went after Marc, but regained her composure. She told us to leave, and I got my stuff to leave. Marc however, was not happy about it. Him and I got into a heated discussion over our relationship. I told him that he could have prevented all of this, and I told him I no longer wanted to be with him. He got very angry, and knocked me right in my eye. Then he made a snarky comment about how Alicia and I going to come crawling back to him.”

“Sir, tell me about the heel in his eye.”

“Well officer, he hit me really hard. I felt defenseless, so I picked up the heel and swung at him. It got stuck in his eye. It was a spur of the moment thing.”

“Okay sir, I have all the information needed from you. Go back to where you were standing, and tell the Mrs. to come give her statement.

Eric walks over, and Alicia soon walks to where the officer is standing.

“Ma’am please tell me your side of the story.”

“Okay, so I was supposed to be going on a trip. My flight was cancelled, so I came home. When I got here, I found my husband in bed with one of our good friends. I was furious, and almost hit Marc. I didn’t though, I was in shock. Like, I knew we weren’t happy but I never thought he would be sleeping with a man...” Her voice breaks slightly.

“My apologies ma’am, but keep going.”

“Well we got into an argument over the house, and I threatened him with court. His responses were vain of course, he’s diagnosed with narcissism. I told them to leave then walked downstairs, only to come back minutes later. I heard a scream, and Eric was on the floor when I got up there. Marc had punched him, and then was laughing about it. He said I was lucky to be a woman, or I would have ended up the same. Anyways, that’s when I noticed Eric going for the heel. He like, put his finger to his mouth to tell me to almost keep it hush hush. I wasn’t quite sure what was happening sir, but then in like moments. A shoe was in Marc’s eye. I stood there shocked. Now, you’re here.”

“Well ma’am, after collecting everyone’s statements; I will not be putting you under arrest. However, I will be arresting your husband with aggravated battery. He may serve jail time, but there’s a possibility of bail if you want him out.”

*“He can rot in there for all I care. I’ll be serving him divorce papers whether or not he’s in jail.”* She thought to herself briefly.

“I will be arresting Eric as well, with a higher charge.”

She nodded at the officer, watching him walk over to Eric.

“Sir,” The officer said. “Can you please tell me your last name?”

“Yes, it’s Edwards.”

“Alright, thank you. Eric Edwards, turn around and put your hands on your back.”

“Wait...what? No!” Eric steps back.

“Sir, turn around and put your hands behind your back. You’re being arrested for attempted involuntary manslaughter.”

“No! No! He deserves to be arrested, not me!

The officer proceeds to detain Eric, finally getting him in the squad car. Officer Weathers then comes back over to Alicia, “You have a good night Miss.”

“Thank you officer.”

The squad car exited her property, and Alicia made her way back inside. She climbed up the wooden staircase slowly. Walking towards her bedroom door, she pushed the door open gently. Her eyes fixated on the tousled bed in front of her. She sighed loudly, “Great, they just had to screw in the bed I sleep in. Now I’m going to have to burn the sheets and mattress.”

She tries to laugh at the joke she made, but instead, a sob escapes her throat. Her body begins to convulse. She falls to the floor, landing in the pool of Marc’s blood. Sobs erupting from her throat, as she convulses uncontrollably. Blood staining her hair and skin. Her sobs finally quiet down, and the shaking ceases. She puts her fingers up to her mouth, whispering to herself, “Hush hush Alicia, hush hush.”

## **Brandon Williams**

“end measured mile”

It’s probably eight o’clock or so when the van rumbles to a stop and the overhead light comes on like a dim yellow alarm. Everyone’s blinking against it, staggering out of their seats and stretching, freed from the too-tight seatbelts, the stale air conditioning and the ever-present scent of Cheez-Its. Sue stays bundled up in the old army blanket, blinking blearily at the intrusion of noise and the sudden cessation of motion.

The sliding door just past the top of her head opens, sending her backpack thumping to the asphalt along with a half-eaten packet of Starburst. “Come on, girly,” Dad says, patting her on the shoulder. He’s talking too loud, ears deadened by twelve hours on the road.

Sue just squeezes her eyes shut more tightly. The sooner she gets up, the sooner she has to help unpack.

