

# D I G G I N G :

A L I T E R A R Y J O U R N A L

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Spring  
2021



volume 3

Diablo Valley College - San Ramon Campus

A collection of poetry, flash fiction, and short fiction  
by the students of ENGL-222 Spring 2021  
Diablo Valley College  
San Ramon Campus

What a wonderful semester with you all! Thank you so much for your time, your enthusiasm,  
your creativity, and your support for one another.  
It has been an honor and a delight to work with you all!

Yours,  
Katie M. Zeigler

# digging:

a literary collection

Between my finger and my thumb  
The squat pen rests.  
I'll dig with it.

Seamus Heaney

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## The Blue Bride Ashley Baumgartner

The flowers shake in my hand  
I hope everything goes as planned  
Not a hair out of place  
Even as I pace and wait  
For the judge to usher us in  
My heart soars and falls  
As I walk the hall  
He watches me, patiently  
They try to pacify me  
Still I walk, ponder and pray  
My love for the day wanes  
Until I meet his steady gaze  
Blue and deep, like the sea  
His eyes remind me  
I'm here with the ones I love  
In the place I could have loved

## Come Sail Away Nicole Pyle

Now & then I think of the water. ink of crossing under the light blue of sky over the dark blue of waves, reaching out & spilling over. ink of petting the surface tension, an old friend, a wild & tame paradox.  
Then I stop & turn away. What's so tempting? I have no good reason to be out there, to go away from here, leave behind & turn my back to everything. But you. You & the glossy memories of back then I can almost hold in my rippling hands. Out on crisp, breezy water: floating or falling I cannot tell. But then again, we would always reel ourselves back in, never drifting out so far as to be dots on a small town's horizon. Tonight, you're here again. You're out of the blue. I ask, why are you back? You say, let's cross over. I've got a(n old) boat. Come with me. Then that look in your eye fills me. Now I think of the water.

## Untitled

Adrian Gomez

First came space then the land. Both cold and desolate like a lone glacier floating gently across the Arctic. Silence prevails then continues as the emptiness takes turns light, then dark. With light comes life then in darkness death, but those colors of orange in between are better than both. These moments are so savory yet those who have never seen the dark will never know, then never search. As each day comes then goes as dark turns to light then to dark again an invitation is extended. But some will never take a seat to enjoy the sunset.

## Oh Sea, Be Still!

Grace Fenstermacher

My head is full of water. Then again, the body is made up of 70% water. Raging seas make up my very mind, something murky and deep. My sanity is thirsty. Searching my mind for a drink on a homemade raft. Poor sanity... surrounded by water, just not the right kind. Then again, all water is the right kind of water... in a way. From a quiet voice, sanity is invited to drink what ails her. It's an invitation from Madness. She accepts, no delay. Desperately sucking down the salt water, her eyes fill with bitter tears. The salt of the earth leads a cruel reign. It tarnishes land and ravages the body. Yet, remaining sanity drinks to heart's content and I lose more of myself. Then, the thirst becomes insatiable. Like a boat without a lighthouse, I've lost sight of what's in front of me. Lost in the sea of my mind without a map. Then again, if I'm lost at sea and probably dying, I'll finally be free of anxiety. Ahh, Anxiety is a cruel poseidon. Forever taunting me with thunderous winds and mountainous waves. It never tires of the game. The game of chess. I'm simply a pawn cowering in the majesty of it's queen, feeling defeated before the game even begins. Basically, a queen is an all powerful piece on the board. One that can defeat any opponent that stands in the way. Then again, a pawn with the right strategy can be a queen too and anxiety won't always win.

## Spring Concert

Michael Gomes

Leafs flourish the forest canopy, as songs fill the air, who's breeze then carries away the choir on wings. Feathers dance in the air, through the labyrinth of bark clad giants, then wash in crashing foam. Then, as the sun has circled, he finds himself again, over the long blue road. Then and now, over vast openness, towards greens hung high. Perched high in the amphitheater, awaiting his duet partner, then releases his song into the warm breeze.

## The Kitchen is Feisty

Kaitlyn Isola

The kitchen is feisty

The lighting of the first match ignites an enduring banter between the stove and pan

The sizzling foundation of olive oil bullets ricochet off an apron of armor

Spices thrown into the pan rudely announce themselves through distinct smells

The view becomes clouded from the chopped onions' sudden seizure of the eyes

The knives revel in their own sharpness as they boast their competing cutting counts

The oven forcefully ligates the salty with sweet as cookies rise in temperature anxiety

The eager thrash of the blender re-arranges food molecules in new forms of matter

While the atmosphere is occupied by frantic motion and dancing scents,

With innovation and a wooden spoon, one can attempt to stir the ego of the kitchen

## Digging for my Childhood

Emily Federspiel

Back in the good old days, when life was easy and before society pulled us apart.

The most exciting thing was lunch and recess.

I am now digging for those childhood memories in the soils of my present.

I find myself asking why I was so eager to grow up.

I find myself looking at the old days when the soils of my past were so simple.

Now I work two days a week and do school daily.

Trying my best to keep up with life even when I can't.

I keep pushing and find myself digging for the flowers of my youth.

As a child adulting seem so magical.

I couldn't wait to blossom into the young woman I am now.

Now I find myself looking for the next steps and reaching for what might be.

I wish I could go back to my childhood just for a day and be worry free.

When life was simple, easy, and breezy.

You could miss a few days of school and you wouldn't be struggling to catch up.

Now I miss just a day too much.

I wish I could just visit the soils of my childhood one last time.

## Into The Sky

Victor Matskiv Jr

What am I looking for?  
I spend every day digging;  
And I dig for the sake of myself  
Because I find something on the surface. But when I dig  
I always seem to expect something,  
As though the world were obligated to serve me. Nevertheless I keep digging  
And I make attempts to unravel the world. But every time I remember reality -  
The serendipity of the universe,  
The torture we all inflict on ourselves, The scale of relativity  
That none of us ever engages in, It's then I remember Humanity. I dig for Humanity  
But I already have Humanity. So then I dig for the Best.  
But no matter how much I dig For the Best of Humanity, Eventually I realize  
That the Best of Humanity Isn't Humanity.  
It's Alien and Unknown. It's beyond our reach,  
Our ideal world.  
Our Ideal Humanity that I dig for - That everybody digs for -  
It's not Humanity because it's perfect. I can never be perfect.  
But then at that point... What am I looking for?

## Brown Box

Zoe Damaschino

With every footstep is a creak  
The stairs old and well worn.  
Leading to the attic,  
where I once had never been.  
A distant memory of childhood, kids playing hide and seek.  
I stumbled upon a box up there,  
Stacked high, light brown and bleak.  
I opened it at once, discovering memories I had lost,  
a story of a wedding day, photos so valuable there was no cost.  
My mother and her sister, young, with hair too tall  
My baby brother Oliver, he looked delicate and small.  
Photos of great adventures, the trips we took throughout the years,  
As I dug down deeper into the box  
My eyes pooled full of tears.  
My family had no memory,  
no one wished to relive the past.  
But here I sat, on the dusty oak floor  
A box just at my knees  
Reliving the memories I once had forgot,  
a mother's lifetime that did not last.

## Dutchman

Cole Anderson

Then then then then then, what is there after that? Nothing. Stop asking. There certainly isn't a voice calling me. I hear nothing on this placid sea. Cloistered in fog, wrapped, and agog. No, this couldn't be me. Straining to hear that laughter again, studiously trying to capture with pen, that warm felicity. No, there is not an invitation for me. Nothing tethered round my waist to haul me across the watery waste. No, this couldn't be me.

## A Token

Michael Gomes

He traveled into the forest  
To retrieve a treasure  
The token of a king  
That no one could better

Deep in the woodland  
Under the oldest Oak  
Was where the king lay  
And the spoils await

Unearthed in short time  
Bony hands revealed  
A small metal spoon,  
Rusted from its last meal

Earl grey, two sugars  
Mixed by her hands  
Cooled by her breath  
Gifted with her smile

## Goodbye on the Ocean

Joe Chung

A bright red buoy appears and disappears into the fold of the angry waves. Then a piercing beam of light strikes at its tip. Explosion of light floods the ocean gold as far as the eyes can see. Then a silhouette of a woman emerges in place of the buoy, clothed in light. Then in the blink of an eye, she's standing on the bow, wrapped in silky gleaming bands of kelp fluttering in the wind. She extends her misty hand to say "come" with her sealed lips. Then I reach for her hand and we walk together on water towards the light. Then a larger than life wave curls over our heads and when the froth of the fallen wave dissipates, a crimson red buoy bobs away.

# Digging Up Dirt

Shannon Geraghty

I Shove  
Scrape  
Tearing through the earth  
Like a hunted, wounded animal  
my face is dripping with blood  
sweat  
tears  
it's all the same, soaking my hair, my hand slipping against the metal trowel  
im gripping, tight as i can, knuckles white,  
burning  
ripping the earth from its bed  
praying i can still find it in the mud  
covered by not just dirt  
but my own blood and sweat  
drowning memories out from my own mind for years  
suddenly  
i break through  
the earth is splitting open beneath me  
i should be terrified  
but i have been working for so long  
my muscles weak beneath me, i do nothing to fight the falling  
eyes shut tight, bracing myself  
as the earth i worked so hard to exhume caves in around me  
i wait for what feels like forever  
before opening my eyes  
and realising  
im home  
wrapped in her arms again  
the same old tattered book in her hands, reading to me again  
i always begged her to  
and here she is, doing it again after so many years alone  
all of the dirt pulled away  
everything looks the same as it did  
there is not dirt  
no blood or sweat  
no tears  
i'm home again



## Polaroid Poem

Sehaj Basrai

I first met Dean in a bar  
filthy, shifty men galore except one. His arm coiled around another girl, a snake who's just  
caught his dinner. I wish I hadn't lingered.

He stared me up and down,  
Smile like liquid gold.  
He unwrapped his tight noose around her neck,  
Smile melting away, dropping her act.

He talked his sweet talk at me and all I did was agree.  
I asked about the scars,  
"Oh god, that story's no fun!"

I should've left then,  
But who goes to a bar just for a drink?

## Untitled

Natalie Saephan

The family room is joyous  
It is not a place that will often destroy us  
Where we all gather for laughter and cheer  
And our minds can all be clear  
Take a seat and turn on the tv  
The people around you are the true MVPs  
The importance of love is seen in most family rooms  
This is where we blossom and bloom  
At the end of the day when we are all burnt out  
Family time is what life's all about

## Pilferage

Jacob Fisher

It's never looked so brilliant  
The corner store, that is  
Where, the night before  
I bought a tube of Chapstick  
I wonder if he knew  
Brilliance, usually bright  
For me it's stark  
You may think of me as brilliant  
Bright, that is

Chapstick is so unambiguous  
He must have thought I'd buy that pop  
And the Marlboros, the bag of crisps too  
Rather, I waved it at him  
He knew.  
Maybe I am brilliant  
Stark, that is  
He was bright  
He knew me  
"Chapstick boy!"  
Was it my burning hair?  
My watery eyes?  
The matching mustache  
He saw my brilliance and captured it for himself  
I was bright enough to let it go.

### The Hidden Violence Found in Living Grace Fenstermacher

in the laundry room,  
they argue...  
her words  
stain the walls,  
his rage  
pools on the floor  
their hatred  
flickers with the fluorescent bulbs  
they try to hide  
from the world  
the room comes alive  
the laundry  
room is screaming, tearing  
into itself  
hating,hating  
itself  
and...  
Life  
for fabricating  
Such, such  
emotion.

## Vanilla Ice Cream

Kaitlyn Isola

She told me where. Vanilla ice cream. The fizzling foam of crystalline origin. Embracing shore lines. Durations of blue rage. The sweet consequences. Anger. Forceful. Instability engineering bizarre assortments. Gleaming white matter. Compelled to interact. An outlandish mastermind financing my ice cream. Currency of brutality. Thuds of tempers. Drilling body parts. Below the comfort of my bubbling world. Dark dwelling of uncertainties. I had diminished to a set of eyes restrained by black. Directions. All morphed into down down down. Am I real? Do I exist? Tiny star in galaxies of constellations. Meaningless. One-dimensional. I can't see the rest. Nestled in a cloak of cobalt. At last, returned to surface. I told her that this is the place where ice cream is made. People are humbled.

## Winter's Song

Victoria Drozda

Winter's breath an ice bliss  
rattles the old house gently.  
Warm ceramic mug  
in slender chilled hands.  
She walked like a ghost;  
steady and gracefully.  
Not a sound.

She settles in a chair  
perfect for reading.  
The sweet scent of coffee and peppermint  
dancing in the room delightfully.  
She take a small sip  
it filled her mouth  
with delicious warmth.

A veil of frost  
coated the window as she looked outside.  
A small uneven smile on her lips.  
Snow drifted by the window.  
Dancing in winter's song.  
The fire crackled with laughter  
in its enclosed brick home.

The house settles to place  
with talkative age old creaks.  
Making a comforting melody  
of crackling, creaking,  
and the hissing of the wind,  
bonding all together  
in an usual song.

Yet soon the fire quiets down,  
the house stops creaking and the wind goes silent,  
as if asleep.

Only the woman was awake  
with her uneven smile and rhythmic motion  
of her chest going up and down  
softly in the darkness.

Perfectly still.

Just like a ghost.

Barely making a sound  
except for her steady breathing.

As if waiting in  
the dying glow of the fire.  
for something or perhaps  
Someone.

## His Dark Demise

Cyerra Smith

There was an urban legend about a clown in my small town. He was a tall fellow, with a long, snake-like tongue. One night, a bunch of kids went into the woods, hoping to summon him. As soon as the children were standing saying his name, they all heard a tree branch snap. Then the fog started growing thicker. A child, startled, crossed over a small ravine, hoping that it was just their imagination. The woods went quiet and dark, all the children had scattered away from each other. The feeling that was resonating in the woods was despair. Then, after moments of silence, an eerie laugh escaped through the trees. The ravine began to turn black. It looked as if it were black ink. A dark, tormented voice came screaming out. Just hearing the yowls could give the most heartless person chills. Soon, parents were beginning to call the names of their children but, none of them emerged out of the woods. Then the startled child came across a dark figure. The figure was just watching him, like a lion watching antelope. Looking up at the figure, the child glares a wicked grin. Leaning over the child, the shadow gives the child his hand. Taking the hand, the child's wicked grin began to grow. Then, in the distance, you could hear the faint sound of music playing. It would remind someone of a music box. The woods soon filled with the sound of classical music and child laughter. Then it all went quiet.

## The Dead

Keleigh Kuptz

The world becomes bigger when there isn't somebody in it that makes you feel smaller. I remember the world caving in on me the moment I saw him and I felt like I'd found something that made everything wrong with me okay. I smiled in the mirror and the way I saw myself was different. I never knew what it was like to be in love but I remember the exact moment I realized what it was like to not be in love. The cars on the highway passed in front of us and I thought maybe one of them was going far away. Maybe one of them could take me too. Losing him I thought I lost every part of myself and that if I could just go back and find all the pieces, maybe it would be as though I'd never lost them.

As time went by and I went back to that highway, the cars were moving by excitedly, all different from the ones that had been there that day. I realized they weren't running away from someone or somewhere, but were moving quickly towards the places they wanted to go. As the cars went by, for the first time, I didn't start running quickly beside them. I stood where I was knowing that I'd already made it to the place I wanted to go, even if I had been there all along.

## My Beautiful Sister Fiona

Ashley Mitchell

My beautiful sister Fiona.

The one soul I look up to most in this sad, sad world.

I distract myself as much as I can from this sad, sad world.

How can someone as bright as my Fiona be made to feel small, small. I too, feel as if I have no voice for her, I feel small, small.

I bury myself in my school work, I work for as much money as I can. With hopes that one day I will be my very own person, Anne.

Poor Fiona, her voice so strong, so powerful. My parents should be ashamed of themselves.

Forcing marriage upon my one and only Fiona. I hope one day things will be different.

I hope one day I will become just like Fiona and save her from all of this madness. I hope one day Fiona will have a chance at this world.

A chance that she well deserves.

Until then I will keep working to fight for her.

Keep working to fight for my beautiful sister Fiona.

## She Looked Upon the Roaring Sea

Brian Havig

She looked upon the roaring sea, then cast about her fears. Her faith, her guiding light, dim in those dark hours, but shining in her beating heart. Below the decks wounded men wailed, her charges, the ones who were left. When her fears were cast, only then did she turn her back on the roaring sea. The woman still had a week until she made it home, then her investigation would begin. War had seen them flee, but even across the sea, war would come to see. The wind howled at her back, flitting her robes, and biting at her flesh. She said a quick prayer, then descended below deck. While the wind was muffled, and muted, the screams and moans of her men grew louder. In each face she saw pleading eyes, distant eyes, and eyes that reminded her of her childhood. She had been a different girl then. The rising stench of musk and death assailed her nostrils, which she upturned, and gritted her teeth. These were her charges, and she would see them through. Across the sea, and to home, she would bring them.

## Burnt out, Reignited

Jazzy Tran

She wants to have the world in the palm of her hand, She dreams of a world that bends to her. Then Reality hits. She doesn't have the power that she thought she had. A knock at her door suddenly interrupts her train of thoughts. In a matter of seconds, she can feel her heart start to pick up the pace. As the door opens she is welcomed with loud noise and words that did not make sense to her. Seeing the lies fall out, she goes back to her thoughts. She looks back and thinks "what did I do wrong?" Then Anxiety starts to flow through her body as if she has fallen in a river. The stream's harsh currents only kept forcing her down. As soon as the lies stop and the door shuts. She turns back in her chair and looks out the window. She doesn't know what to think anymore. Was there anything she could do? She was being guilt-tripped into things that didn't make sense. She also didn't know how she should feel, on one hand, she wanted to scream and say that she is not the bad seed. But Then she knew what kind of consequences she would have faced if she did so. Then what is she supposed to do? She sits in her chair looking out the window as everyday passes by, as she looks out the window. She thinks she studies, she plans, and Then eventually she'll take action.

## Escape

Janani Mangai Srinivasan

The Bedroom is Fear.

Her body hot with wounds; His hands ~~malicious~~ sweet in their marking

The Bathroom is Disgust.

She called herself weak, ~~as He always did~~

The Kitchen is Self-Hatred.

She cooks and tries to forget, ~~as He ordered, because it was Her fault~~

The Laundry Room is Sadness.

Clothes for His pleasure lying in a sodden heap on the floor ~~as Her tears dripped like waterfalls~~

The Dining Room is Hatred.

As the limit She can handle overflows; He sits calmly, ~~doing no wrong~~

The Lounge is Anger.

He pulls Her in, He wants Her close; ~~close enough to keep safe~~

The Family Room is Horror.

She had tried to run, He had followed; ~~it was a peaceful argument~~

The Garage is Panic.

~~His~~ Her favorite clothes, freshly washed, soiled ~~red~~

The Front Yard is Emptiness.

Sirens and Flashing Lights Searing Her Unseeing Eyes.

The Court is Unanimous.

Self-Defense. ~~the people whisper you're safe now~~

Under  
My  
Stairs

Scott Slater

Everyone has their place in my world. Organized. Perfect. Each folder neatly put together, and placed in a large metal filing cabinet that I keep under the stairs to the basement. No one knows about, unless I tell them, in which case I like to show it off afterwards. I show all my friends. Sometimes I like to come and visit them, catch up on old memories and past times...

I keep files in my cabinet under the stairs that no one is ever allowed to gaze their eyes upon. I keep perfect files, each with their own place, their own slot in my cabinet. The files are full of screams of lost fibers, sentimental scribblings, and everything else I need for my friends. I never get lonely, but one can never keep enough files. I am not picky about who gets to meet my cabinet. Adults. Elderly. Children. It is good to have a broad range of friends. Black. White. Straight. Homosexual. Tall. Short. Smart. Dumb. Big. Small. Good. Evil. Happy. Sad... Screaming and then Silent.

Sometimes I wish someone may find my precious grey metal Realspace 22". Someone who might appreciate all of my friends. Maybe someone who would want to become one of my friends. I watch tv sometimes, and I like to watch the people who think they know everything, those who find the bad people and put them away for all their badness, and then they move onto the next bad guy, and the next. Maybe someone like that would want to find my cabinet, and be my friend. I am not picky about my friends.

There is an old file, at the very back of my aluminum box. It is the oldest file. The very first friend I ever made. I visit this friend the most. She has started to deteriorate over the years, and someday she may be gone. Friends come and go, but none of my friends will leave me. And I will continue to make more friends. Organized. Perfect. Silent.

Jamestown Girl

Jacob Fisher

Love that oozed from the microscopic island was there forever. It's funny, when you're there for something so certain, only to be knocked off the tracks. I was falling down the cliffside. She'll be there to catch me. I never left the track, I never fell, I just flew away. Then we crossed the Bay to the west side. I asked if you'd join me; the sparkle in your eyes said yes. Despite you never flying before, forget you never crossing over the Bay before, you left the microscopic island.

Now we break barriers as if they're water.  
lives exploring what's beyond the bridge.  
together.

Now we live our  
Now, we fly away



## A Glass of Sherry

Shannon Geraghty

it's cold outside, again. the wind is blowing up all the leaves and they're back in my driveway. after everything I did to clear out my yard. raking, watering, mowing, dragging bag after bag full of leaves to the bin.

it's like there's nothing I can do right. every time I try to do everything I can and yet somehow it never works out.

i'm playing the victim again. that's what my mother would say.

"you're playing the victim again Winnie" "don't be like THAT Winnie" like i'm always playing some game.

i'm not, though. it's never a game. it's always about me being me. and that's just not okay, is it?

it'll never be. every interview, every audition, every performance. it all comes down to me being me

be bolder be quieter be braver be nicer be lighter be stronger be who you are but don't be like THAT, Winnie. Anything But That.

i'm so tired. tired of being the victim, but what else am i to do?

floating through space, through time, an unsatisfied spectre forced to roam the cosmos searching for anything to satisfy her.

another party, full of strangers that are my friends a costume party; sort of they all are just places we go to be someone we're not.

a place to drink. a place to forget. to forget the tapping of keys, horns honking in the street, a dial tone at the other end of the receiver.

to forget, to get all dressed up, with a glass of sherry, and a smirk.

## Dirt

Cole Anderson

Wandering through the waist high weeds  
Craning over the leafy canopy, playing  
Soldier with the little green men  
I rake trenchworks in the dirt with my fingers  
I shape ramparts with my bare hands  
I like my tools and the sense of use lingers  
As well as the smell of the earth  
It's locked in my head like the rock  
Underneath my nail flinty as shale  
There it splinters into me the impression  
Of a memory  
That childhood dirt, it calls back to me  
Over battlefields and victory  
Beckoning me back to the ground  
Where I craned to look down  
Over the leafy green canopy

## Ghost of the Sea

Victoria Drozda

Brittle cliffs hatted with tangled purple flowers  
that then stained the wind with scents  
of salt and summer.  
Where lonesome hanging trees grew lopsided  
in their blanket of sand that  
caged the bottle-green sea. Their thin spider-like branches  
cried leaves of glinting silver-green.