All too quickly she finds herself making the weary trek to the back of the van to grab the nearest suitcase, her hair floating free with static, the army blanket draped over one shoulder like a half-hearted toga. The driveway is on a steep incline from the road, ending at the big white door of the garage. Sometimes she feels like the walnuts that fall from the huge, crabbed tree at the top of the hill, rolling down to where Grandad has to sweep them off the front walk. No matter where she goes, she rolls back here.

She falls into the line of suitcases trundling towards the front door and watches from the rear as it opens, dutifully stepping forward one vacated space at a time, eventually taking her place at the front. Her turn to hug, pat on the back, make awkward noises in her throat when she can’t take a compliment, can’t think of anything pertinent to say about the fact she’s taller (she’s

not) or prettier (nope) or maybe wider, if Grandad makes a joking jab (but it's funny because it's true).

"How was your trip?" Nanny asks, putting her long arms around Sue. Nanny, tall and frail and beautiful, like a stilt-legged bird.

"Long," Sue says.

"Never gets any shorter, does it," Nanny says with a small laugh. She pulls back and cups Sue's cheek, piano fingers dry and cool. "Glad you could make it, hon."

Sue just smiles and gently pulls free.

Then Nanny and Grandad gather up to make a fuss over Benji; and look how tall he's gotten, how broad his shoulders are, he'll be shaving soon and, goodness, they heard he made the track team. Benji soaks it up because he's conventionally attractive and athletic and accomplished and fits in his skin, it's tailormade.

Sue is ninety-percent sure she doesn't hate him for that.

She doesn't miss how all this is happening in the middle of the foyer. Sue is on the right edge and Mom stands on the left and Dad, Benji, Grandad and Nanny all huddle between, talking over each other, providing a barrier. Because this is the distance proscribed by this summer's cold war. Nobody ever said, 'keep Sue and Mom apart'. Nobody had to; there's ice there, forming crystals in the gap, and they all feel it.

Sue turns and pulls her suitcase away.

Her room is the laundry room. Once upon a time she and Benji had shared the kids' room, but that was before high school, before bras and blemishes and all the other plagues of puberty. 'A growing girl needs her own space,' Nanny had said, and if that space is mostly taken up by a washer and dryer, well, Sue isn't that picky. Besides, she likes the way it smells: Tide

and clean cotton and dryer sheets. Her airbed is wedged against the opposite wall, already fitted with sheets and a pillow. There's a small bathroom right across the tiny hall.

She's brushing her teeth when she looks directly into her own reflection and freezes, toothbrush prickly against her gums. She has the sensation that she's looking through a window, not a mirror, and another Sue is staring back at her, caught in the same moment. For a long, shuddering second, she's hesitant to move because the reflection might not move the same way. And what would that mean?

It's a child's thought, something long leftover from the days when she would peek around the doorframe, pretending the silvery sheen crouched above the sink was a window to another world. Now here she is, in front of the same mirror; fully formed, fully reflected. No magic, no shades of Mirror-Sue. Just her, facing herself and a future she can't seem to find the shape of.

It's always just her.

She goes back into her room and collapses onto the air mattress with a rubbery squelch. Getting comfortable always sounds like someone molesting a balloon. She reaches over into her backpack and pulls out the letter, with its creased edges and faraway zip code. 90095—California. The same country but still so distant—so different—from Michigan, from Arkansas. She tugs it out of the envelope just enough to see the words that make her heart race.

You have been accepted

She tucks it back away.

---

The next morning is the first day of vacation, always set aside as the laziest day. Sue eats a quick breakfast of cereal, after which there isn't much to do except wait for lunch. Benji is still

sleeping in the kids' room, so the Sega is off limits. She doesn't feel like watching TV; she does plenty of that at home.

At the back of the dining room is the sliding door to the second-story deck. She steps out into a day just beginning to hit the first edge of summer heat; dew sits heavy on the thick-bladed grass below, the planks of the deck moist beneath her bare feet. Two clear acres stretch out and down to the drop off at the far edge where the creek cuts through the red clay and winnows past the trees dotting the high bank. Across that shallow ribbon of water is a fence on the other bank, backed by high grass. The Ozarks roll above it all, estival greens rising and falling like the wooded humps of whales breaching on that misty horizon.