Across the sea  
a bird wearing a coat of liquid obsidian  
feathers flew;  
settling on the hand of sea-shell white. The hand  
at a slight angle was raised as if in a spell. Locked  
in the bird's break was an invitation.  
Held together by a stain

ribbon of red and a lost ring of gold.  
Gently did she then  
took the letter in thanks. Her oil-black eyes lingered  
on the letter of bitter  
promise as she sat silently on the branch of  
the crying tree. The bird then politely took its leave and  
flew back across the sea. Gracefully did she  
walk toward the sea; greeting  
her disoriented reflection like a lost friend as

she fell into it.  
Sinking like a coin holding a wish,  
did she flew toward the bottom of  
the liquid melancholy  
blue and living green as she walked toward her lonely  
sand-castle of glass. Her dress rippled with secrets  
of sapphire blue as she  
silently settled on her throne of ruins

like a ghost of the sea.

## The Fight for your Destiny

Emily Federspiel

In Scotland lived Paisley. A Princess. Fiery red hair and emerald green eyes. While her beauty was enchanting, she did not act as a normal princess would. Instead, she loved shooting her bow and arrow. Riding her horse to the tallest hill then climbing anything that would give her a new view of the world. She was soon to be matched with her husband. Her parents had already sent out invitations to all the distant lands inviting them to bring their eldest sons. Upon their arrival, they would complete a series of challenges to show their worthiness, to Paisley's hand in marriage. They all have come from distant lands across many bodies of water to become participants in these challenges. It made Paisley's blood boil at the idea of not having any control over her own future. She wanted to make her own destiny and pave her own path. While thinking about all of this she had a plan. During each challenge, she would prove herself and compete for her own hand in marriage. Expecting her parents would see she does not need to be married. Or she hoped. On the day of the first challenge, they were to shoot a bow and arrow at a target. This was Paisley's favorite, she saw this as the only chance. She went for it at each target each arrow making its mark, but this did not get her the response she wanted. Her mother instead grabs her, dragging her back to her room. Lecturing her about how unladylike that was and how a princess should not know how to use a weapon. This infuriated Paisley and she told her mom she was not going to stop. This made her mom furious, which caused her to rip the bow from Paisley's hands. In one motion throwing it into the fireplace. Paisley stood there in shock as to what had just happened and she started screaming at her mother. Her mom left the room after that and slammed the door behind her.

## The Girl Who Doesn't Live Next Door

by Zoe Damaschino

She stares blankly into mirrors.  
And while you might think you know her, what she wants, her need and fears  
She doesn't even know herself.  
Figuring that out is what she fears. The typical girl next door,  
but her location is always changing.  
She fears settling down and commitment, her life is constantly rearranging.  
She slips clothing on piece by piece,  
godly and well rounded  
An empty canvas, a stolen car  
Nobody knows why it's so hard to keep her grounded.  
Shes ever drifting always changing,  
can't seem to be held down  
Her life, a movie, her friends, the viewers, always watching, always astounded

## Never

Victor Matskiv Jr

She told me to cross the river. She told me to forget myself, my goals, my ambitions, and then cross the river. I was told by another to do the same. I had tried to make music for myself, my goals, and my ambitions, but it never spoke to my heart. My soul then bled as it knew it wasn't impossible. But somehow, no matter what music I make, I can't please my heart. My soul seeks to achieve my goal, to make music, but my heart can't be touched. It was then after that when I questioned whether the heart and the soul are the same thing. She told me to cross the river, to forget myself - my soul's desire - and my goals and my ambitions, and let myself out - my heart. Then, maybe I can please myself. But I can't. My answer is no, I refuse because even if I can't please my heart, I have to try. My soul demands that I make music that pleases my heart, even if my heart refuses. Until then - when I please my heart - I will never cross the river.

## Never Had a Chance

Joe Chung

We were eighteen  
A message in a bottle we buried  
Underneath this swing set  
With a promise to see each other  
On the day you return from service  
I shove my trowel inside mother earth  
A curtain of soil sprays into the air  
Falling pieces of earth graze my cheek  
Like soft little kisses  
Scattered on the ground whence they came  
Unearthed bottle spills out  
A letter full of empty words without a station  
Without a chance to breathe in light  
I flick on my lighter  
Watch the flame break up the vowels  
Letters U from I  
Curled edges tear away to the wispy wind of yesterday  
The fire in my eyes water the ground  
Into a stream that winds through the maze of time

## Into the Earth

Ashley Baumgartner

The pickaxe strikes the ground  
One, two, three, four, five  
Soil, grass, crushed cans and old pennies make a mound  
None where what I was looking for  
I drove a mile to get to this place  
Mom said this is where the house once stood  
The dirt stains my palms like soot  
I toss the old axe aside and dig with my hands  
Crouched like a dog, I tear and claw  
I squeal when my fingers scrap something hard  
The old wood tore the tops of my fingers raw  
My blood drips onto the chest  
I wiped it away as I lift the crate  
I pry it open and find my quarry  
There it was lit up like a light bulb  
A crystal ball, about the size of my palm  
Out of habit, I glance around  
I don't hear a sound  
I lift the crystal that's been in my family for generations  
I rub my bloodied fingers over the surface  
The light intensifies and I'm sucked in  
I watch a little girl, me, prance around  
Her brown pigtails flapping like a sail  
She floats in the clouds  
But she's about to be brought down  
One misstep and she slips off the precipice  
She lands with a crack having hit a rock  
Her parents scream, her grandma is silent  
Her mom pleads, her grandma concedes lifts her skirts and takes out the crystal ball  
She holds in aloft until it takes flight  
Like a UFO it hovers over the broken body  
Pigtails laced with scarlet, a leg bent in a V  
The crystal ball exudes a golden light  
It burns blindingly bright  
It takes a minute but I'm whole again  
I smile triumphantly at the crystal ball in my hands  
I knew it!  
It was grandma not them

## Corpse Bride

Cyerra Smith

Once upon a midnight opening.  
Take the surveying from out of my heart.  
The investigation brought such sorrow.  
You had warned me to watch myself.  
My memories were tunneling back.  
I was now uncovered from the ground  
Hearing them dig me out of the ground.  
Crawling out of the ground, I was covered in dirt.  
My clothes were torn, covered in leaves and dirt.  
The digging noise was still echoing through my mind.  
I started screaming, begging the noise to stop.  
The noise started growing louder and louder.  
Closing my eyes, I was back under the ground.  
Everything that was surrounding me was just old memories.  
A small smile appeared on my face.  
"Goodbye, mother." I whisper to the casket as they put her in.

## Endless Circles

Nicole Pyle

I put on my  
name tag [*Irene*]  
and shed my

skin, tuning into  
the rhythm of the  
night, the rhythm  
of the music.  
Bell-bottoms and long  
hair, kaleidoscopic color  
and people. I am a  
different version of me.

Most of all, the  
place is hot: heat  
radiates in  
circles of  
lungs, in  
heaps of  
breaths,  
staggered as if  
part of a  
well-rehearsed  
song.  
All breath  
intermingles— inhale,  
exhale, ad infinitum.

I'm halfway across,

halfway between Earth  
and Sky. My soul is  
floating;  
"That'll be \$1.55."

Faces gather here in free  
time, on weekends and  
after-schools.  
Hard-wood polished, spin and spin smooth,  
skaters looping endless circles like their wheels do.

## Treasure

Janani Mangai Srinivasan

my best friend in the whole wide world  
Jandro is keeping watch while I used the  
shovel  
it's so big I can hardly hold it  
better than scratching at the dirt like my dog hiding a bone  
we found the Map in Dad's study  
while all the grown-ups were downstairs crying  
Mommy said they were sad Dad's gone away for a long time  
she said it was a farewell party like Kenny's when she moved away  
Jandro says his Mommy told him we'll understand  
when we become grown-ups  
Jandro also said the  
Map leads to Treasure  
like in the movies!  
Dad had  
hidden his  
treasure  
some ways  
away from  
the trails he  
took me and  
Jandro  
on the weekends when Jandro's mom is home  
Me and Jandro will find  
his Treasure  
so Dad will be happy  
when he comes back

the Sun is very hot  
and I am getting  
tired Jandro takes  
the shovel and tells  
me his Dad told him  
how to use it

Properly

I jump up and  
down happily  
when Jandro  
finds a piece  
of tarp  
between the  
mud and tiny  
rocks

and I jump down to help him dig with our fingers

Jandro tells me it's "modern money" because  
Ancient Gold  
Coins are  
hidden in  
Treasure  
Chests  
not tarp

Jandro moves more dirt  
and finds a  
dirty squishy  
thing it looks  
like my hand  
but bigger  
it doesn't look like Jandro's hand though

We frown and talk  
about giant Barbie  
dolls I move more dirt  
and find a face like mine  
but not like Jandro's

Jandro screams  
and I scream too  
Barbie dolls' faces  
don't look like  
that!  
Jandro pulls my hand with his  
and we run towards the safety of the trails

Mommy tells me it's okay



I can see Jandro's Dad between  
her crumpled hair Me and  
Jandro hold hands while the  
nice suited man talks to us like  
Ms. Principal

Jandro tells me  
he doesn't want  
to help dig plants  
with his Dad  
anymore I  
squeeze his hand

and tell him that we will help his Dad cut flowers instead

We find a small Treasure Chest  
filled with Chocolate and Candy  
between the flowers Jandro  
smiles and I smile too  
We run to the house to wash our hands and eat our Treasure

Before going to bed I ask  
Mommy  
when will Dad come home?

## Tense Shoulders

Jazzy Tran

A dark shadow cascaded over me. a dam full of expectations & insecurities Eyeballs watching my every move. As I dig, My thoughts run rapid What Am I Searching For? CRACK!! The Dam wasn't gonna hold for much longer As if a dog was finding his lost bone I dug fast, faster than normal. I could feel every particle of dirt Going underneath my fingernails What Am I Searching For? in a matter of seconds. Everything ended up shattering The pain The tightening muscles That run down my neck And to my shoulder Is now released And i feel weightless

## Time Capsule

Ashley Mitchell

Digging, digging, digging  
Into the brown dirt in my childhood backyard Into the clammy, silken soil  
Digging, digging, digging  
It was a lifetimes ago a time capsule was buried  
Memories and fantasies from a lifetimes ago  
Digging, digging, digging  
The sound of a metal shovel hitting a metal safe rings through the air  
History lying before my eyes  
I lift the capsule out of the darkness into the world  
I dust off the capsule, sweaty hands  
5...5...5  
I punch in the lock code and the lock breaks open  
Memories and fantasies from a lifetimes ago  
Illusions from life before me play throughout my head  
Newspapers, polaroids, jewelry, books  
There's a whole life before me staring me in the face  
A lifetime so beautiful  
So antique

## Untitled

Adrian Gomez

The sun was beginning to set on the day  
And I was surrounded by all those whom I loved  
The crisp iron of collars was accentuated,  
as was the theme of the day  
Wails of the wind drowned out side conversations  
Well-kept blades of grass danced beautifully to the music  
The sun lowered, casting shadows over the Earth  
A once lively group had been reduced to a lamented guise  
Only memories remained  
For the life of me I could not remember one  
One where smiles filled the room  
One where laughter had been as abundant as the grass today  
The Earth broke open for me  
As it was carved further recollections crept in  
The sun's descent had quickened  
A hole could be seen forming within my kin  
The hole carved from the Earth could not compare  
And it was not until I realized I had been put 6 feet deep  
That I could unearth the memory of squandered happiness

## Untitled

Sehaj Basrai

The bathroom is liberating.  
obvious reasons aside,  
you find solace inside  
a reason to hide, you're untied.

a retreat to the bathroom is not defeat  
Whether you need a good cry  
Or can't give another try  
You don't need to lie  
when you ask, "can I use the bathroom?"

## Rosey

Keleigh Kuptz

The garage is bruised  
I hope he can't see how I really feel, I hope I look amused  
I hold my breath each time a car passes, hoping no one can see me inside  
I wish that time would go by faster, so I can leave, without looking back, run away, and hide  
I still can't remember the name of his dog, I forgot it each time I'd go over, each night I  
stayed there  
I remember everything else though, the farmers market, cocaine, the way he looked at me,  
the way he'd stare  
I never stopped moving from that day forward, I didn't want to stop and stand still  
I was scared of the world, scared to be alone in the dark, scared someone would remind me  
of what I'd done for a dollar bill

## An Unknown Love

Natalie Saephan

I never knew what love was like  
Until I found my passion for cutting hair.  
Snipping away at the hairs of my first customer of  
the day,  
I pour my heart and soul into perfecting their appearance.  
To see the smile on peoples faces,  
It's like a spring flower has finally blossomed.  
I know my work is good; I know my purpose.  
Once the sky darkens,  
I am finally able to go home to my son, my everything.  
Bonding over drinks while I cut his hair,  
I tell my stories of being a barber.  
His eyes begin to light up like fire in the dark  
As I tell him what it is like to allow for others  
to love themselves  
Just a tad bit more in the moments of revealing their  
new hairdo.  
I remind him that the importance of life is to love  
deeply  
And to save some room for the love that is still yet  
to be discovered.  
Unknown love.

## I Expose the Past

Brian Havig

I expose the past  
with agonizing care.  
The shovel falls,  
Parting dirt from dirt.  
Each time that it falls  
A weight begins to lift.  
Closer and closer,  
At last, I find my goal.  
This barren field  
Was once lush, and green.  
Now the trees are gone,  
and earth gives no succor.  
Beneath the dry rock and dirt  
I find their bones.  
Shovel abandoned,  
I finish the job  
With brush and chisel.  
Slowly, carefully.

## Digging for a Forgotten Face

By Scott Slater

Clawing

Scraping

Tearing away at the dirt as it scrapes me raw as some sort of revenge.

Fingernails full of black sludge as I desperately try to play the reel in my head another time.

Just a little bit further, a little more pain to prove myself right.

My favorite film has been run too many times, as the projector burns away the reel.

Their face viewed too many times as it continues to fade away.

My memory is all I had left, and it is no longer sufficient.

The old pictures in dusty books lie about the faint rosy of their cheeks.

Estranged pretend to share old stories, like they own the right.

Only I hold the truth, the true nature of what was lost.

The memory of the truth is no longer sufficient.

The earth itself tries to hide the memory, enslaving me to prove what is fact.

I will not be tricked, and I will never forget, and I hold the real truth.

Those liars wish to deceive me but I know the face.

I can never forget that sweet small face.

how could a mother forget?

Clawing

Scraping

Tearing away at the dirt as it scrapes me raw as some sort of revenge.

I no longer need to worry about fingernails, as I plunge into the earth once more.

The fields of tropophobia show my love, and surely I will be rewarded.

# FLASH FICTION

## Olympic Artist

Ashley Baumgartner

The excitement downtown was tangible, every bar and restaurant was packed with people eager to watch today's event; snowboarding. Faith smiles to herself when a chorus of cheers sound off behind her as Kelly Clark makes yet another impressive aerial maneuver. *I wish I was as fearless as her*, she finds herself thinking when she steps out onto the sidewalk. Involuntarily, her gaze goes to one of the many looming mountains that cupped the city. Snow was visible on the peaks and Faith briefly imagined that somewhere up there was a woman, a snowboarder, who was so inspired by Clark that she decided she just had to train now. She didn't picture herself as that woman. She was terrified of heights, well, to be more precise she was terrified of falling. Faith has never tried snowboarding but that didn't stop her fascination with the sport. It only stopped her from planting her feet on a board, because she knew it would end with her face planted in the snow. She knows failure is inevitable, but some failures were too huge to risk. That's why she's always given herself achievable goals like getting a college degree and becoming an accountant. She repressed any inkling she ever had for something more. Since she's gotten her job at the bank, she put down the brush.

"Painting isn't a practical skill," her mother had always said and now those words were ingrained in Faith's head. They have made her lead a life where her feet were planted firmly on the ground. She would never catch air by painting; she never tried to catch air by painting. The crowd in the bar whoops and hollers again, the sound penetrates through the windows and the door. Faith watches some passersby look around for the source of the joyous noise. *Would people have cheered for my art?* Faith allows herself to wonder, for once in her life she lets the what ifs swirl around. She doesn't weigh pros and cons, she lets herself believe that the pros outweigh the cons. The strange impulse to believe goes against the instincts she's spent most of her adult life honing. Faith's eyes go to the peaks again, and she thinks of Kelly Clark and her imaginary snowboarder again. *It's time to train*; she decides to set off purposely toward the local craft store to pick up a palette, smiling to herself.

## One Syllable

Keleigh Kuptz

There was a small m&m pack on the seat, and a roll of tape in his lap. I think back on that time, and know it as the first time I thought I was in love. He's next to me now in the same car so long after that month, and he does what he can not to look at me. My eyes glaze over and I know I won't have to be there for long. I'm still in the seat, but I was gone by the time he talked about her. It wasn't the girl that made me stain my eyes red more so that day, but the fact that he would know what I did too. It'd been over for us for so long then, but I knew it'd be over for good soon. He held the drops over me as he did each day, and I laid my head back on the seat. He asked how it was that night, and I told him what I did. To this day, he says he knew but I saw his face drop when he found out. The road we're on is rough and paved, but I went out bare on my feet and stood for a long time. I don't know what we said once I came back, but it was the last time I took off my clothes for any guy the way I had for him. It's not the last time I saw him, but it was the last time I saw him the same way.

Late that month, I'm in a room with no light and I lie on the floor next to my mom. I didn't sleep for hours until I took her robe and hid my body in its sleeves. It's dark in the halls and I see signs of each life that's been here. I slide the door shut and stand on the deck that looks out to an old 'Alph's'. He'd call me at night now so no one would know we still talked once in a while. We said small words and he talked of the lawns he mowed and the cups he filled all the way that stained his teeth. The only food I ate then were the light blue pills I kept under my seat that made my thoughts come out as quick words I didn't know I had. My aunt was in the next room over but I held one in my lips and kept off the wind as I cupped my hand next to it. There was light for a moment, and I asked him if he thought we'd be the same as we were back then. We both knew we never would be though, and I hung up the phone so I don't have to think about being on my own. I held my head back on my own this time and saw the red seal over my eyes as I wiped them clean. I was glad I had something that made me fail to think of all the things in life that scared me.

## The Colander

Kaitlyn Isola

You soak the good and you drain the bad. That's what she mumbled as she stood by the kitchen counter freeing her pasta from the burden of its own bath water. Each droplet circled the drain screaming for recognition as it swirled into a pit of black with rotating knives as teeth gurgling her liabilities. The colander held a commanding role as it forced imminent separation with little warning or rebellion. It didn't matter what size the holes were because worry had a way of adjusting to tight spaces. They spurt through the bottom like a showerhead drizzling off the backs of the innocent. What is she left with? A bowl of perfectly al dente noodles too immature to solidify and acknowledge the challenges of life. They would not last forever though. They were on a time limit. Anything euphoric generally doesn't last long, but those brief moments of release became enough to throw away pieces of herself. We must all make sacrifices to concoct an al dente brain that bleeds out the murk of distress. At least that's what she told herself as she popped the pill into her mouth, staring at the colander in her hands that would unbind the hurt clinging to her being.

## Persian Princess of the Year 2000

Emily Federspiel

My name is Centola and I am an archeologist. A few days ago I heard about a Persian Princess who's mummy they have found. The Persian police have called me to come verify the mummy. They informed me that they found out about this mummy from a videotape made by Ali Aqbar. In this video he claims to have this mummy for sale. I am a very well known Pakistani archaeologist. This mummy was found on October 19, 2000. The police are now bringing me to the location as I am writing this. We are going to meet a tribal leader named Wali Mohammed Reeki in Kharan, Balochistan which is near the border of Afghanistan. If this is true this could be an amazing moment in history not only Persian history, but archaeology history as well. When we finally arrived in Kharan and spoke Reeki. I asked him where he had acquired this mummy. He goes on to say how he had received this mummy from an Iranian named Sharif Shah Bakhi. Who claimed he found it after an earthquake near Quetta, which is the biggest city in Pakistan. Apparently the mummy had been put on sale in the black antiquities. This is a form of trade of goods and artifacts, sometimes it is illegal or legal. This mummy was selling for 600 million rupees, the equivalent in none rupees is \$11 million. As a result of Reeki participation in this he was accused of violation of thus country's Antiquities Act, in result he was sentenced to ten years in prison. The same punishment will be given to Ali Aqbar as he has violated the same act. After I talked with Reeki, he was taken away. I went to examine this mummy and I took it back to my lab in Quetta for a closer look with my equipment and team members. After a year or so it was confirmed on April 17, 2001 this mummy unfortunately was concluded to not be the mummy of a Persian Princess. The real identity of this mummy is unclear, but I am determined to find out more about this mummy. The only conclusion we have is that it is a modern day fake. This was an extremely sad finding because I had some hope that maybe we had made a discovery. This is when being an archaeologist can be hard and disappointing

## Steal, Or Take Back?

Nicole Pyle

Not one of you could know what I hid from you. I took it, stole it, made off with it- shall I go on? But you don't know what it is. Ain't that a shame. It was right there, where they say the nose can smell: you could not have lost its scent, though in some way the ghost touch still creeps low and straight in all of your minds. What you do know is this: I stole your hearts; I stole the wet weight in your eyes; I gave you dreams of more, and stole those too; I stole from all of you. When you'd look on me blind, you would not tend to see your own feet on the grey ground which would kick up the dust- dust which then set down in the dark cracks of space that kids on the block make sure to skip for Mom's sake. Your joint bones would twist in a sprain, and you'd fall to earth which is not Earth, paved on top of green, but the sly weeds still peek through. You could not see that you did not have me; I did not fall with you. (If I should fall, I will fall at you.) I stole me back from you. From each You that came to me- I left too quick for you to sink your thumbs in me and hold me down: tight grip, gasp, break, chew, spit; nails that claw red map marks in a line on at least one back. Tears spill out from me. But do my dew drops come from my past pain or my new gain? Too much breath or none, it feels the same in how I am stuck, and I lack the thing I need in a round shape on the ends of each loop. The noose holds the shape of a tear; my breath rips a tear in my throat. I won't dare stand to hang if I must live out my death for you. "One time and once more, one more time, for me? I will



learn, please, take me back." But I have me back, and I will not leave me this time- and no time soon. What will you do with me? No, the thing to ask is, what will I do with me? I am my own. My ears, eyes, tongue, mind, shape, voice, arms, hands, legs, feet, down to my small toe: all parts of me will be your foe if you try to claim me. I am no *thing* to be claimed. Stare as if I'm yours, fine, but as sure as I am it will not be true. You get what my words mean, though you act like you don't. The end of You is my new life, the first page of a book. My words write on their own, not caught in my pen's throat, free to leap ink to ink, my words not held back by a tug of rope.

## Magnum Opus

Brian Havig

His sword was nothing special: just a piece of shaped steel, with a handle wrapped in unassuming leather. The distal taper of the blade was accurate, down to the millimeter, of any template a student of the forge would follow. Every aspect of the blade, every corner, every surface, was standard. It was the creation of a student, one who followed the instructions of a mentor to a 'T'.

The smith had many, many blades, each more intricate than the last. He had experimented with thousands of designs, some historical, some alien, others impractical. Each time he learned something new about the craft. There were curved blades, long blades, axes, knives, halberds, and experimental blades that had no close cousin to speak of. Each one had a purpose, a design, or a use, not matter how strange.

But, no matter how many weapons he pumped out of his forge, searing hot, his sword, so basic and elementary in its design, never left his side.

He had swords created from that original design that would have been fit for kings, or even gods. Sword hilts emblazoned with rubies, sapphires, and diamonds. Decorative swords with inlaid gold, folded Damascus steel. He had swords with magical properties. Several of them could ignite with flame, glorious, and singeing.

But he never left behind his first.

Once, he had dismissed the blade as an impressive first attempt at smithing, but his mentor had proven him wrong. That first blade had held its own against all the others. It shattered the golden, gaudy impersonators, sliced through gem encrusted shields, and battered aside intricate, but ultimately useless designed weapons.

The sword was more than an attempt, and more than a template. It was proof of his abilities, and his deepest shame. The sword was a perfect example of the fundamentals of his craft. It was his Magnum Opus.

## Start Again

Zoe Damaschino

She sat cold on the grey porch step, her eyes full of warm wet tears. She did not cry, for months her eyes had stayed dry. It had been a year since she lost her dad. She lived in the same house, but now just her. She felt lost, like a game piece you just can't seem to find. Cool night air swept the street clean of leaves. She watched them, picked up and strewn in the pale night light. She, a leaf, now tossed with none to her name, felt bare and blank once more. Things were once good, then bad.

Her hard work now forced to start new. This is not fair, she thought. Why me, her voice faint. It's my fault. She held a key in her palm. Glanced down, a tear falls on the key. She thought of last night. She thought of the plot. Did I lock the door? She will ask this many times. A dog came from the house and sat next to her, with brown eyes that looked at her with joy, not a clue of who had been in her house, just a day ago. The name of her dad on the steel ring that laid on his neck, and fell on his fur. A lost soul brought back in her life, a friend. She did not think of cash, her tears were not there due to the glass that lay at the base of the door, cracked and hurt like her. The tears did not come for the lost watch and lack of things left in the house. Theft is not sad on its own, she thought, it's what they take that makes this hard. For her, a young girl sat hurt on the porch, a dog, now the last thing of her dads, his cards, clothes, and art, gone in one foul swoop. Her dad would laugh if he was here. He would not fear or tell her to cry. Her dad would pick up the glass, and say it would be fine. He was like that. He did not frown. Once she saw him cry, in the bleak white room, with the green chair that was made to take a seat, but no one did.

Why sit when one can not stand. The last days were hard. He smiled each day. His skin was grey and his hair fell thin. He told her not to cry, so she would wait. He was all she had and she knew that was the truth. She had let him down. His house, now bare. His cards, all lost. His art, not hung, a blank spot on the wall where he once had put it. The night got cold and the sky was black. She sat on the porch step, tears now dry. Her face stung. She could fix the glass door and clean up the house. She knew it would be fine, she knew it was time to start new.

## Like a buried treasure, my treasure is buried here

Grace Fenstermacher

Carrier of once and always precious cargo, you will hold my buried treasure. You hold me, fighting against my ever failing legs. Golden wheels reflect heaven's rays onto Baby's face, like warm breath singing hushed lullabies. Rusted wheels now squeal against my awkward movements, like a baby's first cry rejecting the cold world. A navy canopy, made of thick fabric, blocks busy eyes from reaching Baby, like a knight's shield protecting it's holder from surrounding evils. A faded canopy, sprinkled with holes and fighting day's light, mimics the stars of the night sky from the empty bassinet. A woven basket, padded and new, cradles Baby like mother's arms, safe and warm. A patched basket, weathered with age, a place only for dust (and falling tears), like my arms, empty and cold. A bare carrier, new and ready, slows in the gravel. A bare carrier, old and forever waiting, stops as silent as the grave. Like a buried treasure forgotten by the world, Baby rests undisturbed. My treasure. You will not hold my treasure, yet you hold me. You hold me as I continue to look for my buried treasure.

## Stuck

Michael Gomes

It was cold for a night in the hold of the east. The three moons' lit up the sky as the elf crept out of the woods and up the path to the back of the small town. With so few homes, there were few guards to roam the streets that night. This made the elf's job a low risk, in and out gig. Still crouched, the elf came down the back road on his way to the town bard's home. The bard had come to cross the wrong lass. Her first thought, in her rage and tears, was to kill him with her bare hands. Once she calmed a more quiet, but no less cruel, plan came to mind. Steal his lute. The source of his coin and his joy. To take this from him would hurt him far more than any punch ever could. As the elf steps into the light he must act with haste to not be seen by the guard who just came out on the road. With a speed he is well known for in the guild, he ducks behind some crates on the side of the next home. While he counts the breaths it takes for the guard to pass, he takes stock of the goods that hide him from view, the crest of the town mage clear on the side of the crates. A Mage often has rare goods that sell well with any fence. This mage, though, had not one thing worth his time, just sacks of lime and clay, for who knows what end. The guard was long gone now, so the elf was back on the move, with the bard just next door. The lock on the door was low grade and quick to get through. The home was small, one floor with only three rooms. The thief made his way through the home up to the case at the far side of the bard's room. This lock gave him pause, though in the end it was no match for his skill. Lute in his right hand, the thief made his way back to the front and with a twist of his left hand, the door was open. To the view of a guard taking his break on a stone on the far side of the road. At the noise, the guard took a look at the house only to shout when he saw the thief exit the home. In truth, the thief could care less, he had not been caught in the past, he won't be caught now. He made a break for it down the side of the house to lose the guard. Now at the back of the homes, the thief saw a grey path and dashed to it only to step in deep, wet, mush. His speed made him fall face first into the odd mud, and the thick goop made him slow and weigh a ton. By the time he stood up a sword was at his throat.

## Across the Water

Scott Slater

Then's razor fangs hungered in the cold dead night, but his heart hungered more, yearning for a lover's embrace. He then journeyed up to the roaring river looking for something to eat, but Then than found only dried twigs and salted rocks on his side of the roaring beast. He peered across the river, daring not to step any closer, as his eyes wondered what might be past the bounds of his prison. But then, Then found another set of gleaming fangs in the night, belonging to a Than. Than peered back at the man with the dead trees and encrusted boulders, as he was scavenging for his aching belly as well. Then shouted to Than and the two struck up a suddenly intimate conversation. Then Then talked to Than, their tenderness tantalizing together. They talked about craving red, hating the alliaceous smell of the weeds, and how this damned river blocked them off for the rest of the world. Than then invited Then over the river, so they might talk more closely. Then could not. Then invited Than over the river, so they might touch. Than could not. Then then and Than took one last look into each other's hallowed eyes as two parted ways, forever separated by the curse laid upon them. The curse to always hunger, but never find satisfaction; The curse to live forever, but never find the taste of another.

## Friday

Jacob Fisher

I wake with a sense of mind-numbing joy, it's Friday. The weekend was breathing down my neck and whispering in my ear, "Are you ready?" as if it was Frankie waking me from slumber before an international vacation. I love the weekend, especially in the summer. Fridays are always a breeze; everyone is filled with sunshine and smiles. Living in the East End is certainly an interesting endeavor. You see, I grew up in rural Alabama where the sun kisses the elongated fields, and everyone in town knows each other. Here it's different, every time I step out into the city, I feel the energy pulsing. Energy from the thousands of people, millions of thoughts, breaths, and leg twitches. The energy differed from the norm on the bus today. Even though it was Friday, in July, it felt like a wintery Tuesday. My leg was shaking, and that's how I knew. My legs only move when I'm walking or in deep thought and I wasn't doing either. Something was being uploaded into my brain and I couldn't access it yet. I sipped from the iced latte in my hands, then chewed on the white plastic straw. I wasn't nervous, but it didn't feel like Friday. Exiting the bus, I jangle the ice in my cup before tossing it to the landfill, as if to savor the final moments of a less polluted world. Finally, I step into the building and exhale a giant sigh of relief...I'm home. I know what you're going to say, you're just a receptionist, but I loved feeling in charge of the building. Everyone's my friend in here! It makes me feel like a celebrity. In Alabama, some days I would see no other living soul, just myself in the cracked mirror of the outhouse. It's nice to know every face, until the time where you don't. He walked in so briskly, with determination and strength in his eyes. He moved with so much vigor and angst. This was the energy I felt when I woke this morning, it was him breathing down my neck..."Are you ready?" he looks into my eyes, pierces into my soul actually, and jabs my Friday joy to death. I see the gun, but that's all I see, I can't look away he won't let me. As he slung the bullets my eyes were wide as a kitten's before she pounces on a spider. He screeched so loud I could barely hear it. I knew everyone but I didn't know him. Just as quickly as he came, he was gone. It's Friday, and it was over before I knew it.

## Wonderland

Cyerra Smith

I was watching her, the way her fingertips grazed over the dusty globe on the desk. Her long, dark hair would sway with her body movements, her dark eyes studying everything surrounding her. I call out to her, hoping to gain her attention. She stopped walking, her fingers still on the globe. Turning my way, she had the biggest smile on her face. I could see her dimples placed on her cheeks, I could see her face was flushed, her cheeks a bright but subtle pink. She started telling me when she was a little girl, she had a dream that she always wanted to travel to Paris. As she kept on talking, I was focused on her body language.

"I just wish my father was able to come with me." she says quietly.

She looks down, as if she's regretting letting me see her like this. Instead of telling me what was going on in her mind, she shook her head. Moving closer to me, she gently took my hand, placing it on the globe. I was tracing over some of the continents, looking over some of the details. In Africa, I could see a little heart etched into the wood. I wondered if it was her that made it. Perhaps it was her and her father, when they were discussing her dream to travel. Why wouldn't he make the heart over France?

"What's with the heart over Africa?" I ask.

She gave me a weak smile, and looked over at the continent.

"My father took my mother there on a safari trip. It was their 10 year anniversary."

As she told the story of her parents' safari trip, I imagined her as a small child sitting on her father's lap. He was telling her how beautiful it was, how all the animals were graceful.

"He made the heart when they came back." she laughed.

She stopped spinning the wooden earth. Her eyes were full of emotions. "Is she reminiscing what happened?" I think to myself. The sound of mumbling was being echoed through the big hallway. "I miss him." she mumbled.

I began to wonder about her. She had such a mysterious energy, it always drew me in. The way she would look up at me, her dark eyes staring up into my own. She never fails to amaze me.

"If you don't mind me asking, what happened to your father?" I ask her.

She doesn't look at me. Her skin is now pale like a porcelain doll. She opened her mouth to speak but instead she kept quiet.

"If I hurt your feelings or made you feel upset, I'm sorry." I tell her. "It's ok." she whispered.

The energy between us had turned into solemn sadness. Her eyes were watering, she was about to cry. Her hand was no longer tracing the details on the globe.

"My father, he passed away." she told me.

"He gave me this globe before he passed. Telling me that whenever I travel to make a little heart on my destination. I haven't made any yet."

She grabbed a pen that was on the desk. I saw that she drew a small heart on France. I didn't know how or when but, I was going to take her.

## Untitled

Natalie Saephan

With hazelnut brown hair, emerald green eyes, and a pink birthmark in the shape of a wave on her right cheek, Ariel was born with a gift. She is only 7 years old and has the ability to walk on water. Ariel spent most of her life being caged up in her second story bedroom so that no one would discover her secret. Even then, Ariel believed this power was a gift rather than a burden. Tired of being locked away, Ariel then decides to leave home by traveling on water. Ariel lived near the ocean and decided it would be best to embark upon her journey in the middle of the night. At 3am while everyone is sound asleep, she decides this is the best time to leave. She walks for hundreds of miles, then sees something shining in a cave. Slowly creeping in to see what was inside, Ariel then found random people who had the same mark as her. They were fairy-like people who only wore fluffy tutus and shorts. After many hours of traveling, Ariel finally found a group of people just like her. She then receives an invitation to join the family. Ariel thinks to herself "Well then, I guess I should make this place my home." She realizes she is right where she belongs and is finally accepted.

## Comfort Food

Shannon Geraghty

Freda was finally home from work, another long day doing something - anything - to put food on the table, and today, no matter how hard, was no exception. It was time for dinner. The colander sat on the kitchen counter-top, where it always was. It was never away on a shelf, or hiding away in a cupboard. It was always there, on the counter, right by the sink, waiting for the next time it would be needed. Freda insisted on leaving it right there because she knew she would be using it that day, every day, for at least one meal. Smells filled the kitchen each day, steam and starch and acid and spice.

Today, it would be classic spaghetti with meatballs; Freda had been able to talk the butcher down a whole quarter for the ground beef, which enabled her to get the surprise of the evening: a whole bar of chocolate and a quart of heavy cream. Freda brought a large pot of water to a boil and crushed tomatoes in a hot pan.

Time had stopped. Salt, pepper, oregano. The meatballs were in the oven. The kids were smiling at the table. Freda picked up her colander and plopped it into the sink; the noodles were ready. She lifted the pot gently and strained the noodles. She shook the colander over and over, hot rain trickling down into the sink. Steam rolled up into Freda's face, her skin relaxing in the heat. After serving dinner to her kids, Freda put the surprise in the oven: bread pudding. Stale bread with vanilla and the cream from the store, hiding broken pieces of chocolate to the bread. When it came out, Freda watched her children's faces light up. They couldn't remember the last time they had such a decadent dessert. After dinner, Freda went to work on the dishes. When it was all done, before turning the lights off, Freda replaced the colander onto the counter where it sat, waiting for the next night's dinner.

## Dangerously Beautiful

Victoria Drozda

Sharp, dangerous...and beautiful.

Those were words used to describe the enchanted looking weapon that she held. She gracefully slid a finger along the blade in a dangerous waltz. A wry smile drawing on her dark lips. Funny enough, those were the same words they use to describe her.

It was almost as if they were always meant to be; a perfect fit.

The pretty little trinket had a good size blade, no longer than from her finger tip to her wrist along with a strong handle that was easy to grip. She circled her thumb against the smooth emerald embedded between the handle and the black stone blade like the reverse coloring of a cat's eye: piercing and eye-catching.

Ironic, how despite it being a decorative dagger for show it was never truly meant to be used. Yet, it had become so deadly in her scarred hands. Scars that should have never been there in the first place. Scars that only she could really see. Just like the dagger. They were one of the same.

Beautiful dangerously; that was never meant to be touched.

## Silence

Joe Chung

I place the colander inside the kitchen sink and let the running water dutifully wash away the surface of these bright and plump strawberries dumped out of their plastic bin. I wonder why packaged fruits never have the 'pre-washed' labels that I find on vegetable bags. I think about googling for answers when a ping interrupts my thought. I pick up my phone to see the text that reads "Hey, I'm sorry for whatever I did. Can we at least talk". I quietly stare at the screen with the tip of my index finger instinctually hovering near before I decide to ignore and turn back to my strawberries. I give the colander a good tumble to wash the other side. Then I remember the time I left the water running in the sink to thaw a frozen package of meat while stepping out to grab the mail, only to discover a flooded kitchen floor upon my return.

Apparently, the bottom of the package had sealed the overflow hole. The water gushed onto the floor, looking for a dry surface to ruin. I study the strings of water streaming through the pores on the colander. I place my finger tip against one of the pores and feel the tickling sensation of the water pressure. I wonder if this is yet another end, my heart drowned inside the bowl full of unspoken honesty. Will my uncaged truth run softly and smooth as these streams of water or mount to a thrashing waterfall. Will the story end differently or the same. I pick up my phone.

## Message in A Bottle

Sehaj Basrai

Then, my voice would ring as church bells, bouncing off the endless mountains that surrounded our lush escapade. Now, the endless ocean cares not to give a response to my unstable cries of help. Then, mother earth would cradle me as I lay in her emerald green pastures of growth.

Now it seems as though I accepted her invitation for a fight, as the waves now jostle my body like a child picking about an earthworm. It was then that I had a disregard, a lack of respect for your mother. Now I seem to think and feel everything in this empty, barren decay of life. Then, when I had every opportunity to find a purpose, I found nothing. But now, like a firefly trapped in a jar, I've found something to live for. And why to live for. A need to survive. Then, I must get back to.

2002

Ashley Mitchell

He loved her to death. He couldn't believe she was gone... forever. The love of his life, killed while visiting her ill grandmother in a small little town in Germany. Killed on her way home to him in a plane crash. He was heartbroken. She was only supposed to be away from him for a week, seven short days turned into an eternity. She was his everything and now he felt as if something was missing from his now gruesome, lonely life. Adjusting to life without her was going to be unbearable to him. Memories of her play throughout his mind like a broken record. Her golden brown hair, her glimmering green eyes, and her smile that could light up a whole football field, is all he thought about. For months he grieved over the loss of his loved one.

Months went by and he felt as if now he needed a change from the rut he fell into. He started investing in himself again. One morning he woke up, got out of bed, and realized he was better and bigger than himself. He got a facial, he got his hair done, he hit the gym, he bought a new watch, self care became his therapy. He felt this new desire to make himself feel good... all the time. This new desire fueling a deeper desire only he knows. This new desire turned him more selfish and narcissistic. He was a walking money tree, spending money left and right. Spending money on himself made him feel something. He is now looking for and chasing how she used to make him feel: complete, loved, secure. Feeling that feeling again is the only thing fueling him to do anything these days. So he did what he had to do. He made himself his number one priority, he made himself the number one person in his love life. Months went on and he started feeling a lot better about himself and his life. It was getting easier to live without her, easier to be reminded of her without wanting to melt, easier to look at other women without feeling ashamed.

One day grocery shopping he runs into a woman: Golden brown hair, glimmering green eyes, and a smile that could light up a whole football field... there she was standing right in front of him. This was the first woman he has ever laid his eyes upon since the love of his life.

Untitled

Adrian Gomez

It is a goal of all calm, fair men to be able to peek wide their eyes as rays of sun peer through his blinds. It is his goal to rise out of bed as he may please, once the time he sees fit ticks on the clock next to his bed. His goal may change as he lifts himself off the bed to start the day but the peace gained when the birds sing his name just hours past dawn will stay near to his heart. It was the Lord's day and no birds chirped as the sun glazed the cracked streets which the small kids played on top of. Only honks of cars could be heard as my eyes popped and the gears in my mind began to turn. The first breath of the day came forced. Pain of which I did not know and from which I could not quite find. Face down on top of the hot black top. My neck strained to lift my head as if it were pinned down by a big dumb bell. As I raised my arms to get off the ground I felt a new pain, when my palms were singed by the heat that beamed from where I had last laid my head. First my left cheek rose, then my chest, soon I was able to sit up and see where I had been left. I turned my head left and right where I could hear the wails from angry cars and the yells of kids at play, both which felt like stomps on my brain. My eyes strained to make out the scenes in front of me when I could not help but spot red stains dripped about my clothes and where I had once laid. The pain grew as I lifted my shirt to find a mess of wounds placed all over my rib cage. I reached my burnt hands near my face real shy, scared of what I would feel. I tap a lump near my left cheek bone and am shocked by the pain I felt from



the burn on top of it. The gaze of drivers and young ones, the same, drew to me as I made my way to my feet while blood stained the street more. While on my feet I felt a pain which I knew very brief, one only the scorch of a hot July day could give. I looked down to see my soiled white socks flat on the curb, close to cooked by the hot East Bay day. As I fell to my butt to dodge the scalds of the Earth I thought, "What went on last night?". I reached to my side to search for the gold coin purse, which had all my money, when I felt the empty space, "They got me." I said. Weeping in my hands I could only think of how much I would have loved to be woken by the song of the birds once more.

1998

Cole Anderson

Victoire was alone and could not see. She tried crawling on her hands and knees but found that her legs would not work. The last thing she saw was something she saw for the first time. A screaming jet plane made of hard angles fell from the night sky and detonated in her village. Now dragging herself through the smouldering rubble of her home, she could only hear the flames of the wreckage roaring in her ears, and it smothered her own cries. Using her hands she felt her way to where the entrance of her home used to be. Conversely the howling flames reminded her of the cool breeze that was flowing through the entrance just moments before. Ceasing her screaming and locking her ruined face in a grimace of determination, Victoire dug her fingers deeper into the rubble. Inch by unrelenting inch she crossed the threshold and crawled away from the ruin. Her heart pounded in her ears and she felt they might explode. She kept going knowing that if she stopped she would never begin again. Soon she felt the refuge of the wet jungle foliage and it slowly enveloped her. Once under the canopy Victoire rolled over onto her blistered back. She finally noticed the cool air stinging her eye sockets and the hot jelly on her cheeks. She didn't scream this time. Her heartbeat faltered in her ears and she could hear others screaming. There were people running too, and some sort of rumbling growing in the earth. She had to keep going. Victoire was alone, blind, broken, and scared but she knew she had to keep going. It wasn't the idea of bloody reprisal, or the fact that she didn't know what happened to her family. She didn't think about any of that, not yet. It was something animal, primal pushing her forward deeper into the jungle. There was nothing left behind her but the stench of burning wreckage and the screams. Soon a staccato of gunfire began and the screaming stopped. When Victoire heard the first shots she finally stopped crawling. They were distant but She didn't know how far. She didn't care. Victoire suddenly realized she didn't know if she could even cry anymore, but in that moment she wept the most bitter tears. She lay there on the cold dirt and wet leaves of the jungle floor losing track of time and consciousness. This was due to her lack of sight, which made everything blend together into a borderless nightmare. The dense void was finally penetrated when she felt sunshine on her skin. With that one new sensation to hold onto Victoire began to crawl again.

# Mourning Death

Victor Matskiv Jr

He told me it was a "skull" - an object I've never heard of. It was pale-colored, with dirt covering the surface of the object, and cracks stretching across what resembled a human jaw line. There were sockets halfway up the front of the skull, he said that's where the eyes went - the eyes of a human being. Within the jaw line, there were stained rectangular objects resembling teeth.

He wore regular clothes - albeit all black. A leather jacket, jeans, and a picture-less shirt. On his middle finger he wore a metal ring with another "skull" attached to it. Forget the obsession with skulls, nobody wears all black. I asked him if he was hosting a magic show or if he was an actor, he said no. He said no after finishing his whiskey. He ordered another one as I stared at his ring.

I asked him where he got his ring from. He took a long moment of his time before responding.

"You wouldn't know."

That remark left me with frustration. I then asked why he carries around the skull. He took his second glass of whiskey and took a sip before looking at me. He had a look on his face I wasn't familiar with. It gave me the impression that my barrage of questions annoyed him.