She descends the creaky wooden steps to the lawn. Down near the edge of the creek is a shady oak tree with a trampoline beneath it. Per usual, she tires of jumping within fifteen minutes. She's lying on her back enjoying the dappled light winking through the shifting leaves when Benji finds her. The trampoline is kind of a first day tradition.

He pulls off his shoes and rolls onto glossy black mat. "Mom said she's going shopping with Nanny, so we're on our own for lunch," he announces.

"Cool," Sue says, which it isn't, really, but she doesn't feel like talking.

Benji always feels like talking. "So are you still all brooding and stuff?"

"Shut up, Benji."

"What? I'm just asking," he retorts in a tone that's nothing close to innocent. "Unless you're just going to hate Mom forever and still stay."

"Seriously?" Sue kicks out blindly with one foot and connects with what feels like Benji's midsection, getting an indignant squawk for her effort. "Go. Away."

"It's my trampoline, too!"

“No, it isn’t, it belongs to the neighbors.”

“Well, I was there when they said we could use it,” Benji states, like that’s the ultimate argument.

Sue sighs and rolls over, intent on ignoring him.

“I just wish you’d do something,” Benji mutters. “You and Mom are making things so weird.”

She doesn’t know what he’s complaining about. He’s the golden boy—always has been, always will be—and if Mom ignores Sue from now on then he’ll get that much more attention.

But it’s hard to push him away, here on the trampoline. A thousand echoes of their younger selves flit through memory. Benji isn’t Sue’s enemy, and she misses the days when the gap between younger brother and older sister hadn’t seemed so wide and meaningful. Now she’s grown up (yeah, right), and he’s waiting to catch up.

“Maybe you should talk to her,” Benji suggests. He makes it sound that easy because it would be, for him.

“She doesn’t listen,” Sue tells him.

“You haven’t *tried*.” Benji sits on crossed legs, tearing up a fallen leaf into tiny green shreds. He shrugs uncomfortably. “This just sucks, you know?”

She knows.

Dad shows up on the ATV about twenty minutes later. The noise of the engine cuts through the peaceful morning like a buzzsaw; Sue can track his progress without opening her eyes. He pulls up alongside the trampoline and kills the engine.

“You guys been down to the creek yet?” he asks. He looks them over. “You’re still dry, so come on. Let’s see how it’s doing this year.”

Dad doesn't own the property or the creek, but he still treats it like it's his own pet project, noting slight changes in its course year by year. Since Nanny and Grandad moved here from the old house the creek has eaten away a good twenty feet off the end of their yard. It's never safe to walk right up to the edge of the ravine. Sue and Benji follow Dad around to the narrow trail that cuts through the tall grass, meandering down to the creek bed.

Benji and Dad start skipping rocks; it takes about a minute for it to become a competition. Sue finds a spot that's deep enough for her to sit in and settles there with the water lapping up and down between her chest and stomach. She turns over the smooth rocks, watching tiny minnows scatter and the small clouds of mud get swept away. No crawdads so far.

Once, she found an arrowhead mixed in among all the other rocks. It was a lustrous, speckled red-brown, its edges long since dulled with age. She had wondered if anyone would find something left from her after she was dead. If they did, it wouldn't be as cool as an arrowhead. 'Someone wrote 'SUE' on this rock,' they would say in that distant future, 'but we don't think they were important.'

She'd scared Benji with the arrowhead, telling him it was haunted by an Indian ghost and then hiding it under his pillow that night. He's too old for that to work anymore, but she feels like she might have been half right. Not because ghosts are real, but the person who had made the arrowhead had been, once, and sort of still is. The arrowhead sits at the bottom of a drawer in Sue's room, an extant piece of a life long since lived.

So, maybe *everything* is haunted, because everything has been touched by someone. And everyone leaves pieces of themselves behind, even though they don't mean to. The past never fully fades away. It's a sea of ghosts, beneath the map.

"Sue!" Dad yells, breaking her from her thoughts. "We're going back for lunch."

She stands and walks heavily to the rocky bar, slow with the weight of the water and its cold. Her arms are covered in goosebumps despite the glaring sun. She looks back at the creek and she can see the impression where she'd been sitting; she wonders how long it'll last.