He said "A long time ago, people stopped dying. The graveyards we owned disappeared, hospitals were demolished and replaced, and illness and disease went away."

He took a deep breath and continued.

"We stopped being people. We're no longer human beings. Instead, we're creatures with full control over life and death. We're not chained down by the constraints of reality because we chose to live a fantasy."

Obviously, I didn't understand a word he said. He gave me the "I told you so" look and finished his whiskey.

Instead of ordering a third drink, he sat still and stared off into space, as if he was waiting for something. There was something about what he said that burned in my mind -

"What's death?"

The man moved again, facing the tabletop beneath him where his empty glass stood. He sighed heavily out of what seemed like annoyance, and then obliged me:

"It's when life ceases to exist. It's when a human being stops living and disappears. Their consciousness is gone, and their body starts to decay. When the flesh and blood decay, the bones are visible, and the skulls are visible as well."

I was puzzled. "Isn't it a good thing, then, that death is gone? We don't have to fear facing the end of our lives."

He didn't answer. He took another long moment. He paid for the drinks, then took his skull and a backpack he had laid down beside his stool, and left the bar.

## Letter for My Child

Janani Mangai Srinivasan

I will die on this eve of red.

'Why?' You ask. Good. Find that which is odd. It will aid you in this ring of fire.

'Cuz I am a thief of life. Not of Life dyed in red. No. But of life full of hard work. I steal so I may live.

But they still say I steal life. And so they say I must die. And let the red of my life taint the fake gray stone they make to keep those who steal life like me but not like me from the eyes of those who don't.

Is this right? Are they right to steal my life when I steal the life of those who have a choice but do not steal the life that is red? Are they right to steal my life when I had no choice but to steal theirs?

I think these thoughts as I sit with no balm to cheer me in six walls a cube of fake gray stone.

Would you cry for me? Or would you join those who put me here? Your choice is null as I am here and not out there for you and so they will make you take the same path as I and then we will meet in hell of the sins we tried to steal.

You are my next of kin and I wish I could wish you a life those like me and you would want to steal but I dare not. 'Cuz I feel this God of ours will take what I wish for and twist it to what I would not wish for. But this dream of fright has come true too soon. As though this God of ours knows my thoughts of all time.

You are the one true love I have left in this life and soon you will be all you have. And you will have no choice but to steal their lives to life yours. And so I say to you these words-

One: Do not think to steal a life of red as they can feel when you do so and when they do, they will pounce.

Two: Do not show them what you lack for they will take that as proof of you as one who steals their lives

Three: Do not take their hands that vow a life with no need to steal. It is a trap.

Four: Do not act like them. They know what lies on the wide path from them to you. It is not worth the cost.

Five: Their vile words show who they are. They hide it with sweet words they can not be. Do not fall for this trap.

Six: Do not get caught.

## A Poisonous Flower

Jazzy Tran

As she strolls through the backstreet, there is a grasp of fear that itches in the back of her mind but she pays no mind to it. What is this bleak view that goes on through my flesh? Most news has been said that dames all over the city have faded. Care shall be taken to see that rules are set up for bed checks and to stay in small groups. I rush home quickly to dodge the howls of men in the street and to play by the rules. As I walk home I am stopped by two cops, they thought it was very odd for a dame to wander through at the dead of night. In reply to the officers, she made it clear that she was working late at the large building and took a side trip through the back street to get home quicker. In a flash the dame filled with a bunch of ill at ease, like a cat on a hot tin roof. She lies and tells them that she must get a move on if she was to make it home soon for the bed check. But as soon as she could take one step, one of the cops placed a hand on her arm and asked if she would like to join them for drinks. She turned the cop's plea down plus she had tried to move past the cops, but they stood tall like concrete. One of the cops starts to move close to her. Her eyes start to fill, to the brim with tears as this man with no morals, seals the space that splits their apart. At that point, a firm voice had cut through the air. I peered past the cop to see a man there, he was tall, dressed very sharp. As if he made his way to a pub near the city, set for a night of drinks and tales of a wild topic. He told me that all of them are waiting at home for the dame and that the meals would get cold if we did not rush. I go through with it and leave with the cops back there, as soon as the man and I have gone a pretty far width. He turns back to me, he starts to atone and told her his cause for his deeds. As she walks first the man behind her has a smirk placed on his lips. As they get to the front door of the dame, she asks the man to join her for a cup of tea as a form of thanks for his help. He waits for the right time to strike, the poor dame joins the man in the living room with a tray of tea and two cups that are hot and ready. She hands him one of the cups and then grabs her own, as they both sip the tea, the man bends over and splits the said tea out. As the man lays on the ground half woke he can see the dame go over to where the sugar is. What he saw next, made his eyes wide, next to the sugar he can make out an open jar of drugs. As she walks back to the man that lays on her floor she sits in front of him with a small smirk lay on her lips. The man looked up from the ground, seeing the women towering over him. She kneels down and comes close to him whispering something in his ear. The man was barely conscious, and the last time he heard before things went black, was "Thank you~"

1999

Keleigh Kuptz

I stood at the gate waiting to go to a place I'd never been before, and a place I could never go back to. I hugged the blue fleece around my shoulders and watched as the world continued past me, all listening for words overhead. I was hiding inside my jacket, but I knew I wouldn't be alone long. The airport reminded me of broken hairbrushes and songs about being alone with boys. I hated places like these ever since I'd watched that movie, and thought about what I'd do if something like that happened to me. I was distracted as I looked around, checking my phone, bouncing my leg against the chair. I'd been on a plane before, but I'd never been on this one. I thought about smoking cigarettes on the patio earlier and holding it with two hands. I hated the smell and since our patio overlooked the front entrance, I knew everyone else did too. I thought about the talk we'd had earlier, and how he'd described each person's height between the span of legally little and Shaquille O'Neal. I thought about the lady in the Rite aid parking lot who held up the line while rescanning her receipts. I smiled at the

people below me on the ground next to the plane, and pretended they were people I knew. Some women smiled back, but most men saw my features as hard and unfriendly. I closed my eyes and drew over each letter on my fleece four times before opening them back up. I look back on it now and wonder if I made the right decision. I could've stayed and listened to the things they'd told me to do, but I left because I knew I didn't want to yet.

## The Year You Were Born

Zoe Damaschino

The glass always gets foggy, when the warmth of the space heater that sits just below on the cold stone floor meets the cool outside chill that December brings. I lay in bed awaiting the soft ring that sounds from my telephone, each morning, at the same time. A routine. I wish they would stop worrying, as I am the least of the world's worries right now. In my parents' world though, it's naive of me to assume they would wake up with anything but the feeling of an ache in their heart, with a desire to hear my voice, and a longing to know I am okay. It's been nearly four months, an amount of time that would feel long in any other circumstance, yet now it feels inconsequential and quick. I feel guilty each morning, though I know I should not be. Survivor's remorse, commonly noted feelings of guilt when you survive and others are not as fortunate. It was as if the whole city felt this way. You didn't have to be in the buildings, fighting on the front line, or the few freak occurrences of calling in sick that one horrible morning, to experience survivor's remorse. Anyone as fortunate as I, felt guilty. You're taught a lot of things in life and you see more than you can prepare for. You watch family and friends grow and fall ill. You take trips and go on adventures, seeing sights not even the mind can create. You experience storms and earthquakes, tornadoes and sunny beautiful days. No feeling compares to this, I can tell you that. The city feels smaller and the "hard on the outside" New Yorkers, felt nicer. The streets were still loud, but a conscious feeling of comforting one another was alive and well. The telephone's familiar ring disrupted my morning thoughts, as it always does. I answered the phone, anticipating the daily check in, the well wishes, and the verbal displays of affection. Each day, on the hour. I had little rebuilding to do after it happened. Few can say the same. I was fortunate. I think about the friends and coworkers whose lives are forever changed. I sit at the edge of my bed, sunk into my white linen comforter. I look out the window at a skyline that seems unfamiliar. My stomach aches, a feeling I consciously blame on morning hunger, but I know is from fear. You can't anticipate a day where the sky is grey and smokey, the streets are full of debris, and your world is turned upside down. A familiar ache in my head arrives, as I think about those that the city has lost. The phone call ends.

## A Lot of Work

Brian Havig

The Gulf War was coming to a close.

James Cantrell stood outside of Lucky's Tavern, flicking at a zippo lighter, trying to get his cigarette lit. The damned lighter was old. Ruddy silver that was once reflective was now scarred and marred with age. It clicked, and sparked, but refused to light. James cursed under his breath, which came out as vapor in the cool evening air.

The woman on the television, just inside of the tavern, was giving a news report about the end of the conflict. He could just hear her chipper voice over the patter of rain striking the building. James hadn't really kept up with the war, not since his brief involvement had concluded. There were more important things to deal with.

As he finally managed to get his lighter ignited, and cigarette lit, he considered that thought as he took a drag. Things more important than war? There was a damned invasion happening, and he was too busy thinking of more important things. True, in the grand scheme of things, when compared with a possible multi-dimensional catastrophe, a war certainly did seem insignificant.

James wasn't sure he'd be able to get used to that line of thinking.

He flicked ash from his cigarette, and leaned against the tavern's outer wall, watching the rain wash over the street, cars, and other buildings.

Whenever he stopped, and looked, *really* looked, he always wondered where the time had gone. In moments like this, he would think back to his time working at that bar in Texas, living out of his tiny mobile home. What had that been, twenty years ago? It was so easy to lose track of time.

He dropped his cigarette, and stamped on it with his boot, then turned back into Lucky's.

Sophia waited for him at the table. She had tied her dull, copper hair in a simple pony-tail, and she wore that same, stern expression she always did. Her eyes were glued to the woman on the news.

"Let me guess," James sighed as he dropped into the rickety chair across from her, "that was all *their* doing?"

Sophia nodded. "Not sure what the hell they're planning though," she said, eye narrowing, as if she could discern that secret from the news anchor. "What does starting a war in the Middle East help them with?"

James knew that she would *still* be pouring over all of the evidence that they had managed to find while scouring the battlefield during the conflict. So far, they had found nothing, which was troubling. "Maybe they just like conflict?" James suggested with a shrug. He knew that wouldn't even be close to the answer. He wasn't the brains of the operation, far from it.

"No," Sophia said with the clipped tone of a professional. *Military definitely, but what branch? Or...something else...*

"Doesn't matter," James said with a casual gesture at the television, "the war's over."

"That one is, sure," she admitted, then looked to him with a serious expression, "but there will be more, and it's our job to find out what they're up to."

James sighed. "Great, sounds like a lot of work."

## A Note From Me to You

Emily Federspiel

This is change and a note from me to you. I note for those who need to hear it.

Many things come with change tears, love, joy, and even rage. Change can be a theft in the night when you don't see it. It can seem sudden or out of the blue.

It can make life tough, but you have to know you are tough too. Life is not meant to be smooth. Life likes to test you and see how far you can get pushed till you break. The main goal is how you grow after life beats you down. No matter how hard you fall to the floor or no matter how bad you get beat up or no matter how much your heart gets scrapped.

What matters is what is taught to you. How you grew, life is here for you to fall. It is your choice if you get back up again to face another day. You are strong, you can take the hits, and when you rise again. You will be even more brave than you once were.

Life is not meant to be smooth. Life likes to test you and see how far you can push till you break. Life goes on and you can choose if you want to keep up. It doesn't wait or pause. Life does not care who you are. Just roll with it and see how much you will heal then glow.

When you roll with it and take your time. Life will feel new and sweet. But to get there it will take time. You will have to be with you for a while and just with you. To love you for you it will not be quick. It will be long and a maze of ups and downs. You will not be the same as you went in. They say you will glow when you learn to love you for you. You will glow like you and they will see how far you have come. The ones who thought less of you or left you. May want you back, but you will not let them. You will know your worth. You will know the value you hold. What they did not see when they had you.

Just keep your head up and you will get there. You will have a glow like a new you. A strong you. A bold you. A brave you. A better you. A you no one can bet down on that will let it all go. Let it slip from off and you will know your worth. Life has its ups and downs, but one day it will be smooth. Your day is on it's way. I can see it, just keep at it. Soon you will see who you are meant to be. Just wait and let your find your new glow. You will have to change your mind and how you see the world. I want to find me and be the girl I am meant to be. This is a note for you and for me.

## The Year I Was Born

Kaitlyn Isola

The tapping of passenger's surrounding feet forms a man-made soundtrack separating reality from diversion. The clacking of tray tables bounces on a split second time-lag with the movement of the plane as if the sudden jolts travel down the vessel like a rolling wave with the energy stored at the front. Children senselessly ask questions about pretzel bags and whether they have time to watch *Finding Nemo* before landing. Flight attendants attempt to mask their terror through sets of white teeth and red lipstick. Loudspeakers screech nonsense that I instantly associate with foreign languages. The lack of spinning emanating from the propellers demands attention from a pre-occupied audience. Wings are tilted in angles that I am confident do not comply with flight protocol. Gravity is no longer a crutch but a harsh actuality bending us in abnormal positions. Odd combinations of fluids separate from their plastic cup holders until they are airborne and moving in unpredictable splatters. I stare out the window conscious of the fact that the sky appears distorted in a spiraling arrangement of blue.

As I finally welcome the panicked energy that was previously shoved beneath perception, fearful shivers irrationally rumble through my body. My blood cools until it's halted from further circulation. In the process of tightening my security belt, I fumble, elbowing my fellow wriggling partner. He looks up in alarm as bright green spheres of weeping serve as a reminder of the impending crash.

It hits me like a bolt of lightning; the truth rippling through my veins. I wasn't supposed to be on this flight today. An innocent trip to Alaska swiftly transformed from an escape to forced confrontation. What justice is there in penalizing someone for arriving too early for their flight? Punishment for over-preparing, thus canceling out the spontaneity in my life? I think back to the kind woman obliviously handing me an upgraded ticket to my own demise. All that I had to do was say, "maybe later".

Sitting there plummeting through the air, I can't help but remind myself of the taunting mystery of the northern lights that I will never see. What else is there to think of as we unintentionally cut through the sky achieving aerodynamic feats that I don't understand? I didn't think I would be this aware, counting the prolonged seconds before embracing a distinct end. Suddenly, everything is calm because we have arrived in an unanticipated format.

## Red Eyes

Victoria Drozda

Snap. Thud. Crack. Hiss. Shhhh~

It was gone. Like a kiss with time. Gone but in no ways lost. Not in a place like this. A claw; keen and sharp like the tip of a spire, drew traits of a mask face in stone. Stone the same tone of tombs: cold and gray. The same stuff her stiff spire of a cage was made of. Cold to one's touch, dull to stare at and ruff on one's hand.

Snap. Thud. Crack. Hiss.

Worth? To some; yes. Much worth. Kind of like her eyes, fair eyes, the tone of rust. Keen eyes. Red eyes of a once red heart. Eyes of a beast. Cursed eyes of worth.

More worth than a string of pearls? Yes.

Or of a set of opals the size of one's eye? Yes.

Of gold? Of course.

Snap. Thud. Crack. Hiss.

Bored. Yes, bored as she sits on her throne in her rust red gown; ripped and torn over her skin dressed with gold scales. She smirked a pair of fangs. She'll wait. She did so, many times when they first locked her up. They stole many things of worth from her that day too.

Snap. Her heart was the first.

Crack. Her looks. Fair, she was once called fair.

Thud. Her eye. Now it's place was a dark void. Never to shed a tear.

Hiss. Her crown.

She brushed a clawed hand down her long thread like white hair. In a way she was still fair.

Click, clack.

Out? There was none. She knew that all too well. He didn't. That was his fault, when he stole from her first. He stabbed her as she slept in her bed of torn silk sheets, right where her heart was. But now there was no heart left to stab. Then they run like fools when she cries out in pain.

Tears? Oh, there were no tears. Not any more. Only pain.

Snap. Thud. Crack. Hiss.

Dread sets in as their moves turn stiff and slow as if their bones were turned to stone. They think it'll be a cinch at first. To enter; yes. To leave; no. If that was true she would have left after some time. But more than an eon has passed and she is still here. Then they try to kill her again. Sword in hand. And like the others, he too will fail. That is true. Yet at the time, they'll think they won.

'The beast is dead, I won!' They'll cherish this part. So as if in a spell they try on the crown. A crown of gold and tears. As their blade sets root in place of a beast's heart; eyes dead and dark.

Click, clack.

They'll waltz up the steps to the throne as if it was fate as they stood in front of stone ghosts: cold and gray. Grasp the crown in their hands, set it on their rash heads of theirs and grin. But then their grins will shift to one of fear as they scream their last breath as their face turns that cursed stone gray. Gray and firm like a tomb.

She would then take the blade out, toss it and pick up what was hers to start with. Smile and take her place once more. A wry smile. They think the crown was the cure. Ha! When in truth it was her tears that would have saved them. The only thing was she had none left to shed.

Snap. Thud. Crack. Hiss. Shhhh~

And it would start all over.



## It's More Than A Game

Michael Gomes

Miguel gaped as his champion fell to the ground, filling with a sense of dread faster than the screen could shift from red to grey. There was nothing he could do but watch as his opponent stepped over his fallen fighter and proceeded to their next objective, capturing it with little effort. He could hear curses muttered under the breathes of his teammates, each holding off their own opponents from the opposing team. We were losing. And Miguel was the problem.

It was a miracle that he was at the tournament to begin with. For years his mother had chided him for all the time he wasted in front of the computer screen. "If you are going to be on that thing, it better be for your school work, not those nonsense games," she would say. Miguel hated school. He was not a stupid kid by any means, he maintained a decent GPA with the C's and few B's he got, but this never managed to satisfy his mother's expectations. Any time not spent towards furthering his education was a waste in his mother's eyes. The scholarships awarded to the victors of this tournament were the only reason Miguel had been given permission to participate. She had been almost pleased with the fact that he wanted to earn money to further his education. He didn't tell her that winning meant getting a spot on a pro team.

The lie by omission didn't even matter anymore, Miguel was certain he was going to lose the match and the open position. He had given the enemy team too many kills and too much gold. His teammates were barely holding back the waves of minions assaulting the last turrets protecting their base. Strangely, the enemy champions were nowhere in sight, it would have taken them little time to overwhelm them and end the game. Suspicious, Miguel moved his champion away from the turrets and towards the edge of the forest. Once at the border, Miguel placed a deep vision ward in the pit of the Dragon, revealing the enemy team struggling to kill the beast.

With little time for error, Miguel pinged for help in the forest's river and his ally fired a rocket towards the brawl, killing the Dragon and four of five enemy champions in the process. The following forty seconds were filled with screams on both sides of the table, as Miguel's team rushed the enemy turrets with their opponents unable to return to the battle. VICTORY soon took up Miguel's screen as his teammates jumped from their chairs in joy. He had won, not only the tournament but the scholarship and position as well. Looking up into the audience, he sees his mother's unexpected cheering and jumping, and he thinks he might have won something more.

## To Dance With A Beast

Grace Fenstermacher

The ground, chilled stone, holds me. Keeps me safe. I can't breathe. I...can't...breathe. The void in my chest forms an ache that will not cease. As I gasp and take in stale air, my lungs fill and rest in a state of ease. A fixed weight of gloom traps me in my curled up state. I don't care; I have no hope left. My light is gone. I have lost my soul to the dark prince. The dark prince, cloaked in pall, eats up life that strays from the marked path. Look out for the dark prince. He who shrouds his starved bones in an ink cape that stains the dirt black. He who hides

his caved in face and blank eyes with a torn up veil. I warn you now and only now. For I know the dark prince. I know the strength of his grasp. I know his soft touch. I know the sour gaze he casts on the world. I know the sweet smile he greets the moon with. I know the dark prince for I was his friend. One does not make friends with the dark prince if they want to live. If they wish for death, then it can be done. I've wished for death. I wished for my death to be quick and easy, but I guess life had plans for me. When I had wished for death, life gave me a friend. The dark prince. The lone prince had walked and searched the earth for his own light and had grown bored with his trek. We were both so tired. Tired of the dark. Yet when I came to meet the dark prince, a small light, one I could not see, sparked deep in my soul. I shared time and space with him; I loved him. Who knew it would end the way it did? The more time I spent with the dark prince, the more my light grew, the more my love grew. The more time the prince spent with me, the more he craved my light and the more his fear grew. His fear of the dark. The dark that grabs at his legs and nips at his arms. The foul dark that taunts him with no shame. The dark prince keeps at bay with the lives and souls he has snatched from those who have passed by. Once I learned the truth, I left the dark prince; my heart broke that day. Once I had seen a true friend, now all I saw was a beast. As I walked off, the dark prince filled with dread. He could not face his fear. The dark prince charged at me. Our wails filled the night sky. The ground, chilled stone, is damp and turns a thick gray color. I touch my face. Wet. My lungs sigh out and break the still air with toiled breath. The light of the moon shines bright on my face just to mock me.

## My Jupiter

Joe Chung

On my bedside table, the alarm clock clicks to nine fifteen. I wait to overhear her say goodnight to Lily. It's then followed by the sound of her dull incoming footsteps that drift toward her bedroom door. Once the door closes, the faint weeping starts. Like clockwork. She doesn't know I can still hear her suppressed sobbing through the walls. I turn up the volume of my radio. The radio host is excitedly talking about the recent photos of Jupiter sent from the Voyager 1 spacecraft. Two years. That's how long it took for the spacecraft to finally reach the edge of Jupiter and send back photos of its rings for the first time. I joked in class that I would roller skate around those rings, a fancy immediately squashed by humorless Mr. Nelson who told me I would fall right through those rings made from dust suspended in midair. Floating particles of dust trapped in endless circular motion. Then I wonder if my dad's dust particles are out there somewhere, coalesced back into his old form. Staring at my bedroom ceiling dotted with glow-in-the-dark stars, I imagine being weightlessly lifted up from my bed and whisked away through the window like Wendy in Peter Pan. Swimming through nothingness for days. Days turning into months, months blurring into years. Questioning whether I'm moving forward, back or simply in circles. Wondering if I would ever arrive at Jupiter. Then all of a sudden, out of darkness emerges the face of Jupiter in its full glory. A gigantic ball covered in swirly shades of brown and encircled by a ring that reminds you of a halo. It's been waiting and waiting for my arrival. I feel a warm tear slide down the side of my face and fall to the pillow cover like a meteor, flowering particles of dust that float away to my universe, my Jupiter.

# Her Nightmare

Cyerra Smith

Once it is night time, a kill has been seen. I had felt an urge to see the corpse. Her skin, cold and pale. I could see the tear streaks that were placed on her cheeks. On her neck, I could see where the rope was traced in her flesh.

"Oh, what a dumb girl." I say.

As I was done with the corpse, I could feel the wind on my skin. The night was clear, the moon was such a sight. The stars were big and shiny. The mood that was once fear, is now vile and dark.

"Such a shame that you had died." I laugh.