Benji strides by, shaking off droplets like a dog. She's about to fall into step with him when he raises his hands in front of her face, forcing her to halt. He's got a toad perched on the seam between his palms, its tawny little eyes glittering like gold flakes.

"Kiss him, he's a prince!" Benji says with a wide, mischievous smile.

"He's your toad; *you* kiss him," Sue counters.

"I tried, but he's a reverse-toad prince. He needs a kiss from another toad." Benji thrusts the toad even closer to Sue's mouth. "He said no tongue."

"Come on, guys!" Dad calls from further up the bank, distracting Benji.

Sue sidesteps her brother and gives him a five-star square on his developing sunburn. As Benji screeches the toad makes a heroic leap for freedom and flies in a graceful arc like a warty comet; it dives back into the welcoming waters of the creek with barely a ripple.

*Ten out of ten*, Sue thinks.

She wonders if toads can remember things like this.

---

Dad's in charge of lunch, which means Sue and Benji each get a can of Campbell's finest Chicken & Stars. Afterwards they convene in the kids' room to kill some time with the Sega Genesis in the TV cabinet.

"Bet I can get past the Labyrinth Zone," Benji says, grabbing the controller.

"Bet you can't," Sue says.

She's right. Benji throws himself onto his bed in a huff, followed by the taunting tones of the Game Over music. Sue takes up the controller and makes it all the way to the Star Light Zone, earning an obscene gesture from Benji.

She pauses the game and goes out into the garage to grab a soda from the second fridge. Granddad keeps the place obsessively clean and the concrete floor is cool and smooth against her bare feet. It smells like oil and metal, underpinned by the acrid hint of gasoline. She finds Dad at one of the workbenches against the far wall. Curious, she comes up next to him to see what he's working on.

"Just weighting these lines," he tells her, crimping a lead ball onto the fishing wire.

"We fishing tomorrow?" Sue asks.

"Probably not tomorrow. We're going shopping, remember?"

"Oh, right."

She watches his hands as he squeezes the pliers, smashing the lead closed. Dad works with his hands, always has. There are tiny white scars all over them, scratched onto the pitted leather of his skin like counting notches. They remind her of the sketches he sometimes draws, spindly pictures in blue pen made of dozens of quick little lines. The scars make his hand a weathered parchment, each small cut a scratched-in memory. It's his history; and Sue's, too. It's the work he's done for her, to bring her into the world, to bring her to the here and now. The scars of a family tree, drawn in thin white lines. Hers is the branch that skews towards the wrist, about to fall off the page.

"Benji said I should try talking to Mom," Sue blurts out.

Dad's practiced motions stop for a fraction of a second, the only sign of his surprise. "I think he's right."

Sue isn't so sure. "What if it just makes things worse?"

The final lead weight goes onto the line. It dangles heavily from Dad's fingers, straining towards the floor. "You won't know unless you try, Susan."

"I don't even know what her problem is," Sue mutters.

"She misses you."

Sue frowns. "What? I'm right here."

"Well, sometimes," Dad says.

Sue rolls her eyes. "Yeah, thanks, I prefer my advice to be cryptic." She grabs a soda from the fridge and stalks back into the house.

Truth is, she knows exactly what Dad's talking about.

---

Fireworks tents back home are primarily filled with disappointment: weak smoke bombs, sparklers, maybe some snakes if you get lucky. Party favors passing themselves off as fireworks. Down here, it's the real deal. Sue, Dad and Benji load up on the good stuff and back home they put everything in the shed where it will sit until they start setting up tomorrow afternoon.

Inside the house, Nanny's in the kitchen prepping all kinds of food for the family who will arrive for the Fourth. Sue gets roped into helping, which she has long since resigned herself to. Chores are just a part of staying with Nanny and Grandad, the price of an otherwise great vacation. As Sue putters around the kitchen she can hear Benji running the weed eater at the side of the house while Grandad's riding mower drones in the distance.

"How you likin' vacation so far, Susie Q?" Nanny asks in her honeyed drawl as Sue dutifully chops carrots for a chicken pot pie.

“Good,” Sue says. Then, more animatedly, “We got a great haul this year from the tent. Tomorrow’s show will be awesome.”