I gave the corpse a vile grin. The way her face had fear gave me the idea that she had a pained death. Even though I knew how she had died, I had a need to know how she felt. I longed to know how she felt when the noose touched her, how she felt when she could hear her neck snap.

"Here, take this ring." I say.

The ring I gave her was the ring I stole for her. She was my bride. I had trained her to be a good pet.

"I am here now, my love."

As I pick her up, I take her to our spot. She had a strong odor, she smelled of death. "Here we are, my love. At our spot."

All of the land at our spot was now filled with wet ground. I look at my bride, I have to do what I know will hurt the most.

"We will be one."

I threw my wife into the wet ground. It soon starts to cover her skin. It broke my heart to see the love of my life get locked in her own Hell. Next time, I should have just let her hang in her room. She earned the death, she would beg me to end it all. Now, it is my time to go and be one with her. The wind blew with such a force, the air had grown eerie. "Where are you?" asked a girl's voice.

As I looked to my left and right, I could not find where it was from. I could still hear her, so I called back to her.

"Hello? Who is there?" I yell.

What I heard next had my bones chilled, it had my skin raised.

"Why did you do this to me?" she asked.

As I woke up, I could feel that sweat had left my body. My eyes were wide and wet, like I had to cry. I hear the sound of my bride. She was in the den, I could hear the sound of her laugh. It was loud through our thin walls.

"At least she is still here." I think out loud.

I got out of bed and went to the den to spend time with her, it was our last night to spend with each other. I hope we can see each other in a whole new life.

## Loving You

Shannon Geraghty

He grabbed the stones, put each one in the bag. He had sweat on his face, tried to wipe it off with the back of his hand, with its own coat of sweat, it just smeared on his brow. This was Hank. Hank was not a bad man, but on this day, he did a bad thing. Each stone in the bag, the shine more bright than the last. Green, red and clear rocks.

He thought of the man he loved at home, Ron, all bones and skin, as he sat in wait to die. Ron was not at the end, but they both knew it would come soon, too soon. Hank did not have the cash to spare, to feed and care for them, to help treat Ron, push back the end. Hank could not bear to think of what would come if he could not pay to at least ease Ron's pain.

His goal was to not steal more than what would just get them by. As his theft came to a close, Hank placed the top of the glass case down, cinched his bag, and dropped to a squat to take his leave. He heard a noise. Hank had to drop flat to the floor to not be seen; he had not planned for this. He had to take a friend's late shift to be sure he would not get caught. No one here, the keys to the store; a plan with no flaws, but here Hank heard one on its way.

Was that the sound of heels on the floor? His heart was hard at work, which drowned out the taps he tried so hard to hear. He gripped the bag tight, his hands shook as he willed his heart to stop. He tried to calm down, but his eyes stung with tears. He was so close. Hank took a deep breath, and stood up. He had to try, for Ron. When he stood, he saw what had filled him with fear: the rain. He had not seen the clouds roll in or the rain start to fall while he worked.

He cried more, this time with joy. He looked through the room one more time, stepped out the back door, and made sure to lock it, then banged the knob with a brick; a break in, not a store clerk, would be blamed.

Hank looked up at the stars; he had made it. It was time to go home to Ron, send the stones off, and wait for the rest of the cash he was owed. The night air was cold, but Hank could not seem to care. He took a deep breath, felt his lungs fill with the cool night, and turned for home. As he neared the road work that he passed each day, he stopped and found the part of the walk they had just laid, the grey stone still wet in the cold night air. Hank reached down, pressed his thumb to the wet stone, and smiled. From now on, right here, the ground would say, "Ron + Hank" for all to see; best of all, Ron.

## My Beautiful Girlfriend

Sehaj Basrai

She may not be much of a looker to you, but this perfection of a skull is my beautiful girlfriend. She used to have this pale, buttery smooth skin that made all the light in a room bounce off her like a disco ball. The whole room would stop. Men couldn't get enough and women already had enough. Anyways, I've grown to like her without the outer casing, maybe even more so. All those slobbering men hounding her wherever we went, I couldn't have that. I like having her all to myself, it's better this way. You think you know your significant other, that he or she will never leave you. *I've never felt this way about someone before. Our love transcends any emotion, anything we've ever felt before!* No honey, *your* love transcends any emotion you've felt before. She doesn't feel the same about you at all, I can guarantee that! Sooner or later, she's going to dump your sorry ass and leave you in the dust, wondering what the hell just happened. I couldn't have that happen again with her, so we both agreed on her ending up like this. If I'm making you jealous, just do the same thing I did, it's easy!

## Possession Shenanigans

Janani Mangai Srinivasan

I decided to preserve my skull in clear resin. The doctor had to amputate one of my heads after a small accident with a lotus and a chameleon, but I didn't want to throw it away. Even the medical students didn't need it. They had gotten a recent delivery from a necromancer farmer. The gossipier told me. It was my head and I wanted to keep it. Sort of like a memento.

The neighbor was the one who suggested keeping the skull, instead of the whole head. That would be more efficient. The doctor agreed. It was quite a process. A more squeamish person might cry seeing it. Only the child is squeamish. Not me.

While I was away, the killer did something shady and jumped into the balcony of my house. The police chased him there right as soon as I came back. To make things worse, they kept eyeing my newly cleaned skull, lying on the couch. I was nearly arrested.

Honestly, it's like keeping a reminder from the favorite person whose body you stole is a crime or something! Good thing I kept the paperwork nearby :)

## Sad Water

Ashley Baumgartner

Cyane shudders as the waiter places a glass of water before her, it was complementary. The ice cubes make a soft clink as they bump the glass and the sweet, citrusy smell of lemon wafts in the air around her face, thanks to the slice of lemon in the drink. Water should be tantalizing especially on such a hot day, but Cyane wants to recoil from it. Instead she stares into the glass with morbid fascination. *Who are you?* She thinks, trying and failing to put a face to the water particles. It has to be one of her sisters, one of the other nymphs, she can feel it in her gut. She will never understand why humans like to drink water. But, she supposed, it's not their fault that they were ignorant about her world. Nymphs were sensitive creatures, it didn't take much to make Cyane and her sisters dissolve into water. Anything from a rude look to heartbreak would do the trick and result in their capture. She wonders what emotional trauma caused her sister to be trapped in the crystalline glass. Tears begin to melt away Cyane's human skin, she has to act fast. She picks up the glass, goes to the railing and lets the cup go. The tears recede as she watches her sister return home.

## Bob

Ashley Mitchell

One day there was a small boy. The small boy had a name, Ben. The small boy was a lot. With his pink skin, blue hair, red eyes, he was a ball of hue in a bland world. There was one more boy. This boy was named Bob. Bob was bland with his grey skin, grey hair, and grey eyes. Bob wants to be Ben. Bob shed tears as he looked at Ben. Ben was a lot, Bob was not. The daft thing is Ben and Bob were roommates. Bob used to cry in the night when he thought Ben could

not hear. Bob wants to steal Ben's color and light. One night Bob walked on the hard earth's crust.

He walked the whole night on a search for bread to eat, but he was not blessed with a find. Bob was sad that he did not find food to eat. Bob gave up on food. Bob knew that his thirst was more grand. Bob told Ben about his thirst. Ben gave Bob a coke. Bob drank the coke and was full.

Now Ben drank a cold tea with ice. The ice felt so good on the tongue as it laid cold and damp on his throat. Ben and Bob are now friends. They go to the park and play with a small ball.

"Catch the ball", said Ben with big round blue eyes. Bob caught the small ball with his right hand and then he threw the small ball to Bob with his left hand. Yikes the ball went into the red rose bush. Ben tried to get the ball in the rose bush but it was stuck on the thorns. Oh well, Bob and Ben will now go see the dogs at the dog park. The dogs are so cute. There are five dogs.

There is a big mix of dogs at the dog park that play fetch and smell the roses. One of the dogs saw the small ball that was in the rose bush. The dog was able to fetch the ball but got hurt by one of the thorns. Ben got a wet wash rag to clean the dog that got hurt by the sharp thorn. The dog was sad but that stopped once Ben gave him a kiss and hug on his neck. The rest of the dogs wished that they could also have a hug and kiss. One of the dogs had a loud bark that scared the cat named Sue that had no home. The cat had a nice soft fur coat that was orange. The orange cat tried to rub his tail on both Ben and Bob. Sue did not like the dogs. Sue was also urged for her thirst to be quenched. Bob held the cat in his arms and the loud sound of purr was so great. Bob will now take the orange cat named Sue home and he will not be sad by his grey dull world.

## Y2K: The Year 2000

Nicole Pyle

I wouldn't say I expected much today. People were always paranoid about something; it just so happens the new hip thing to be paranoid about was technology at the turn of the century. I think it had to do with the clocks? Anyway, I'm not about that kind of thing. I go to work, I come home. Nothing ever changes.

Except today, I was to board a sardine-can aluminum tube with wings for an annual job conference in New York. The New Year's Conference, as they called it. I didn't. They renamed it to The New Millenium Conference this year; I definitely didn't call it that. My sister begged me not to go.

"Lindsey, please, you can't fly today! You'll just have to call in sick."

"What's the big deal? They know what they're doing. I've flown this trip a thousand times."

"I just don't think it's all that safe at a time like this. Why not catch the next flight?"

"The overnight flight is the only one that will get me there on time. Besides, planes are much safer than cars. Any jackass can get a driver's license. That's why there's always traffic; too many accidents."

"Just think about it, okay? What would Mama say?"

I ended our conversation with a chicken-peck cheek kiss goodbye and rolled my simple gray luggage bag to the mustardized taxi running outside. Patricia waved to me through the window, half leaning into the daylight, half dark. I couldn't see her eyes. The taxi driver slid his gaze over me as I slid onto the sticky backseat. My head nearly grazed

the cigarette-smoked ceiling. Wear and tear aside, the cab was nice enough, and neatly plain.

"What'll it be?" he inquired. "Oakland Airport."

He sighed, but that was all.

The air was tense in the terminal. Some people scrambled around the front desk, waving tickets in attendants' faces, demanding refunds or exchanges. Some jittered their legs awaiting their journey in the sky, whether from nervousness or too much coffee is hard to say. Some, like me, stared through the window at the runway lined with rotating planes, coming in and taking off in masterful synchronicity.

*What if?* But that's ridiculous. Planes don't just stall out of thin air.

*What would Mama say?* Patricia's voice.

*You tell me. I didn't go to the funeral.*

Who cares if the plane drops? Beats going to work.

## 2002

Natalie Saephan

Annie has as much love for soccer as dogs have for playing fetch. Her dream was to get a scholarship and play soccer for one of the best schools in town. She was such a good player that the chances of receiving a scholarship of some sort was very high. For now, she was stuck in high school playing with the most ignorant, self-absorbed girls. They were known as the Pioneers. One sunny afternoon, the girls had a match against the team on the other side of town, the Eagles. They were known to be the best soccer players. Once the girls got there, they headed to the field for warm ups. After 20 minutes, the game finally begins. Not too long into the game, a girl from the Eagles trips Annie leaving her hurt and unable to play the rest of the game. Time flies and the game is finally over. Annie had apparently fallen asleep and is now alone because her team forgot to do a headcount before leaving back to their school.

It takes a moment for her vision to become clear again. She sees three girls from the Eagles team surrounding her. She asks what they are doing and why they are watching her. The girl with blond hair and green eyes decides to grab Annie's arms while a brunette grabs her legs. The red-head proceeds to shove a sock in Annie's mouth and duct tape her mouth shut. They bring Annie towards the field and start to toss her in a large hole they dug while Annie was sleeping. Annie tries to make any noise she can, but no one is around. Annie thought to herself "They must have the wrong girl. I don't even know these people." The girls begin to throw Annie in the hole and cover her up with dirt. As their finishing touch, they lay a piece of fake grass over the dirt. The girls hop in their car and drive off. Two days pass until someone finally notices the patch of grass looks different from the rest of the field. The police have been called and are on their way to investigate. It is too late, of course. Annie had already suffocated and died shortly after she was buried. The real reason why they did this to Annie was because they wanted the scholarship and felt threatened by her. No one was ever able to find out who killed Annie, but we have to wonder, so who's next in line if all three girls are so desperate for a scholarship? Annie will never be able to live out her dream.

## The Forever Queen

Scott Slater

As my people celebrate me once more, one more accomplishment I have “earned”, I like to think of all the other things I have done. All of the things I have done for them, all of the things I have done against them, and everything in between. Sometimes I think about what it might be like to not be the ruler, but I honestly cannot remember what it is like. A thousand years is a long time to rule England after all.

When you have gifts like mine, you are born naturally to rule forever. To live forever, changing shape and changing form, becoming whatever I may please. Emma. Eleanor. Elizabeth. Victoria. Elizabeth. Different names, different bodies. The same mind.

However, everything good must come to an end. Some may say that my rule did good in the world, but I challenge that: to rule as long as I did, and then see what the results turned out to be. I may not have been seen or known as in charge, but I assure you that it was my own will being fulfilled. This is my confession, and this is my grand reveal.

All of the terrible things that have happened, have been because of me. Some intentional others not, all resting on my shoulders. Sometimes I regret my actions, however I know that everything I have done has been with purpose. Through and through, I have done my best, but I am ready to be the ruler of England. I say goodbye to my people, but you shall not be forgotten. I do this not out of guilt, but out of part obligation and part out of a greater plan. I have had greater pleasure than all, seen everything that anyone could imagine and more, and I am ready to move onto the next part of my life; the next greater part of my life.

Being queen has been grand. All of the parties, wealth, and opportunities a girl could ask for through the ages. However, recently, things have opened up, and throwing away my knowledge to this small part of the world is a great waste to the smaller lives around me. I have manipulated from the shadows long enough, and I am ready to move onto the next phase of my... existence.

I hereby declare my ruling of the world. I will take my place as ruler of this planet, as it is clear it is ready to move onto greater things than men throwing the world away one war at a time. You may refer to me as Queen. You may not understand at first, you may never understand, as rarely anyone does. But, know that what I do is for the best. It is for your best. I am your savior.

## Doin' Time

Jacob Fisher

You may have thoughts that stay in your head. They never leave, just grow big and wild. These thoughts you have might bring joy, ache, tears, or all of these at once. Your brain is a maze. It spends hours, days, weeks, months, and years to search for the key. Even with the key, your brain will not think twice when it drops your knees to the cold, pale, rough solid that is the ground on which you once stood. I too was one who thought long and reached deep into my brain. I once had a goal, my life had an aim. Now I tell them folks my brain is a lie. We spit and howl at my brain; and how it used to churn like a tool. How, now my brain is a pail of slop. We joke in the cell, and file through our minds one by one. I told of the time when I took those names. The names that like to twist the key in my brain. Twist and bend till the end will break and stay stuck. I stole their names for food. I had to eat, just like them. I stole their lives. Just to think, in this cell, what I did to thwart their names, makes me gag and tear up. Tears that roll so soft, so warm, down to my chin. I choke on my sins. My sins and their barbed spines scrape down my brain till all is left is the key. What is a key with no lock? I guess I'm done with that



key. I sit here in the cell, my cell, and count. Count my way back till I'm lucid once more. They must be through the pain by now, they still have a name. I am just a digit, stuck in my cell. My cell, which is all I have now. I may get out, but then what? Steal more, it's all I know. That's my key to my brain. I guess I can change the lock, get a new key. I want to try a key that will bring me joy. I've just felt pain and ache; so what is joy? I think back with my pail of a brain, back to when I was young and thought naught of pain. I had no means to steal then, I must have had joy. I spend days, nights and noons thinking in my cell what joy means. Weeks of long thought, deep in my brain, I see the time. Some would say the light, or the key. The key to my cell was turned. A smile and, "You're free now" had set my brain on fire. Like a gang of bees my brain was a buzz. This was it, the key to my brain, held by a guest of my world. May the light shine deep, far, and wide from my skull; as I did not find the key, yet it freed me from my brain.

## Race My Heart to the Finish Line

Victor Matskiv Jr

In hindsight, I'm not sure why I came here. Actually, I guess that's not true. I had made the connection in my head that seeing this was important for something, although I'm not too sure what it could be. I didn't know that life could end so slowly. Just as this solar eclipse, the accumulation to this end felt like a slow burn, slowly chipping away at each bit of integrity I had left. It was only a few years ago when my life sped up, as my heart raced and everything had just begun, with that single solar eclipse and that first kiss.

For a few years since then, we'd been happy. When people talked about marriage and about their journey in finding happiness, I had no idea what they meant - it felt like I couldn't be any happier than I already was. It was right in front of me, my life, my desire, my joy; all embodied in a single being. She would stay by my side as I watched the stars, wondering about where my happiness could take me, and whether it could take me as far as those stars were.

But if you reach for the stars and race your heart, you also unfasten and accelerate yourself. You might die soon after, having sped up your life. Maybe that's why this feels so slow, my joy was taken away from me. When I was away in another country, somewhere in another city filled with busy people and nobody to care, she was stolen from my life. It was only a few days before then when I saw her still living and breathing body.

Sometimes I wonder how she felt, even in her final moments. Whether she was terrified at the thought of losing me, or of losing her life; or if she resented me for not being there with her, if not to save her, then to be with her at the very least - to at least witness the blood she shed in that moment.

So as the sun wanes in this eclipse, I remember the drop of my heart as I lost her, and myself. I waited a year after that to say something to myself.

.....

The light of the sun creeps around the corner of the Moon yet again. Seeing it makes me want to give up thinking about it too hard. Maybe that's why I came here. I'd like to live again.

## The Sword

Cole Anderson

Jean Baptiste Say would never forget the day Thomas Malius took his fathers sword away. Riding on the dark winds of the night through Jean's village, his home. A black frame in the night came to pillage their pride. The shining blade fell in a flash and was burned in his mind. Jean recalls through all of this time the blade on that man's hulking back. Many years have passed since Malius left Jean aghast, and time breaks us down. Heavy is the head burdened with the crown of knowledge, of age, of the vengeful old sound of a sword being unsheathed.

1999

Adrian Gomez

Silence rang all too loudly in my apartment and I found the best escape in putting my sneaker rotation to use on daily strolls. This week in particular I hadn't walked much on account of my week-long bar crawl in honor of St. Patrick. Myr triple figure bar tab and the aches I still had in my stomach almost outweighed my thirst for another drink. No need for a calendar I knew by the soft rumble of distant drinkers that it was Friday again and that I would soon join them. Walking down my front steps onto the sidewalk I can see the sun setting over the horizon of the city skyline when a gust of wind turns my head. I headed in the same direction and by no coincidence I ended up at my favorite bar to eat my first meal of the day and inevitably worsen my week-old stomach ache with a refreshment. The new bartender made eye contact with me as he continued taking the order of another customer but as my glare shifted I saw a man I did not recognize. His face was plain which made me think even if I had seen the man before, I would not have remembered. I had studied the man up and down when I noticed he was still picking things off the menu as if he were ordering everything that looked any bit appetizing. Once the bartender made his way over to me I heard from over my shoulder, "Hey whatever that guy wants it's on me!" My neck whipped my eyes into the opposite direction to meet the man with the plain face who I now saw waving me over. I made my way over to his booth when I saw his thin lips make out the words, "Take a seat I'm celebrating." Before I could ask why the gaze coming from his beady eyes stopped me in my tracks as he began again, "I'm due for a bonus and employee of the month after the good work I did yesterday!" I took my seat adjacent to him and asked what line of work he was in to which he replied he had just made Enron a lot of money. I watched him sit back in his seat and sip his drink blissfully when a chill ran down my spine. I no longer inquired about his work and waited to drink on the tab of the wicked.

### Family Secret

Ashley Baumgartner

Meave steps through the threshold and, at once, she's overwhelmed by the smell of dust. The entry is filled to the brim with shelves of her parents' most prized possessions. Not family pictures rather books: autobiographies, history books, and bindings of old newspapers. She tried to warn her parents before that some of these tomes shouldn't be on display. Some were so old or worth a few hundred dollars, they were worthwhile to steal.

"Hi mom!" Meave yelps as her mother envelops her in a vise-like hug. The scent of her mom's lavender perfume so close to her nose should have overpowered the dust, but it didn't.

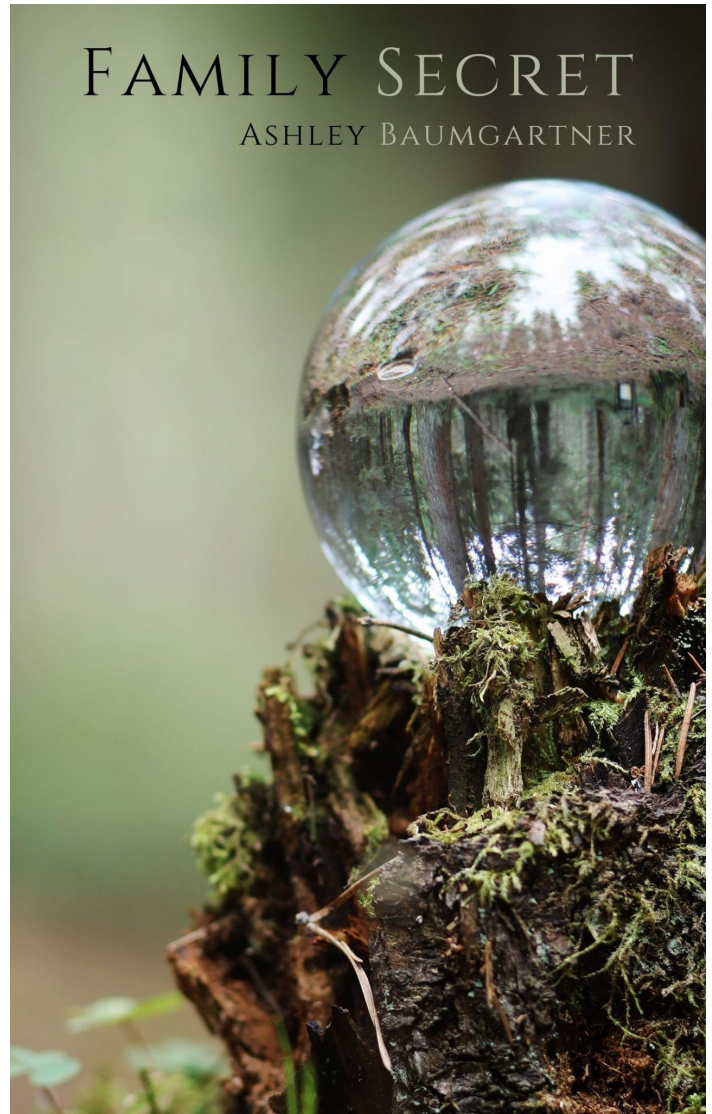
"Hi sweetheart! It's been so long," her mom gushes.

"I know," she couldn't think of anything else to say. She couldn't defend herself; it's been months since she's last seen her parents. That is why she said nothing about how she could feel the air leaving her lungs. Like a balloon rapidly deflating after getting punctured by a pin. However, her mother's arms aren't as light nor as thin as a pin. The woman has played tennis since she was in high school and has kept up the habit. She maybe even played more now that she was retired.

"Don't hog her," Meave's father complains like a petulant child being denied candy.

Rolling her eyes, her mom lets her go, and the arms around her become her father's. Though, his grip was no less ferocious. After a few more minutes of suffocation, she's released and escorted farther into the house.

"I know where the family room is," she giggles, "I did live here."



Her parents willfully ignore her and tug her into the family room, which is right where it's always been. For people who adored studying events that upended governments and the status quo, her parents were averse to change in their own home.

The red leather chair and couch haven't moved an inch since her last visit. The legs of both pieces of furniture left deep impressions in the beige carpet. The bookcases and TV stand were similarly immovable. Meave takes a seat on the sofa, she sighs, sinking back into the cushions. Suddenly, her mother claps her hands excitedly, breaking the gentle hum of conversation.

"Oh, there's something I want to show you!"

"Can't it wait? I just got here."

But her mom is already scurrying off to find whatever it was that she wants to show Meave. She returns a few moments wearing her glasses and carrying a grocery bag. *What's so interesting about a grocery bag?* Meave thinks. With a flourish, her mother pulls out of the bag a photograph and hands it over. In the picture are an old man and woman standing in front of a cabin. *Cora and Grandpa*, she realizes.

She sucks in a breath as she gazes into the eyes of the woman who left her family. She used to be told that she had the same blue eyes, she would take the comment with a bright smile.

But now she remembers those instances with a grimace. She didn't want to have anything in common with Cora, her grandmother.

"Why do you have this?"

"I found it, awhile ago when I was going through your grandparents' things." Meave takes that response with a tight-lipped grin. Her mom is perhaps a better person than she. She would have burned the stuff; it felt disrespectful to keep any of Cora's things. Or the things she left behind.

"Why did grandpa keep this?" she asks no one in particular.

"He was sentimental," her mom answers, shaking her head fondly. Translation: he thought the love of his life would come back. But she didn't, not even for his funeral. The bile rises in Meave's throat as she recalled that evening;

*The sound of the droplets of rain hitting the casket was the only thing breaking the silence. All the other mourners have left, the only ones who remained were Meave and her parents. Even the priest who was meant to give the final rites left. He had claimed he was going to get a snack then he'd be back... that was an hour ago.*

*Out of the corner of her eye, Meave watches her mother continue to look for Cora. Her face was so full of hope as she scanned the cemetery for that bob of greyish brown hair.*

*"Let's give her five more minutes," her mom says softly but firmly. Five minutes turned into sixty, but neither daughter nor husband complained. They obediently stood solemn vigil, side by side.*

"Cool," Meave mutters brusquely as the memory fades. She thrusts the photo back into her mom's hand but She doesn't seem to get the hint. Instead, she sits down beside Meave and pulls out more photos as well as a lot of candles.

Meave cleans her face of any smudge of contempt and takes the items her mother hands her. She gingerly runs her finger tip along the edges of another photograph. The edges were curling either from age or from being held too often. It must be the latter; no way would anyone want to look at this picture regularly. It was viscerally disturbing. Cora sat at the head of a table with about six other people. Everyone was dressed as if they stepped straight out of *The Great Gatsby* but that is where the similarities ended. This photo didn't capture a rambunctious party scene rather it looked like a seance was taking place. A seance, Cora appears to be instrumental in. The eyes of every person in the picture cling to her slight frame.

*"Let us join hands" Cora instructs as she extends her hands to Mr. Davies on her right and Mrs. Davies on her left. The couple exchange uncertain glances before placing their hands in hers. The eyes of the Davies couple and their friends bore into her as she hones her focus to the crystal ball. To the ungifted around her, the crystal ball was reflective and ordinary. To Cora, it was a window into another world. In this case, the other world. Most of her patrons only came to her to speak with the dead, a precious few came to her to uncover memories. Seances were dime a dozen and mostly uninteresting. But her customers were always, unfailing, awed. Gasps break out as the crystal ball begins to glow, the glow wavers as a voice from the beyond disrupts the intensity of the golden light.*

Meave flips the photo around to see if there was a date, it reads October 31, 1922. Impossible. Maybe, Cora had written that date just for a laugh. She was the type to enjoy a bit of mischief and a good lie. With begrudging curiosity, Meave reaches into the grocery bag for another one of her grandma's mementos. Just as her fingers brush the plastic, she recoils. What if all of these were faked or made up of half-truths? Pieces of the puzzle and red herrings. Should she take that chance and be satisfied with the blurry image or keep the little seeming truths that she remembers?

She sighs and plunges her hand into the bag; the sharp edges of something wooden hit her palm. Meave curls her slender fingers around what feels like a picture frame and pulls it out.

"An Ouija board!" She laughs, bringing the board to rest in her lap, "Are you sure that you found this stuff in grandpa's house?"

Meave watches her mother stiffen as she says, "no, I actually found it at your grandma's house"

"Where is the house?"

"It got demolished as was the rest of the town she used to live in,"

"That's illogical, not to mention disrespectful to the history of the town," She responds with a frown, "What happened to the land the town was on after it was destroyed?"

"Nothing, they never rebuilt or did anything with the land," her mom shrugs. A moment of silence lapses as theories abound in Meave's head. She discovered her disappeared grandma was involved in occult practices, and now she was expected to, what? Just let it go? She

couldn't do that; there had to be more. *Why do you want to know more about Cora?* She questioned herself, because it was a mystery and every mystery had a solution.

"Are there any ruins left?"

"I don't know, I haven't been there in years."

"How did you find this stuff if Cora's house was demolished?" she asks. The question surprises her mom just as much as it surprises Meave.

"I-- found it before the house was crushed," The pit of her stomach twists, the inflection of her mother's voice had gotten higher when she neared the end of her sentence. She's lying. Meave remembers her mom's voice taking on the same squeaky quality when she had told her that their family dog had "gone to a farm up state."

Meave was sixteen then. She knew the dog died, yet her mom had attempted to protect her from grief. What was she trying to protect her from now?

"Mom, where was Cora's house?" her mother deflates, she knew she's been discovered.

"It's on the edge of the Taylors' property line, a dirt road off the highway,"

"Interesting," She says flatly as if she were, in fact, uninterested. If her mother could have her lies, so could Meave. Her demeanor shifts from sleuthy to pleasant as she turns to face her father, who had been watching them from the kitchen doorway.

"So, dad, what's for lunch?"

The dirt road was hardly a road; it was more a pathway of flatten dry grass and gravel. Meave jolts as she drives over another pothole. She had managed to prevent herself from being harmed by the last one. But this time the force of the jolt made her bite her tongue hard enough to draw blood.

*Is she really worth this? Meave wonders, would she have endured uneven terrain just to know a bit more about me?* No, Cora won't. So why is she? Because she loves a good mystery. That was what Meave kept telling herself.

She slows her car to a stop after crossing the pothole and pulls off the 'road.' The slam of the car door as Meave gets out echoes across the expanse. She is the only human and hers is the only car around for miles. It's quiet aside from the sound of the wind as it whips across the mostly barren land. The only barrier between the gale and its course was the decaying frame of a house a few feet away. *That's my only lead;* Meave decides as she walks toward the ruins. She steps through where a front door would have stood but all that stood here now was the doorframe. The wood was old and burned as were the poles that once made up the house's frame. Where the floor would have been, there's now blackened dirt. The ground wasn't as compact as it appeared; it was soft like sand. Aside from the fact that the 'house' was the only one for miles, nothing identifiable stood out. This could have been Cora's home or someone else's, now it was a graveyard without any visible headstones. They were buried somewhere underground.

Meave drops to her knees near the doorframe, she scoops up the soot and flings it away. She takes no notice of the stains forming on her jeans or the direction in which the flecks of soot fly. Many droplets land in her brown hair or on her blue jacket. To any passing stranger, she would appear to be in the middle of some sort of prayer, but no, her body was bent in determination not reverence. She tears and claws at the burned earth, ripping it open to reveal a chestnut-colored chest. Her desperate, careless digging had resulted in the tips of her fingers becoming bloody and raw, but she paid it no mind. Meave, grunts as she hoists up the chest.

Once it's completely above ground she opens it and finds a crystal ball.

The crystal ball pulls her in as if she was a piece of metal caught in the sight of a magnet. Blood streaks across the clear surface when Meave caresses it, involuntarily. Her blood goes from red to orange as the crystal ball becomes aglow. She stares into it, her retinas burning;

*Meave, eight years old, trots along a craggy trail, her family are not far behind her, but they are far enough away to not see the impending danger. Meave passes a yellow sign demanding hikers to be cautious along this part of the path because it could crumble. But such signs are not important to this little girl. She races past it entranced by the idea of being the first to the top and being the first one to see the view. Then Meave trips, slips and finds herself careening over the edge of the cliff.*

*"Da--!" her cry catches in the wind; it doesn't reach anyone but the sight of her starting to fall does. Meave falls, her arms windmill as she plummets. Her mind is blank, but for some reason she notices that a butterfly is directly in her soon-to-be landing zone. She would crush it, and she was sure she did, but she couldn't apologize with a face full of grass.*

That memory had been successfully suppressed until now. She remembers the feeling of weightlessness, she had thought it was freeing until her body shattered. Her parents had said that it was a miracle she recovered, the end. But the crystal ball apparently thinks there's more she needs to know. But the scene that begins to take shape wasn't from her mind but Cora's. It was disconcerting to see the world, to see herself, through the eyes of someone else;

*Cora clasps her hands together as she patiently waits for her daughter and son-in-law to cease their grieving. The inhumane wails emitting from her daughter nearly broke her heart but Cora stayed where she was. She watches the blood of her granddaughter, Meave, seep into the grass, impassively. Worrying was of no use when a solution was so obvious, but she never showed her hand before being asked. Finally, her daughter Rosie remembers who her mother was and gets to her feet, trembling.*

*"Please," she croaks, Cora dips her head elegantly accepting the request. Her daughter's knees give out beneath her as Cora retrieves her crystal ball. A blink is all it takes for her to command it's cooperation. Like a golden UFO, the ball takes flight and hovers over her granddaughter. It becomes a mini-sun as it casts its healing rays on Meave's limp body. After a long moment, the lights show stops and the crystal ball returns to its mistress' hand.*

*"There, all better," She says with a smile.*

A knot forms in Meave's throat as the memory fades from the crystal ball's surface. About a thousand thoughts whirl around in her mind. She came here for answers, and she's gotten some but she also had more questions. Meave hates to admit it, but the Cora in that memory didn't align with her memories of the women before she left. When she wanted to be a

grandmother, Cora was fun and warm, never cold. But the memory did align with the narrative Meave wants to create in her mind.

Cora had played the part of a mother, wife and grandma but never was that committed to the role. She grew tired of it, so she left, without any remorse in fact she felt victorious. Meave wasn't sure if her theory was right but she didn't care. It had made it easier to hate Cora for all these years. Believing she had always been a stranger made it easier to stomach her absence.

Why should she miss someone she never really knew?

These questions continue to pester Meave as she begins to drive back to her parents' place, as does the crystal ball in her backseat. Somehow she could feel it calling to her, poking her, begging her to look into it again. It was like having a crying baby in her car that desperately wants her attention. Meave loses her resolve to keep driving, like all mothers do and pulls over.

"What?!" She yells at the box, yanking the door open. *Oh God, are people watching me?* Meave thinks, looking over her shoulder. Part of her is expecting to find cars slowing down as they pass her, children and adults gaping at the crazy lady yelling at a box. Thankfully, only a few cars were on this section of road. Still not keen on being the next viral sensation, Meave slides into her backseat and shuts the door. She places the box in her lap and pulls out the crystal ball again.

"What do you want to say to me?" She asks softly as she rubs her temple with her pointer finger. The ball lights up and once again she's in Cora's head;

*Carrying nothing more than a knapsack worth of belongings, Cora approaches her home for the next... however many years. She's been here before, the cabin looked better then. The logs that made up the exterior used to shine when the sun hit them but now they were rusted. The garden where Edgar had planted sunflowers, myrtles and lavenders was now mostly sunflowers and weeds. The bright golden yellow blooms taunt her as she climbs the steps to the cabin's front door. She would have to cut those out, the first chance she got. Cora studies the cozy living room she had decorated, everything was where she put it.*

*Her leave of absence hadn't resulted in the house being trashed by squatters. Part of her wishes had been trashed, that would have given her an excuse to get rid of all this stuff. The wall of pictures of her and Edgar should have been tossed off their hooks or made askew. Instead, they taunted her too like the sunflowers and the empty circular platform in the corner of the room.*

The driveway up to the cabin is clear except for a black and red, 1910s Cadillac off to the side. The thing could have been a collector's item if it wasn't for the state of deterioration it was in. Vines coil all around the vehicle but the thickest ones wrap around the tires, it would take an axe to clear just those. Additionally, a layer of dust covers the car's leather seats like a flurry of snowflakes.

Meave flinches as her car door slams shut behind her, breaking the tranquil quiet and alerting whoever was in the cabin to her presence. Gravel crutches under her feet as she walks, then the wooden floorboards of the porch creak under her weight.



"Hello?!" Meave calls out, loudly. She already lost the element of surprise, "Cora?! Cora Wright?!"

"Shut up!" a cantankerous voice yells from the other side of the door. Meave freezes, her insides turn to icy slush as the front door of the run-down cabin opens and Cora emerges. Her deeply lined and sun-tanned face loses its scowl when she looks at Meave. The wheels in her head visibly grind as Cora tries to place Meave's face, to no avail it seems.

"Who are you?"

"Meave Wright, Your--" Her voice is weak, her words crack like a brittle leaf coming apart as they leave her mouth. *What am I to her? Granddaughter? No. Family member? No. Relative? Sure.* "your blood relation"

"Blood relation?" Cora echoes, her eyes go wide when she realizes, "Meave"

Meave nods, numbly.

"Leave," She hadn't been expecting that brutal command, it hit her like a slap to the face.

"What?!" She squeaks.

"Leave. Get out of here," Cora, with an utterly neutral expression. She points Meave in the direction of her car.

"That's all you have to say?"

"Yes"

"No hello? Or goodbye? No sorry?!" Meave's voice climbs higher in an octave on each question as her senses return to her. She's the only one here, who has a right to be angry. "'Leave' that's all you can say? That's what you want me to do? You're my grandmother, that's supposed to mean something to you!" Tears gather in her eyes as the dam finally bursts and the knot that has been sitting in her stomach comes undone. "I hunted you down, to find out more about you, I used a dang crystal ball to find you! And all you can give me is 'leave'?! " The only words from her nonsensical ramble that garner any reaction is 'crystal ball.'

"You found my crystal ball? I need to see it," Cora says, her face warming into a smile. The old woman reaches for Meave's arm eagerly, the force of her grip is so tight and vise-like it throws Meave off. Nothing about this woman was familiar except for her touch, Meave jerks away. "I need to see my crystal ball; your mother took it from me so long ago. I thought she destroyed it ... Why didn't she bring it to me?" Cora's slew of words is nearly as nonsensical as Meave's, but she is more surprised and angry than upset.

"My mother knows you're here?" Cora waves away Meave's question like it was nothing more than an annoying fly. Inconsequential to the person it's near.

"Where is my crystal ball? You brought it with you, yes?"

"It's in my car," Meave realizes her mistake as soon as she speaks, she shouldn't have given up that information so willingly. Cora shoves past Meave, flies down the steps and tears into the car like a rapid wolf would a dead deer.

Meave rushes over to join her, she stares as Cora bangs at the hood with her fists. *How long has she been out of touch with the world?* Meave wonders. The elderly woman is too focused on her furious fistfight with metal to notice Meave retrieving the crystal ball.

"Is this it?" Meave asks, wiping a tear from her cheek.

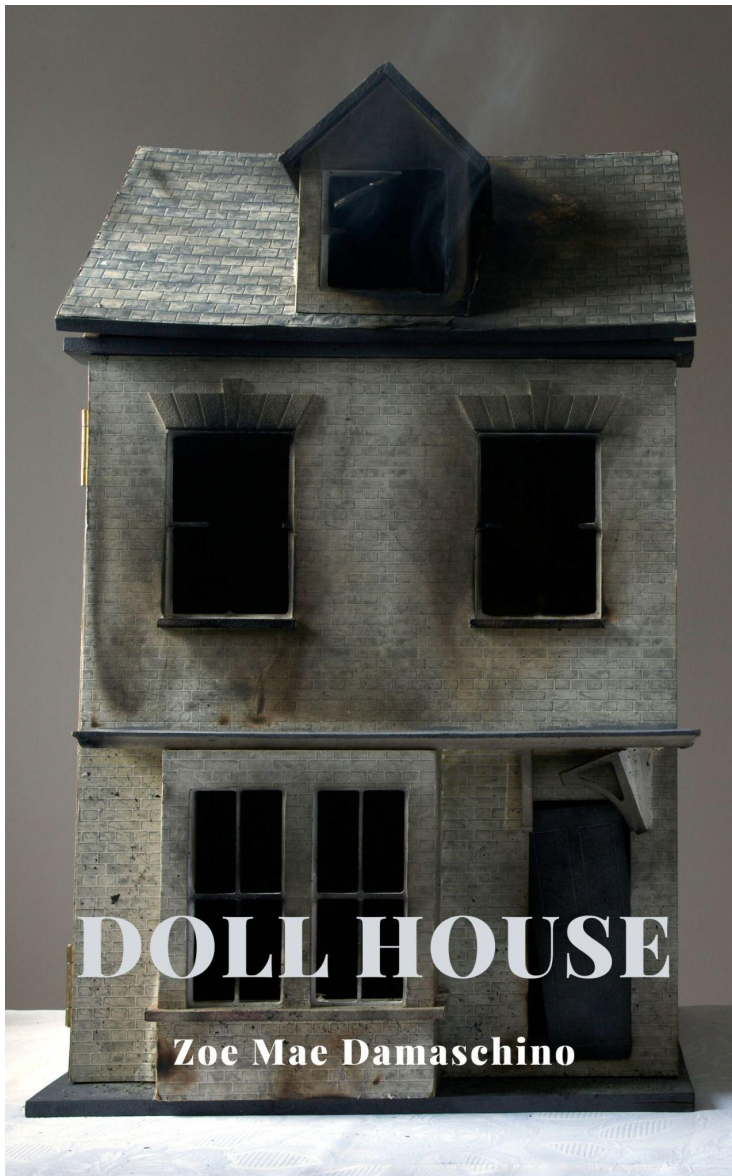
"Yes!" Cora's smile is blinding, even from so far away she reaches for it like it was a returning loved one. That's what makes Meave snap.

In one fluid motion, she hurls the crystal ball into the ground like a quarterback making a touchdown. The two women stumble away and shield their bodies from the shards of glass that leap into the air upon impact. When the dust settles, Meave looks down to inspect her handiwork. The crystal ball is nothing but shards of ordinary glass now, whatever mystical properties it was once imbued with are gone.

"No!" Cora wails falling to her knees besides the broken body.

# Doll House

Zoe Mae Damaschino



Doll House. A light blue-ish grey color, similar to a stormy sky. This wasn't just any ordinary color, it was the color my dad painted our house the day he found out he and my mother were expecting a child. He always told me he was so excited and so nervous, he didn't know where else to put his energy. He used to tell me the story of rushing out of the house, pulling his old beat up pickup truck into the parking lot of the local hardware store that one sunny afternoon, anytime I needed to smile. He said he picked the first color he saw, eager to get home and get painting. The spontaneity of this story always made me laugh when I was younger, imagining him rushing to the hardware store, picking out the first paint slab he saw, buying gallons of paint and rushing home to paint the house, all in reaction to such exciting news. He said it was the best decision he ever made. Doll House Blue.

I've always led a simple life. Grateful for the things I had, showered with love from my father, who raised me on his own after my mothers' early passing. She

suffered complications shortly after giving birth to me. They say you need two parents to raise a kid, and I'm sure my dad would have agreed at times. I was constantly testing his patience and ability to parent. From making him take me to the drugstore on the corner of fifth avenue to buy makeup before my first day of 8th grade, to the many shopping trips where we ended up aimlessly circling the little boys section, holding up cargo shorts insisting "Now these would be cute, Fifi." I've always hated that nickname, but he loved it, so I always smiled in agreement when he called me that. His little Fifi.

I didn't think much of my mother growing up, and I still did not today. If I'm being honest, I refused to fill my life with a longing and desire to know someone who will never be

with me. I'm not sure if I created that mentality, or if it was discreetly placed on me by my father, hoping to avoid uncomfortable and emotional conversation. Nonetheless, together we spent little time discussing her. I liked this though. It was almost as if my dad was protective over their relationship, wanting to keep her to himself, which was okay, he didn't have to share her. I didn't want him to. I personally never knew her. I would never have two parents, and that was okay, one was just enough. I was told she was beautiful and smart, witty and two steps ahead at all times. My dad said we shared those traits, but that was really all I ever heard of her. I left the mourning up to my father, who noticeably missed her everyday, but respected my reluctance to acknowledge her absence. Two months in any other respect might feel like a long time. Two months of being sick would be miserable, two months in prison would feel even longer, but two months of being a mother must have felt extremely quick to my parents, and that's all she ever got. Two months.

I slept in the same bed, in the same house, looking at the same eggshell white walls, with the same person, every day for the past 24 years. My 20th birthday was bitter sweet. My dad let me repaint my room, a mundane task, that meant all the world to me. The phrase, "let me" is being used liberally here, as I'm sure he would have done it for me, as a birthday gift, if he hadn't been sentenced to bed rest just a few days prior. Two weeks before my birthday that year, my dad got the news everyone fears of receiving, stage three lung cancer. I was just old enough at the time to take on the role as a full time caretaker, and I didn't mind the responsibility, he had taken care of me my whole life. I'm an only child, so there really was no other option, and my father's humility prohibited him from hiring a professional. The thought of having a caretaker in the house at all times, my father said, was just as sickening as the cancer. I'm glad we didn't hire one though, as my father survived another three years.

My twenty third birthday was very different from any other. I spent it in my father's study, sorting through medical bills and personal belongings. Time had flown by, and I'm the first to admit that I lost track of my own life. For the three years prior, my days revolved around meal times and when medicine was needed. My days were scheduled in six hour increments, about how long it takes for medicine and food to wear down in your system before it's time for more. Those three years went by both too fast and too slow. Some days I would wake up and forget that he was gone, others I would wake up and all I could think about was the neverending torture of watching him decay day by day.

Once he passed, my life took a turn. Twenty three felt like forty, as I now owned a house, its belongings, and a cat too old for its time, long grey fur and a nose too big for its face. I felt bad for Willy, picked up off the side of the road by my parents many years ago. He, too, has seen both of his owners leave him. I felt for him. It was just the two of us now.