“You always did love those fireworks,” Nanny remarks, and while there’s that same hint in her tone that Mom always has—the one that says *‘I don’t get it’*—there’s something else there that Mom lacks: acceptance. “Well, I look forward to it, hon. Pass me that salt, wouldja?”

Mom passes by the kitchen with an armful of tablecloths, headed for the laundry. Sue keeps her head down and chops, fearing eye contact.

“You know we all want what’s best for you,” Nanny says.

There’s a part of Sue that wants to let it go, but she doesn’t. “Even if I’m moving away?”

“Well, we don’t hardly get to see you but once or twice a year anyway,” Nanny says with short laugh. “You aren’t moving to the moon, are yuh?”

Sue looks down at the half a carrot on the cutting board, surrounded by its own parted segments. “I’d still try to visit.”

“Well, that’s good for me and Grandad. But maybe your momma isn’t used to that. She’s used to having you around.”

Frustration surges through Sue, drowning out the first pangs of empathy. “Okay, fine, but why doesn’t it matter what *I* want? I thought it was my decision.”

“It’s your decision,” Nanny says mildly. “You’re eighteen now. I’m just sayin’ that it might be hard for your mother, that’s all. It doesn’t hurt to try and understand.”

Nanny isn’t the person Sue wants to vent at. She takes a deep breath through her nose. “I really would try to visit,” she murmurs, resuming her chopping.

“You’re always welcome,” Nanny tells her. “Always will be. You’re my number one granddaughter.” A gentle squeeze of Sue’s shoulder leaves behind the floury imprints of Nanny’s fingers, a white half-star.

Sue doesn’t bother to brush it off.

---

The next day Sue’s cousin Jessie arrives bright and early, rushing through the doorway with a big hug for everyone. She’s about three years older than Sue and every time Sue sees her she’s got another color in her hair or tattoo on her freckled skin. She’s loud and fun; Sue has always been close with her.

They take the ATV out like they always did when they were kids. They roar a circle around the house—careful to avoid the lip of the driveway so as to not crumble the asphalt—and swing wide around the walnut tree, racing down the hill with the wind howling in their ears. They cut through the neighbor’s yard and find the hole in the barbed wire fence on the far side. Past that is a long series of trails through the woods and fields, thickets of trees ending as suddenly as they begin, giving way to wide overgrown spaces where the grass whips at their exposed legs. Sue holds on tight to the bars across the ATV’s wide back, swaying with the terrain, every hard bump reverberating up her spine. It hurts, but it’s still a great time.

They roar through a clearing to the rocky embankment ahead. The ATV chugs up it, the tires sending small rocks clacking down the incline. At the top are the train tracks; Sue’s never seen or heard a train go through, but the tracks aren’t overgrown, so they must. A little way down the line is a rectangular white sign, rusted around the edges and pockmarked from someone’s BB gun.

END

MEASURED

MILE

Sue's probably seen it a dozen times. If she's asked about it before, though, she doesn't remember.

"What does that mean?" she shouts close to Jessie's ear.

"What?"

"The sign. What does that mean?"

Jessie shrugs, goosing the ATV over a hump. "Dunno. Something to do with trains, I guess."

She guns the engine and the ATV shoots forward past the sign. Sue wraps her arms around Jessie's middle and doesn't look back.

---

It's getting close to evening. The house is filling up with extended family, clustering around the living room, congregating on the deck. Dinner soon, then fireworks as dusk descends. Sue gets her share of hugs and answers the same questions about college repeatedly. Yes, that far away. Yes, she's excited.

At dinner she sits at the adult table for the first time, squeezed uncomfortably between Uncle Fred and her dad. She can hear Benji and her younger cousins goofing off at the other table and she kind of misses them, though she would never admit it. The kids' table erupts with laughter, high and bright. Dad raises up in his chair a little to tell them to quiet down. The balance is restored. Sue thinks the weather is fine, yeah, definitely.

"Sue, can you pass the ham?" Mom asks.

The question hits exactly at a moment when the table falls temporarily silent, and suddenly the air is charged. Sue sees her dad watching her out of the corner of his eye, sees the quick glances that come her way. Does *everyone* know? What the hell do they think she's going to do, refuse? Throw the ham in Mom's face? What *is* this?