The house was small and homey. Some days, I could see myself living here forever, as my father would have wished. Other days, I knew that wasn't good for me. I had grown accustomed to the sound of the heater and the brisk chill of the AC that kicks in at four in the morning, every morning. I had grown comfortable with the creak of the stairs and the shut door that stood at the entrance of the attic. I knew the house would not mind if I stayed its owner until it was my time to go, and I honestly was content with the idea, seeing as the act of rummaging through and packing up my past seemed a far too daunting task to do alone.

The house was nothing special, not shiny or new. My dad referred to it as an apple, a fruit loved by many, perfectly substantial and filling, yet hardly ever glamorized or appreciated, all because of its dull color and mundane shape. From the outside of my house, there was little

sense of wealth or substance, but the inside told a different story. Though we weren't rich in money, we were rich in memories. The staircase was shackled in artwork and photographs collected by my father. The living room buried in rugs and blankets, sat atop velvet couches and brightly colored lamps. Nothing inside my house was ordinary, it looked like a retro antique shop. I loved it, its floor to ceiling curtains that blocked out any wink of daylight, to its wooden door frames and white ceiling trim. A perfectly normal, but crisp and delicious apple.

I noticed something shining on the steps of my porch as I pulled my dad's old beat up truck into my driveway. My hand clenched the door handle and I was out of the car before it was even in park. My legs felt like Jello but supported me as I ran to the front door. "Please please please don't let it be empty." I clenched my jaw and grasped the cold metal door handle. Glass was at my feet, remains of the shattered windows. I closed my eyes as I swung the door open. Nothing. That sounds deceiving, let me rephrase, nothing was missing, or at least from what I could see. The furniture sat untouched, the art still hung. The golf clubs and bottles of booze were all still where my father had left them.

I slowly backed out of the doorway and stepped back into the cool October breeze. I was on my porch now, sitting hunched over with my phone pressed against my ear. I repeated my address twice to the operator and hung up shortly after. Willy was in the front yard, laying in the pale moonlight and dry grass that surrounded our oak tree. He must have been let out by the robbers. I sat there for what felt like a year, looking down my court, to the street sign, waiting to see the blue and red lights bounce off the reflection strip, signaling safety and answers. My father was all I could think about. I imagined him consoling me, sitting on the step next to me, telling me it's not my fault. I wish he was here. I held the house key in my palm and closed my eyes until the cops arrived. My warm tears hit the key as they rolled down my face and off my chin into my lap.

There was glass at the base of the door and both windows which were shielded by still shut curtains. The broken glass reminded me of dad. In his last months of his life, he struggled to walk, which led to a series of slips and falls, leaving shattered dinner plates and water cups, a mess I was left to clean up. One fall in particular left him unable to walk without my support. I remember waking him up the stairs under my arms, and leading him to bed. He looked so helpless. I now feel helpless. Like I have fallen, but I don't have anyone here to pick me up. Willy jumped up on my lap, and we waited for the police to arrive.

As they filed into my house, guns drawn and flashlights on, my body tensed up. My father hated people being in our home. He thought of our belongings too priceless to ever be touched or tampered with. We rarely ever had guests over and I couldn't think of the last time he allowed on his own will, for someone to enter our house.

They let me walk through my house shortly after their arrival. I sat and waited for them to finish assessing the scene, taking fingerprints and photos in each room of my house. I walked through the front door and into the living room. The police officer was asking me questions but I couldn't focus. I walked up the stairs. Hearing them creak brought me comfort, reminding me that this house was still mine. Everything looked the same. My computer still sat on the edge of my bed, the jewelry draped over my nightstand sat untouched, the television, artwork, valuable china and keepsakes all in their place.

I turned around and looked at the police officer who was following not far behind me.

"Everything's here? What did they take?" He looked at me with a shared expression of confusion.

"We aren't sure ma'am, the only thing that seems to be tampered with is the attic." My stomach dropped. My father never let me in the attic, he told me from a young age that the door must stay locked at all times, and an attic was an unsafe place for a child to explore. I obeyed this demand, as my father hardly ever set rules for me, and if he did, I knew he must mean it. I peered down the hallway and saw the door kicked in.

The attic was positioned on the second story at the end of the hallway, with about 6 steps leading up to an old wooden door. Now, the door was broken, and I could hardly see what was inside. I didn't understand why a robber would concern themselves with such an obscure room, when there was so much more to our house to take. In fact, I couldn't understand why our house would be a target to any robber. I looked at the cop and pointed down the hallway, "Is it okay if I check it out?" I questioned. He nodded in agreement and stood curiously, watching me as I walked slowly down the hall. I flicked on the light and peered inside, standing at the top step. A chill ran down my spine as I looked inside. Boxes piled up to the ceiling, Piles of clothing and belongings, nothing I had seen before. Once I finally built up the courage to step inside, I heard my name called from downstairs by the chief of police, still wanting me to answer some questions. I turned around and shut the door, or what was still remaining of one.

The rest of the night went by slowly, they took my fingerprints, asked many questions, and left me alone by eleven. I fell asleep on the couch that night, with a trash bag duct taped over the broken windows. I heard the wind whistle through my house. I didn't get much sleep that night, or any night following. I layed on the couch with my eyes clenched closed, thinking about my father. He had always gone the extra mile to keep me safe, purchasing locks and security systems, turning the car around five minutes into a drive just to go home and make sure he had locked all of the doors. I had always assumed this was just paternal instinct and a desire to keep his only child safe, but now I couldn't help but question what he was so afraid of. I closed my eyes tighter, and began to think. Maybe my father had been hiding something from me. I began to think of my childhood, secrets beginning to build up, even from a young age. The car wouldn't start. My pink light up sketchers entertained me as I sat in my car seat, waiting to get to school. The first day of first grade. I watch my daddy pull up the hood of the car and block my view through the windshield. The trees always bloom in September, just before they dry up and fall. I watched the leaves blow, hearing the tinkering of my father under the hood of the car. Now, an unfamiliar car was pulling down our long driveway, much slower and reserved than a normal car. The tinkering got faster and louder. The rushed noise of metal hitting metal hurt my ears. I yelled to my daddy that I wanted to go to school. He turned and looked down the driveway, noticeably frightened. I don't like to see daddy scared. My tummy ached. Then at once, the hood was slammed down, his door flung open, and before I could get a look at the car that was making its way down our U shaped driveway, he was off and taking me to school. "Who was that daddy?" I asked in a curious yet knowledgeable way. I could see my daddy's eyes in the rearview mirror. He was crying. I never got an answer to my question.

Time went by slowly. I tried to forget about the robbery, a hard task to achieve, as each day there was a new worker coming by to repair the doors or windows which had been damaged. On Sunday morning, I sat up in bed, and looked down my hallway. When my

bedroom door was fully open, I had a straight shot view to the attic steps. I don't know why, but I knew I needed to look inside. It had been two weeks since the night of the robbery, and the police had little to tell me. I had gotten a call the evening before, one which made my stomach turn and my palms sweaty. They told me the fingerprint analysis had come back, and they needed me to come in Sunday afternoon. So Sunday morning, I began to look around. As I approached the attic, my body felt tense. Walking up the six little steps felt like climbing Mount Everest. It felt wrong stepping inside the attic, like I was disobeying my father's one wish. I heard his voice in my ear. "The attic is no place for a child to be." I'm no longer a child though. I'm sure if he were here he would say otherwise, I'd always been his little Fifi, even when I was acting as more of a parent than he could.

I stepped into the dimly lit attic and assessed the mess of boxes and piles of clothing. Women's clothing. I opened the box closest to the door. Inside I found photos and scrapbooks, my father much younger with a full head of hair and a youthful glow. Then, there stood my mother, dark black curly hair, bangs, a very 90s look, standing side by side holding a little bundle of cloth in her left arm, a baby. It must be me. I continued to flip through the pages, photos and dates that didn't make sense. I began flipping quicker, a timeline that isn't adding up. A day dedicated to a newborn baby, a birthday that did not match mine, but the photo is of me, I'm sure of it. Below the photo of the newborn baby, a name was printed in a light pink color. Dolly. My heart sank deep into my stomach. I flipped through the pages of baby photos. I looked older than two months old in most photos, but my mother was holding me. Photos of us in front of a house, one that didn't look familiar, painted a beautiful light pink. A family portrait. It didn't make sense. I set the book aside and opened another box, a tattered wedding dress, a ball gown, an all black funeral set and multiple fancy hats. Pictures and notes scattered throughout the box in each layer of clothing. I felt my hand brush against something chalky. I dug down deeper into the mess of belongings and pulled out a paint chip, a sample from Frank's Hardware. The sample was a blush pink, with the words "Doll House" printed just below it.

This attic was a mess of belongings. I slowly dug my way through the front layer of boxes and through the attic until I reached a different type of box. The type of brown box you see in a lawyer's office, one with a lid and handles on the sides, filled with paperwork. I slowly lifted the lid off the top and looked inside. A restraining order. Filed by my father, against my mother, or maybe against someone else. The ink was smeared and the paper was faded. Then another sheet, one where the names don't match. Then another, my birth certificate, Dolly George. My father's signature read a different name than what I knew today. Who were these people? I tried to understand all of this information, but nothing was adding up. My phone rang in my bedroom and my head skipped a beat. I dropped the paperwork at once and I stood up quickly, feeling the blood rush to my head. I was intrigued by what I was finding but a small part of me wished I had kept the door shut. I should have listened to my father. I bent down and whipped the dust off my knees and quickly left the attic. I closed the door tight and tried to forget what I had seen, at least for right now.

I laid in bed almost all day, looking at the ceiling attempting to make sense of what I had just seen. My mind whirled. The names don't match, the timeline is wrong, the house, the paint, the photos, everything is wrong. Maybe my dad just got it wrong. "Psychological trauma can often cause memory loss, I heard that on TV one time" I thought to myself. The excuses weren't working. Each lie I came up with to protect my dad and the lies he had told me, contradicted another. I closed my eyes and hummed my favorite song as loud as I could. My dad told me anytime I'm overwhelmed or uncomfortable, this will ease the tension. I closed my eyes tight,

but these thoughts of my father and our past haunted me, even as my eyelids attempted to shut them out. I thought of him, weak and frail. I thought of our life together while he was sick. I thought until I couldn't think anymore.

Hospital hallways have always scared me, which is why I hated Wednesday afternoons. At four pm I would wheel my dad down the hallway and into the same room, every Wednesday. He would be layed down, hooked up to machines and poked and pricked for hours on end. I hated being in the room with the nurses, so I'd sit in the hallway and wait for them to be done. I closed my eyes and sang to the tune of "Hey Jude" by the Beatles, a song my dad used to play for me as a child. I'd close my eyes as tight as I could, cover my ears and hum until someone would come get me, and tell me he was done. I know I was too old for this, but it was a habit I couldn't break.

Humming worked most days, crying worked others, and some I would almost fall asleep out there, guilty to admit that this was one of the only times in the week I had any real down time. Then, there was that one day in late August. I sat on the linoleum floor like I would every Wednesday, back up against the wall, right next to his door, sitting, humming, eyes closed, waiting. Then I felt something, like a shadow standing right above me. Through teary curtains of eyelashes, I blinked open my tightly shut eyes and removed my hands from my ears. No one. I looked down the long hospital hallway, illuminated with flickering lights. I saw a figure, dark brown hair, medium height, a woman for sure. She was walking quickly, almost turning into a skip. She got to the end of the hallway and turned around quickly. I wiped a tear from my eyes and looked at her, she looked scared. We held eye contact for what must have only been two seconds, then at once, the door opened. My father was done for the day and it was time to go. I opened my eyes and sat up in bed, my head pounding. I felt naive and ashamed to have let so much go unnoticed, so many strange occurrences and secrets kept, all gone without a question or desire to understand from me. I wasn't sure how long I had been laying in bed thinking, I had simply lost track of time thinking of my past. The nearest police station was a twenty minute drive, so I slipped on my shoes and headed there. I rolled down my windows and let the cool air hit my face. It was November, a month that was always warmer than you expect it to be. My father used to cook Thanksgiving dinner for us every year. Just the two of us, sitting on opposite ends of the dining room table, with a full feast of food laid out before us.

Growing up with my dad was like growing up in a doll house. We played a lot of imaginary games and entertained ourselves with each other's company. I guess I've realized now how sheltered I was my whole life. I didn't mind though, it's how it always had been. In school, kids would make comments about my dad, neighborhood gossip and schoolyard jokes, but being a single, widowed father wasn't easy, so I would never bring these stories and comments home with me. I feared they would upset my dad. I didn't know what it meant when they taunted him for being secluded, when they made jokes about our house being haunted, because nobody had ever seen the inside, jokes about my mom. I didn't understand. When I got to the 5th grade, my father received a letter home from my teacher, detailing some of these comments, expressing concern that I was being bullied. I was withdrawn from elementary school the next week. I was thankful for my father. He wanted to protect me from my bullies. I turned up the radio and drove hastily to the police station. My stomach hurt and my arms felt numb. I've never been one to worry or fear, but something just wasn't sitting right with me. I pulled my car into the police station parking lot and prepared myself for what might come next. I crossed my legs and leaned over, looking down at my shoes and the metal legs of the interrogation chair, avoiding eye contact with the man in blue, sitting patiently in front of me. I paused for some time after he spoke, processing the information I was being given. He talked



about the break in, neighborhood security, possible suspect license plates and all the information I expected to hear. He asked me a question despite my obvious lack of attention to his words. I paused. It was silent for a while, long enough that I had almost forgotten the question all together.

Did they even ask a question? I looked up. He spoke. "As you may know Mrs. Laine, a routine break-in, involves DNA samples from the homeowner, to differentiate your DNA from the suspects." The police officer talked slowly, yet I was still having a hard time understanding what his words were implying. He mentioned terms unfamiliar to me, he mentioned my DNA on the door handle, reminisce of my fathers' DNA on his belongings and one other sample unfamiliar to them. The report read two counts of DNA similar to my own. He discussed the manner in such a way that left my head spinning. I could feel my face turn pale. The silence was broken, "So you said you believed her to be dead, correct Mrs. Laine?" Mrs. Laine. The formality annoyed me.

"You said that Mrs. Laine is correct? That night, at your house when we asked you who you lived with, you said both of your parents were dead." I wasn't listening to the questions being asked, hearing some and blanking for others. All I could think about was the attic. I imagined the boxes, paperwork, clothing, photos. I zoned back in and answered his question.

"My mother?"

He said nothing to my question, looking at me blankly with empathetic eyes. It's as if he was waiting for me to piece the puzzle together on my own.

"Yes, she is. She's been dead for almost 24 years sir, two months after giving birth to me."

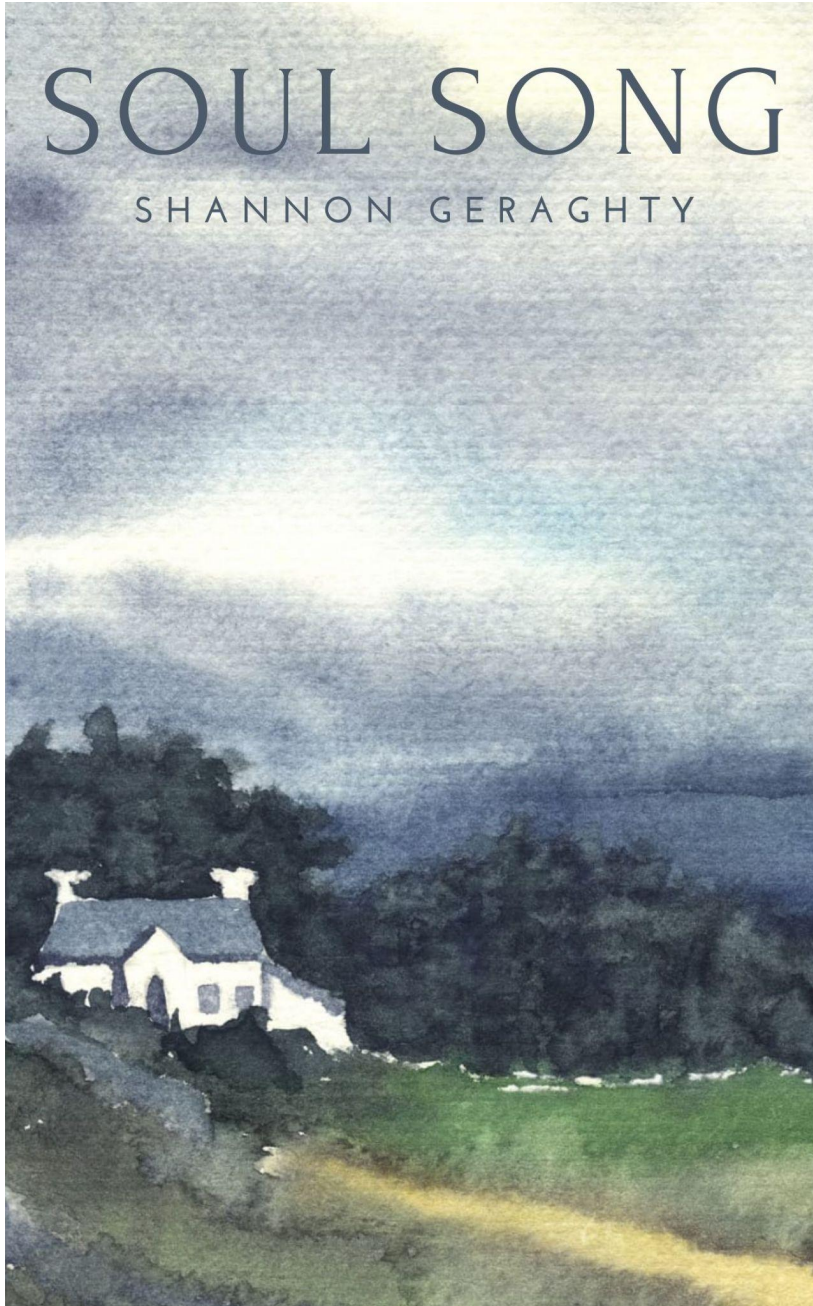
My words held a wavering belief, attempting to sound assured, but knowing he healed all the evidence needed to prove me wrong, in a manilla envelope in front of him. Knowing I had that same evidence, locked up in my attic, living with me for the past twenty something years.

He exited the room moments later and left me there, watching as his neatly ironed uniform brushed past the door, closing it behind him. My state of shock was here to stay, I haven't felt normal since the robbery, and each day got worse. I assumed he left because he didn't want to waste time waiting for me to pick my jaw off the floor, only to answer questions I had no answers to. The back of my legs sat stuck to the cold metal chair, my arms weak and numb. Standing would be foolish, as I could already see my legs giving out from under me. I felt clammy. I knew I wasn't in trouble and I could leave whenever I wanted, but I didn't want to leave. I didn't want to go home, I was finally away from home. I thought of my father. I thought of the conversations we had, my whole life, a lie. Just us two, living in our doll house. I felt like a prop, like his little doll. We were so happy, but far from perfect. We lived just the two, no lies, no secrets, no bad days without the other there. My father never lied to me, or so I believed for most of my life. It bothered me that he was dead. Conveniently unable to explain himself. The next day I awoke to an email of the police report, something I hadn't seen before. I scrolled through the first pages, legal speak and unnecessary information. On the third page under the word report it read: "2437 Bright Circle, home invasion, breaking and entering. 10:44pm, 5/8/17. Three counts of DNA found in the home. Mrs. Fiona Laine, Mr. Erik Laine, and Mrs.

Scarlett George. Female suspect, license plate number 6x7k926, car registered to Mrs. Scarlett George." A last name that looked eerily familiar. Dolly George, written below a baby photo in the attic. Scarlett George, printed on a restraining order. George, scratched into couples ornaments hidden up in boxes. George, my last name? Scarlett George, my mother.

# Soul Song

Shannon Geraghty



“Eoifa,” the voice called out from utter darkness.

“Eeeee-faaaa,” it called again, over enunciating the consonants and vowels in her name, pulling at her with the sing-song tone of her grandmother from the depths of the sea. Eoifa looked down into the waves from high above them, crashing against the stones, the foam building against the smooth surface of rock and the chaos of the waves. Just before she jumped, she remembered.

But Grandmother’s dead. With that recollection, Eoifa woke, her head crashing back against the pillow behind her, the same way it would have against the slippery stones of the sea. Her forehead was dewed with sweat and her nails dug into her palms as if she were still falling into the waves.

It was only a dream. It was over. She picked herself up, pushing back the old, tattered drapes to look out into the yard. The sun was already rising above the gate of the farmhouse, warming the ground with late Spring. She was late, and could hear the animals calling to her, to be set out into the pasture for the day. Eoifa gathered herself, rubbing her eyes, wiping her hair from where it stuck to her sweaty

forehead. She threw a large coat over her dressing gown, a coat her grandmother made before last Autumn, to keep her warm in the winter months to come. She tied her hair up into a large dark knot atop her head, out of her face for her day’s work. She got to work, as she did every day.

Before breakfast, she let out the hens, the two cattle and the herd of sheep. The hens liked to stay between the garden and the farmhouse, where there was shade and sun aplenty, and bugs and worms about to eat. The larger flock of cows and sheep took out to the large pasture west of the housing, to graze the day away in the sun. Mama Cow stopped patiently at the gate, for Eoifa to sit with her pail and stool and milk her swollen udders. Eoifa stomped off to the yard to strain and bottle and store it. Next, she collected the eggs and wandered the garden, checking sprouts and greenery for anything new, any dark marks or plump fruits, ready to pluck. There was always something new, sprouted and grown in Grandmother's garden, and Eoifa had little trouble continuing this trend in her stead.

Once the soil was turned, the fruits and vegetables plucked and anything that needed it thinned, Eoifa took herself in the cottage, began prepping vegetables, jaring leftovers, making jams and bread and butter and cheese. It would take her all day, but it would last her the next month over. Broth made from mushrooms foraged from under the bushes near the garden, rice from the market cooked in and an egg on top. A gift for all her hard work, from herself and from the earth.

As Eoifa ate, she sat at the wide, wooden table in the center of her home, kitchen to her right and bed to her left, pots and pans hanging above, always swaying slightly side to side, as if there was a breeze that couldn't be kept out by the sturdiest of walls, gently blowing through between the quietly chiming metals. Eoifa thumbed through the journal left on the table from the night before, filled with writings by her mother, her grandmother, and some, finally near the end, by herself. Recipes and spells for each herb in the garden, for every phase of the moon and tea in the cupboard. Every other month for as long as she could remember, mother and Grandmother would switch off, disappearing into the night on the night of the new moon, not returning to change out as caregiver until the next new moon. Eoifa always wondered where they ran off to, in the night in their old coats, no bags or snacks, and what they got up to in all that time. One day, her mother returned pale and unable to speak, and the next night Eoifa found Grandmother out on the beach under the moon, tears on her face. Eoifa never saw her mother again.

She turned to an old entry written by her mother, with today's date on it. Eoifa's Birthday Ceremony. For the 18th birthday of the youngest witch of the family, collect these items: Eoifa looked up suddenly.