"Yep," Sue says, and passes the ham down Mom's way.

Maybe the crowded setting makes it clearer how awkward this all is; or maybe it's just the last sign in a series. But this is the moment Sue decides to do something about it.

The show doesn't start right after dinner. As the sun dips towards the far horizon there's setting up to do while they wait for darkness. Sue carries out a few of the makeshift tables and boards to the base of the hill and then slips away, going through the garage and back to her room. In the hall she can hear the hollow echoes of clothing being dropped into the washing machine.

Mom is there with a laundry basket, working in the light from the overhead fan with her greying hair tied back. Sue pushes the door open but stays in the hall; it's sort of a one-person room.

"Did you need to get something?" Mom asks with a brittle half-smile.

It's one of life's provided ironies that Mom and Sue look so much alike. Same small, rounded nose, same dark brown eyes, same lank black hair; same wide hips, curved lips and short square fingertips. They are books with the same cover, the pages reading in ways that wildly diverge. And if Sue lives in the clouds then Mom lives in the dirt, in the hard clay, on the solid ground with the solid people, God Bless America.

Sue picks up right where they left off a month ago, as if the space between one breath and the next has been erased and they are still standing in the wreckage of a screaming match, their house shaking with the sound. "It's not about being better than anyone," she tells her mother.

Mom doesn't explode. "I know," she says sadly. "I'm sorry I said that. I know that's not what you think."

Sue's already lost her footing. She expected anger; she's ready for a fight. "I... okay."

Mom turns back to the laundry. She unfolds a shirt with a sharp, jerking motion, fingers digging into the fabric. "I just didn't know you wanted to get away from me that badly," she says, and there's no rage. Just defeat.

Sue's heart plunges, rattles around her ribcage. "Mom... No, it's not... I'm not trying to get away from *anyone*."

Mom faces Sue again, mouth pinched. "Then what? I don't understand. What is it you can only learn across the country? We have schools back home, good schools—there are schools *here* you could go to, Jessie would *love* to have you as a roommate! Why do you have to go *so far*...?"

"I don't know."

The flat of Mom's hand slaps disbelievingly against the top of the dryer. "Well that's not good enough—"

"No, I mean I don't know yet! The why, the..." Sue wants to reach around and pound on her own back until the words come out. "I— I've just always been at home, or here, and I want to know who I'll be somewhere else. Doesn't that make sense? I don't *know* what's over there, but I never will if I don't go! I'll just... be the same."

"What's wrong with that? There's nothing wrong with you!"

Sue knows that she can keep trying to explain, but it won't matter; Mom will never understand. Not because she doesn't want to, but because she can't. Mom's world is small by design. What Sue wants is bigger; is outside.

“No, Mom...” Sue sighs. “I need to do something different, on my own. And even if you don’t get it, can’t you at least be cool with it?”

“I don’t know how I’m supposed to ‘be cool’ with my baby girl running halfway across the country,” Mom says tightly. Sue starts to brace herself for an onslaught. Then Mom takes a breath and her expression twists into a wry and melancholy resignation. “...but I’ll try.”

“I’m not running,” Sue says.

“Okay,” Mom says.

Sue steps forward and feels her mother’s arms wrap around her, and for a moment she is not eighteen and standing on the edge of an unknown tomorrow; she is a child finding solace in the safest space she knows.

---

That night, the air is cooling as the sun descends behind the Ozarks. The horizon glows with layered strata of orange below a thick band of violet as the moon crawls up and over the fading light. Sue plunders the cardboard boxes for the best explosives, setting them out by order of desire.

As Sue stands ready, she hears shoes brushing through the grass. She turns and sees Mom approaching. She’s holding a few cookies wrapped in a napkin.

“Thought you might want a snack,” she says.

Sue takes the cookies gratefully. “Thanks.” She’s not sure if she should say more. The air between them remains stilted.

Mom assesses the massed firepower with a raised eyebrow. “Your father always spends more than he should.”

“Looks about right to me,” Sue mumbles, unwilling to agree.

Mom rolls her eyes and for an instant Sue feels like she's looking into the mirror again. "I'm sure. Have fun and be careful, okay?" Mom's hand rises to briefly touch Sue's, then falls away. "I'll be watching."

An unnamable feeling swells in Sue's chest; a sweet ache like the opposite of heartbreak, like something clicking into long-absent place. "It's going to be amazing," she promises.

Mom smiles, though Sue thinks there is a soft sadness at the corners of her mouth and the bottoms of her eyes. "I know it will."

The fireworks show is spectacular. When it's her turn, Sue runs down the line of mortars with a propane torch and steps back to feel the deep, rhythmic thud of each launch in her chest. The explosions blast and sizzle against the black velvet of the empyrean, stars being born and dying in the same bursting instant, sending their crackling contrails to all sides and leaving behind the ghostly imprint of their smoke. It's a war on eardrums and retinas, achingly loud and searing bright. The audience claps from their array of lawn chairs, lemonades and teas in hand.

Dad puts a hand on Sue's shoulder. They watch as Benji shoves three bottle rockets into the PVC pipe all at once, showering the grass with sparks.

"Proud of you," Dad says.

Another mortar goes off and the sound breaks across Sue's face, the night fragrant with the smell of powder. This is hers, this moment. And there will never be another exactly like it.

---

Later, when everyone else has left or gone to bed, Sue steps up on the patio table and clambers onto the roof. She lies down on the scratchy shingles and looks upward. Above is a field of stars like bright, distant gems, dappled over the deep endless black of a universe which stretches away into unknown infinity. They disappear at the horizon in the barest remnant of the

late day sun. It has sunk to nothing but the faintest tinge of amethyst at the very bottom edge of the sky, like the light from beneath a door.

The wind stirs the tree at the side yard and ruffles gently across roof, cool and welcoming. Stars wheel above, shingles brace below; the house sits on the hill and inside is her family. It is all one piece, one unbroken road glittering on the cosmic thread. She lies beneath the wide bright dark; listening, absorbing the world in its active slumber. Shining along with this single brilliant pebble winging through a limitless dark. Sue closes her eyes and just feels it. All of it.

Everything.

And for a moment, she thinks—she *knows*—that she can feel the love that insulates against all that far-flung darkness, the ties that bind them to the earth and to each other. That they are not, cannot be, alone. There are candles in the constant. And each candle is a heart that burns until it lights another, passed palm to palm, cheek to cheek, until the rows become a choir. That joyous heightening becomes a murmur, becomes a clamor, becomes the bright curve of arcing song. The glow swells in her chest and flows to the tip of her tongue and the words are what she is to them and they to her and it's right there; she can nearly hear the chorus. They are all who can love and are loved. Hers here with her, in the strings they tied themselves, in concert and company, in a copse.

She blinks. The stars come back into focus.

And it's gone.

## **Eric Short**

“Speak to Us on Freedom”

I had a '91 Pontiac Grand Prix that was a real piece of work

Stuff was always falling off and you had to hold your mouth just right for it to start; not really a smile but more like a sarcastic grin

Sounded like Bevis and Butthead when it was running

I didn't do much cleaning on the old beast and I swear you could make out the drawings of Kahlil Gibran's Prophet in the dust on the dashboard

Wispy dancing muses

I would speak to it on freedom and it would get me to work  
With us, both laughing all the way - huh huh huh huh huh

**Eric Short**

“The Drinking Game”

Half way down the glass  
A bead of condensation  
Slowly rolls  
Not exactly straight  
The wind is no factor  
Nor the conversation  
It must be the subtle film  
Of oil from my touch  
But I am convinced  
It is always something  
Changing the outcome  
Of water  
I wipe it away  
With my thumb  
And for my amusement  
Here comes another

## **Eric Short**

“You’re Old Country Now”

I wanted to describe you  
As an old telegraph pole whose glass insulators had  
Survived a hundred Missouri spring thunderstorms  
And year after year of relentless wind and ice  
Yet still ready to bring news of the gold rush and western lands  
To the smallest towns  
I wanted people to know that the forest’s attempts to swallow you whole  
Were taking a toll but that you could carry on waiting  
Waiting for revivals and handmade everythings  
I wanted people to know that although you have been forgotten  
You could still be found in hidden byways and valleys  
Standing tall and dappled in the morning’s shadows  
Insulators gleaming blue atop the cross timbers  
Waiting for nothing now but the red feathered cardinal  
To land upon the cross and sing  
Blessings for the testament of your old America

## Marcus Sweeten

“102 E. Clay”

The house had diminished throughout the years,  
one could assume at one point it was perfectly perpendicular to the ground,  
but there it stood,  
tilted and slanted off of its foundation,  
nothing more than a three-dimensional parallelogram,  
its once stained-brown wood weathered into a mass of gray splinters.  
Each room of the degrading monolith became an unsalvageable time capsule.

I drove by it every once and awhile,  
coasting the car to stare at the relic.  
I knew from the town’s gossip  
that the house was built well over a century ago  
and housed four generations worth of a family.

One day, city workers came by,  
and taxpayers footed the bill  
for the oldest house in the town being  
disposed of and sent to the scrapyard.  
The city claimed that the house was a hazard to children.

The neighbors swiftly conquered the land for pennies on the dollar,  
and a housewife planted a garden full of watermelons  
that were imprisoned behind a white picket fence.  
Of course, I was never consulted on the matter.

Without much notice,  
the memories of the house degraded within  
the thoughts of the community,  
and though I had never had a home within that house,  
seeing the vacant lot  
on that block  
caused me to feel like a trespasser in my hometown.

There would be no more voyeurs (like me) to imagine the history  
that had been confined between those walls that were  
insulated with the hollow yearning of progress,  
by the arbiters of the original American Dream;  
as the house was reduced  
into some fragment on the town’s property line archives.

## Marcus Sweeten

“Zerzan”

Sometimes words are missing  
at the end of a sentence,  
and in the absence  
is a ghost of the mind.

It's known that within all of our art  
comes the fragrance of our own demise--  
the construction of annihilation to blackmail the eyes.

I recently sold all of my canvases,  
my easel, my paint, and all of my brushes,  
I made more money off of that than all of my paintings,  
what a convenient narrative:  
that poor bastard with a dream.

The palate gets cleansed in a fury with absinthe,  
as the body is now the canvas,  
the brush gets traded for stainless steel:  
sharp to the touch,  
puncturing the skin to create a delicate precipice  
as the silk cream icing  
drowns the subject in the flowing magnum opus  
that drips like a moldy faucet.

The reviews are missing;  
the critiques and the words never come but aren't necessary,  
as no tapestry, painting, or sculpture can convey  
the tranquil scene of the true image.

## Janae Imeri

### “The Puppeteer”

She was once a graceful dancer  
Every step was poised and lively,  
Charming and gay

Until I tied strings to her hands and feet.

Her dance became mine,  
Then her once-poised steps grew circumspect,  
I guide her through new choreographies  
I pull strings for her every step

And still,

Her feet match each beat to the music,  
through shaking knees and trembling hands  
She doesn't run offstage.

### “The Puppet”

I was once a graceful dancer  
Every step was poised and lively,  
Charming and gay

Until *he* tied strings to my hands and feet.

I let him pull my every step  
Through tearful eyes I watch my  
now-careful feet step to each beat  
They used to be so brave.

And still,

My feet match each beat to the music,  
through shaking knees and trembling hands  
I don't run offstage.

Through each dance, I wear away the  
strings,  
I begin to love the steps I take again  
and with every snapped string  
*My grace, my poise, my charm*  
Begins to come from me again.

## **Janae Imeri**

“Train of Thought”

My thoughts always deviate  
From the clear path set circumspectly  
Before them; they

Dash from work to home  
To what's on tv at three  
To in five years what could be

And

Suddenly the lingering  
scent on my pillowcase  
Transports to transparent times

When I could color  
the sky eloquent emerald  
And decorate the grass a vivid indigo,  
When dreaming was easier to come by.

Take me back to when dad made breakfast each morning  
The smell of cinnamon in the air as I get dressed  
But not too far back  
Towards darker days of fighting and yelling  
Bouncing off the house walls,

Take me forward  
To the no-homework, bills-are-due days  
To the dancing in my own home with no pants on days  
To days where I see my lover everyday days,

Then, zip, zap, whoosh!  
Like the wind brushing my hair,  
Goes the never-ending train of thought  
To each and every

Stop.