A sharp ping from nowhere rang through Eoifa's ears. Her senses shut off and she was completely enfolded into the sound; the ringing was joined by others, some high, some low, until a melody began to play, rolling over Eoifa as the room fell away. Eoifa looked down at herself, her clothes were gone, her hands, stretched out in front of her, passed through the light around her like a liquid. The tune grew louder and louder as she touched it, until suddenly the braying of a cow pulled her from the trance.

Eoifa blinked, for a moment not understanding where or what she was. The call from Mama Cow came again and Eoifa rushed to the window. Peeking out the curtain, Eoifa saw the Mama Cow and her baby being approached by a man in cloak and armour - not battle armour, just a chest plate with a monochur across in red, carrying an image of a sun crossed by a sparrow. Another man coming up behind, put a rope around Mama's neck and began to pull. To Eoifa's horror, she heard Mama Cow cry out:

"No! You cannot take her, please! She is my blood, my own, leave her alone!"

Eoifa covered her ears, ice sliding down her spine at the words. Turning around, shadows were coming up behind the curtains in the front of her home, toward the sea. Eoifa had to hide. Now.

She grabbed what was around her, the journal off her table, a small chest holding all the crystals her grandmother had collected. She snipped the top shut, catching the side of her finger in the lid as she scurried for the closet door next to the kitchen counter. She shoved herself inside, tucking away behind the coats of her mother and grandmother left hanging there, untouched since grandma's passing. No more playing dress up, talking about the reasons mum had bought or made this coat or that, the last time she wore it and how beautiful she was. Two coats missing, the two worn by these women she loved, as she sent them off to their resting place at sea. Eoifa had not opened this closet or gone to the sea since, and now, surrounded by the smells and perfumes still clinging to the fabrics, she couldn't tear herself away from the memories. Her finger burned, with a cold-hot sensation and though it was dark, Eoifa knew it was bleeding, red rushing from the wound like flames. She put the cut in her mouth, trying to stop the bleeding.

The taste brought back another, clearer memory, of the spring before, gardening with her grandmother. They had just tilled the ground and Eoifa found a large root in the middle of the field that hadn't been broken by the tiller. She hacked and pulled at it, tearing away at small tendrils hanging off, but unable to break through the root's dense center. While banging at it with her shovel, her finger had been caught in the crossfire, and it seemed the bleeding would never stop. 'Spit won't do it,' her grandma told her as Eoifa licked at the wound, a hurt pup. Grandma had to pack it with yarrow and tie it off to finally calm the blood. Though the aching ceased, Eoifa's tears rushed forth like a well had been tapped in her eyes. Grandma had a remedy for all pains, and started the kettle, floating the different herbs and spooning honey into their mugs, sipping the steaming drinks with two cakes between them. It had been Eoifa's birthday that day, the day as long as the night and the dirt was cold when they pulled it from the earth. Grandma told Eoifa the story of Belladonna - the nightshade; a sturdy woman, deeply rooted, gifting beauty or death, with no purpose or judgement behind the decision, to those who would pluck her fruit or steep her leaves. The owner of the root Eoifa had so violently tried to tear up.

Eoifa tore herself from the memory to the sound of her animals outside, all calling out to her by name. "Eoifa! My Lady, Eoifa! The little one. Little Lady. Last of them, please! Last of the cloak bearers, please!"

Eoifa's breath caught in her throat, hearing the voices of her animals calling to her with such desperation. She tore out of the closet like a wind, blowing open the door, knocking over a chair without touching it as she lept out the back door toward the barn. Then, she remembered why she had been hidden. A rope wrapped around her neck and caught by her momentum, Eoifa's head was pulled back as her legs continued forward, knocking her onto her back, knocking the wind from her.

The guards had nothing of important business with her farm. They had believed the house abandoned, the villagers telling them it had been occupied by generations of witches, who had not been seen for over two months. They had come in the hopes of finding a treasure, and believed they had found better than what they expected: Eoifa. Her skin was clean, her hair a mess of black, like twilight on her head, her eyes two pools of ice and stone. "She's perfect,"

one of the guards said, looking her over as she choked on the ground. They lifted her up, dusted her off, and as Eoifa's senses returned, she started to run, the rope catching again. She was spitting and biting as they bound her hands.

Her ferocity stopped as she saw her cattle being dragged with the same ropes and her sheep chased through the field. "My animals!" she cried. "Please, please I'll go, quietly, if only you leave my animals. If you give me a moment, they will be okay here, please." Their cries had dug deep into her soul, and whatever they feared from these beasts of men, she felt in her own heart. The men talked amongst themselves and decided the trade would be fair so long as there was no more fighting from the girl; one man's hand bled profusely from three fingers after restraining her. They allowed Eoifa only a few minutes, her hands still bound, to clear the farm. She pressed herself against Mama cow in an embrace before propping the gate with a stone to allow them to come and go as they please. She pried the lid from each barrel, pouring the grain and feed for each of the animals across the barnyard. They wouldn't starve without her, she was sure they knew where the river was for clean water. She heard the animals thank her as she left, and found it difficult to look at them directly hearing their words so clearly. She forced herself to say a clear goodbye to them, the words catching in her throat, hot and hurting. "Promise to be good, my dears." She had no idea that would be the last they heard from her.

Passing back through the garden toward the men, Eoifa could see the ocean in the distance, far away, where she had pushed her grandmother, wrapped in her shroud, into the sea. Eoifa's vision was suddenly blocked by a large bush with dark leaves and berries all over. Making sure the guard couldn't see, she slunked over and plucked some of the berries from the nightshade before heading inside to grab the thin chest of stones and books she had hidden in the closet. Placing the berries inside and sealing it, she carried it back to the guards and their carriage. The horse at the front seemed to look at her with pity.

"Where are we going? How long will it be before I return?" The guards looked to each other at Eoifa's question, and she could sense pity in their eyes as well. Her heart sank at the realisation that she was likely to never see her cottage again. She couldn't stop the tears from coming as the carriage began to move. The red around her eyes and swelling of her features only made her more beautiful to the men escorting her away from all she had known, to a world she had never been before. Eoifa realised she had left the cakes on the table. She made them to put out for the spirits, maybe even her grandmother would come, to celebrate her birthday. Eoifa woke as the carriage swayed and slowed.

"Where are we?" She asked, half asleep, rubbing her eyes with her still tied hands.

"We arrive at Master Roland's castle," stated the guard who hadn't spoken since they had laid eyes on her many, many miles ago. Eoifa peered out the slats on the side of the carriage, scratching under the ropes against her wrists, which were beginning to burn as they itched. She gasped when she saw they were traveling along a cliff right above the coast. The waves seemed to chase the cart as they moved along the road.

She had never been so far from home. Town, the woods, and the cottage, that was all she had known. The few times Eoifa had gone to town was only ever to buy ingredients for bread, check for new fabrics in the market, rice, things that couldn't be grown in their garden. It was a day's walk from the cottage, and a day's walk home. Eoifa was always the one to go after mother passed, the people of the village always kept their distance from "the witches in the woods". One day, when Eoifa had travelled since before the sun rose to spend more time in the

market looking for everything they would need for the coming months. One of the salesmen of fabric recognised her and that she wasn't with her usual older companion. Eoifa found herself unable to give him the news, and simply told him she was sick in bed. He told her to give her his wishes, and slyly handed her a handkerchief with the fabrics she bought (hoping no other townsfolk would see him committing a kindness to the woodland witches) that held the emblem of their lord: a blue bow and arrow with a raven across the front.

The abrupt halt threw Eoifa from her memory, her bound hands doing nothing to catch her fall, she flew into the chest of the guard in front of her, and seeing her own reflection in his chestplate, she let out a loud gasp, and scurried back. Staring back at her from the warped silver was a cold, bloated face, with pale, dead eyes. In a blink, it was gone, but burned into Eoifa's eyelids, a haunting prediction, she didn't know of what. The guards seemed to ignore this horrific affair, lifting Eoifa from the carriage by her arms, another guard carrying the small chest she brought with her. Walking through the gate of a castle was something Eoifa had never imagined doing; she found herself in awe of the stone pillars and flags. The entrance led to a long chamber, a throne room, with pews leading up the room and a slender man standing in front of two empty chairs at the end of the long hall, facing the thrones.

He turned, his cape twirling behind him to reveal a bearded face and ridiculous smile. "Gentleman! What treasures have you brought back from your jou-," His words cut short, his eyes locked onto Eoifa. She felt his eyes moving across her features, from her cold eyes, plump cheeks to her strong jaw and full, small mouth. His eyes lingered there as they approached one another. "You've found her."

"Yes, my lord. We believed this would fit what you'd spoken of all those nights ago"

"Well of course, you've hit the nail right on the head. Beautiful. The hair, the eyes," Roland stated and with a slippery tone he added, "have we seen what's under the coat yet?"

The guard stuttered. "Well, no, sir we thought you would want more-"

"A Bride!" Roland interrupted, ecstatic at the new arrival of his living, breathing bounty.

Eoifa spat at his excitement. Roland pulled away, a surprised look in his eye, before a toxic smile crept across his lips. He pulled from his hip a small dagger and grabbed Eoifa by her burning wrist. She called out and pulled against his grasp, but he pulled her to him and ripped the dagger against the rope still around her neck, then the binding on her wrists.

Eoifa was surprised at this choice, Roland could see it in her eyes. "No wife of mine will live bound by anything, but our hearts intertwined." Poetry? Eoifa was surprised again, if not a little disgusted.

Eoifa recognised the symbol on the flags from town. The red sparrow in the sun. She pointed to it. "What's this?"

"This, my dear, is a symbol of the family. A huge power led by the light of God," his voice echoed through the chamber they stood in, and although they weren't alone, Eoifa felt they were everytime Roland ran his eyes across her. She shuddered under his vision, seeing a hunger in his eyes she had yet to experience from anyone.

Roland could sense her fear. He straightened, frowning at her. Who was she to make him feel less than desirable? He turned harshly, his coat twirling behind him as he turned, blowing Eoifa's hair to one side with its gust.

Eoifa was led to her own chamber by Roland and introduced to her chambermaid, Celine. Celine was quiet, with her hair hidden under a bonnet and a white apron across her front. She curtsied deeply when Eoifa entered the room. Eoifa tilted her head at this, and when their eyes met, Celine quickly looked down to the floor. Roland left the room and requested Celine assist Eoifa in cleaning up for dinner.

Once he had left, Celine stepped closer to Eoifa. "Hello," she whispered. "It's a pleasure to meet you." Eoifa found it hard to keep her eyes in one place. Her breathing quickened, the room seemed to be spinning. Celine searched around the room, eyes wide, hands groping at the air before she found the cups and pitcher on the nightstand. She poured Eoifa a glass of water and sat her on the bed.

"Please, my lady, drink. Small sips." She handed Eoifa a small cup of water and placed her hand on her back as she sipped. Eoifa couldn't remember the last time someone had helped her like this. She took the time to look Celine over once again; she was young, but not as young as herself, her eyes and mouth were edged with lines and her eyes a deep brown. Eoifa felt unsteady, but safe under Celine's gaze.

Eoifa found it difficult to get ready, being washed by Celine seemed all at once familiar and foreign, with none of the normal additions from home.

"My grandmother always added chamomile to my baths," Eoifa shared, running her hands through the water of the bath. Something about Celine felt trust-worthy, even with her awkward demeanor.

Celine was quiet for a while, before stating, "I will have to get my lady some to add to the room. Roses may be a nice addition as well." Eoifa smiled thoughtfully.

They exited the bath and Eoifa threw herself onto the bed - a down mattress with a heavy blanket on top. Eoifa found herself laughing, rolling around on the huge bed. Celine covered her with a sheet while she picked out her evening gown for her. Dressing Eoifa was difficult, but eventually Celine changed the gown to something without a corset. A light blue gown that fell from her shoulders, with a dark ribbon wrapped under her breasts. Looking in the glass, Eoifa was happy to find herself in the reflection; and she had never felt so beautiful. Her dark hair fell to her shoulders, her cheeks were flushed from the warmth of the bath.

"Beautiful," Celine commented, watching Eoifa admire herself through the mirror.

Eoifa winced. "Beautiful... That's what he called me."

"Well, he's not wrong my dear," Celine forced a smile, then sighed. "I'm sorry, I never thought... I never thought he ever meant to truly find himself a bride this way. But he's rich! He owns the whole village, this castle. Your life will be a dream."

Eoifa's eyes burned, her heart racing. "These riches-" her voice broke into sobs. "These riches are meaningless. My world is far away from here, by the woods, and my animals. I don't



want these - these Things." Celine wrapped her hands around Eoifa's and smiled at her, though her eyes stayed sad.

Suddenly, the ringing began again. Eoifa looked at her hands and she felt her other senses leaving her again, and the room fell away. Eoifa could not hear Celine call out to her as she was wrapped again in the liquid sound. This time, there were words. Words Eoifa tried to catch and hold onto, but they were in a language Eoifa didn't know, something old and deep. Eoifa felt like she was floating and put her hands out to steady herself. Her hands touching the cool table in front of her brought her back to her body, just as Celine put a damp towel against her forehead. The coolness brought Eoifa back to her senses.

Dinner was uncomfortable. Eoifa hadn't even finished her meal at home before being brought here. By now, the sun was setting and her stomach rumbled at the smells of the dining hall. The food was all meat, something Eoifa's family never ate. She recoiled at the sight of the piles of meat carved off the bone, steaming on the table, but her body told her she needed to eat. There were potatoes and grains that she shoveled onto her own plate, while the servants poured her wine and water. She found herself eating and drinking quickly, and soon her face was flushed from wine and a full belly.

"Please my darling, try this," Roland said, his hand outstretched with a morsel of light meat.

Eoifa grimaced, "What... was it?" "My dear, just eat. Look at you, your mouth is watering." He pushed his fingers against Eoifa's lips, the meat hot and salty on her tongue. Eoifa wanted with her whole being to scratch and claw him away from her, to spit fire from her very heart, but instead found herself unable to find her fire. Her body gave way to hunger as she swallowed what she would later find to be pork. She was repulsed more by Rolands smile, beaming at his achievement of forcing himself upon her.

"See," he told her, "It's good." The guilt of enjoying the taste was worse than anything. Eoifa tried to sleep, but felt Roland's hands on her shoulders from dinner. Her skin felt clammy, cold, under the heavy blanket. Her hair tangled around her as she slept. Her heart seemed unable to find its rhythm.

Her days and nights went like that for a while. Celine by her side, dinner with Roland. Otherwise, she was free to roam the castle as she pleased, but never to leave the confines of its high, stone walls. Eoifa's bare feet felt colder on the stone than any earth had ever felt.

"My lady, please, wear these shoes. You'll catch your death of cold."

Eoifa snorted. "Not in all my years have I kept my feet from the ground. Even these stones are more earth than any bindings across my feet." Her voice with it's deep contralto held strong, even in the cold of the castle. Socks, maybe Eoifa would take, but a real shoe? Her stubbornness ran deep.

Through the castle, Eoifa found hidden treasures. A crow's feather, an acorn, rain fell in through the windows on the east side of the castle early mornings. Eoifa snuck them back to her room and added them to her box of treasures from home. Next to the rough stones and bones passed from Grandma to her, the gifts from this land mixed in well. She traced the edges of these items as she thumbed her way through Grandma's grimoire, and for just a moment, she

felt the same peace as if she were home, in her cottage, the mysterious breeze blowing through the pots above the table. Eoifa remembered her birthday, months ago, the day she came to this castle, the page she had found in her mother's handwriting. She rapidly flipped through the pages until she found it. Eoifa's Birthday Ceremony. For the 18th birthday of the youngest witch of the family, collect these items: the berries of the belladonna, the stones of a crossroad, the feather of a crow, and moonwater.

Eoifa was perturbed to find the rest of the pages written in strange runes, in a language she had never seen before. Was this a secret from her? Her eighteenth birthday had always been heavily guarded secret, with promised ritual and power. Eoifa had never heard her mother speak any ancient language, perhaps Grandma sometimes, when she meant to swear or cast a spell, but never as fluently as this passage. She remembered once, her grandmother muttering about Eoifa's mother passing too soon, that one running the ritual would be too difficult, that she would need to be sure to survive long enough to share wisdom from the both of them. When Eoifa asked if she could help instead, Grandma became very tight lipped, promising that if she were to reveal it before it was time, Eoifa would feel a torment in her soul she couldn't comprehend.

Somehow, she thought this conversation and this language must go hand in hand. That if she could decipher this, she would learn this secret, and find a way out of here with whatever power she could gain.

The song? Eoifa wondered, noting that the lines were written rhythmically down the page. She tried with all her might to remember those foreign sounds that haunted her at night, but couldn't put the sounds together enough to make sense of it. She was, however, excited by the possible development.

Each day, the same, while Eoifa searched the castle for these items. I have the berries, the feather. She started to feel unsure on her feet, dragging them across the stone, some days tripping on her own feet. The rain no longer felt cleansing against her skin, feeling somehow there was a barrier between herself and the wind coming in through the window. Eoifa's condition seemed to be the only thing that changed in her life now. All I need are the stones and moonwater. Celine would go to Roland's men, ask for extra food, lots of hot water for baths, to care for Eoifa. Her eyes were paling, her skin was clammy and ashen in colour. She was depressed, and felt her connection to the earth slipping away from her. I can make the water, but however will I collect the stones?

One day, Roland made it his own goal to cheer her. He returned from an outing with a small box. He placed it on the table in Eoifa's room and told her to open it. "We are to be married tomorrow, and I thought you may like a wedding gift."

Eoifa felt as if her hands were moving without her mind, everything had rough edges. Under the lid were glittering gems, polished and cut. Emeralds, rubies and a large, blue sapphire in the center. Eoifa felt a tinge of excitement as she ran her hand across the smooth gemstones, and then the rotting guilt she felt each time she enjoyed anything in this horrid place.

Roland smiled with anticipation, "This one matched your eyes I thought." He was lying. Eoifa's eyes had grown paler and more steely each day she stayed within the grey walls. But she smiled and lifted the sapphire from the center. She turned it in her hand, the sides reflecting all

the light in the room brilliantly. Suddenly Eoifa screamed, dropping the stone to the ground as she continued to scream. Roland jumped back, reaching out to try to catch Eoifa as she tried to stand from her chair, failing. He couldn't control his temper, "You idiot girl. The man only meets at the crossroad every other month. And who knows if he will have anything to replace such a stone!" His booming voice tore through the room. Eoifa, still crumpled in a heap on the floor, began to sob uncontrollably. Celine, having heard the commotion, came to protect her lady, knowing too well the power of Roland's temper.

"Please my lord, allow me to clean this, to help her. She's unwell, you can see with your own eyes." Roland sighed with anger, stormed from the room, his cape mimicking his mood as it had that first night.

When Celine begged to know what had happened, Eoifa couldn't find her words. In the sides of the stone, she had seen a half eaten, bloated face, a missing eye and hair floating all around her staring right back at her from where her reflection should have been. The shattered sapphire littered the floor like drops of blood.

There was nothing they could do to console her after that. Eoifa lay in bed, shivering, sweating and cold. The song would come again, each time for longer than the last, the words sharper than before, but unable to make sense of them, Eoifa would just wail along with the siren song. Celine stayed by her side each day and slept in the room with her every night, hopping up everytime the screaming started, placing a cool rag against Eoifa's forehead and bundling her up, hoping beyond hope to recreate that moment on the first day, when she woke her from her trance. One night, when the moon was full, Celine noticed a box under the bed - the chest Eoifa had brought with her from home had gone unopened for weeks and weeks. Celine pulled it out from under the bed with a scrape and popped open the lid. She removed some of the gems, the journal and a sealed envelope. Underneath layers of papers and plants, Celine felt something soft and pulled out a long coat from the chest. The envelope had Eoifa's name written on it, and a message "Do NOT Open Until 18th Birthday". Celine told Eoifa what she had found, not expecting a response. She opened the envelope to read it aloud to her and found birthday wishes for Eoifa's eighteenth birthday, from her mother and grandmother. Celine's eyes welled with tears as she read the well wishes and importance placed on this celebration, knowing that neither of them were there with her.

"I'll leave it for when you wake, my lady," Celine said, placing the letter on the nightstand and wrapping Eoifa in the coat she had found.

Eoifa found herself back in her room, in this castle, the moonlight across her face. She could see the letter Celine had left on the nightstand and shakily she lifted it from the table. Reading the mixture of her mother and grandmother's writing, wishing her love, not from the thoroughly studied journal, something new, so fresh, brought tears to her eyes. The end, however, like a riddle from Grandmother said, "My time has come too soon my love, I am called away. I have been here longer than any, and without your mother to send me away, my body can't last. You, the pages, the coat, trust your heart and collect the treasures. You will know what to do."

If only she were home, like this letter thought she would be, to decipher this, on her birthday, on that horrible last die. Like her grandmother, she felt her body wasting away. She looked right to see the bath under the window steaming. She pulled her limp body from the bed, ripping herself free of her nightgown, finding the coat Celine had wrapped her in as

she stood. It smelled like home, like her family. Her body shook with uncontrollable sobs as she wrapped herself in it like a hug; she climbed into the tub under the moon, still in her coat. Her treasures were laid out on the table next to her, the feather, her stones, and the awful polished rock Roland had left her. Without knowing why, Eoifa dropped each of these items into the bath, hugging the coat tight, and felt the water soothing her freezing bones.

Eoifa let out a loud gasp as the song started again, the loud ringing started as usual, but as the words began, for the first time, Eoifa understood the words.

*Long, held out words, carried by the voices of women,  
Come away to find your soul  
Come away from lands too far  
Stretched across the earth away  
Across the sea to hearts that yearn  
For you to come, home you must return*

The words were haunting and garbled, still making little sense to Eoifa, but to hear them and understand the words for the first time brought tears to her eyes. Eoifa began sobbing and, opening her eyes, realised she was no longer in the bath, but walking. Still in her nightgown, wrapped in only the beautiful coat she had never seen before, it was like she was watching herself walk down the hall of the castle, to a door she had never opened. Water was dripping from her and her clothes, coating the stone beneath her as she raced down the hall. Celine was behind her, trying to direct her back to her room, but Eoifa could barely control her own limbs. The voices grew louder as she opened the door and walked out onto a balcony where Roland stood, contemplative staring over the horizon under the full moon, the wind blowing wildly and the moon shining brightly on Eoifa's skin. She flashed in and out of consciousness as the song continued:

*The selkie call from homes in the depths  
To the daughter they had to neglect  
We pray to call her home one day  
When she's of age and called away  
Before the coat is trapped by greed  
Come to the depths of selkie freed*

Eoifa felt herself come back into her body. She was standing on the stone wall edging the balcony, staring down to the waves that encompassed the south side of the castle. Roland was yelling at the top of his lungs over the wind, trying to get the story of what was happening from helpless Celine. He raced over to Eoifa on the wall and grabbed her hand. He grimaced at the touch of her skin, slippery and cold under his grip.

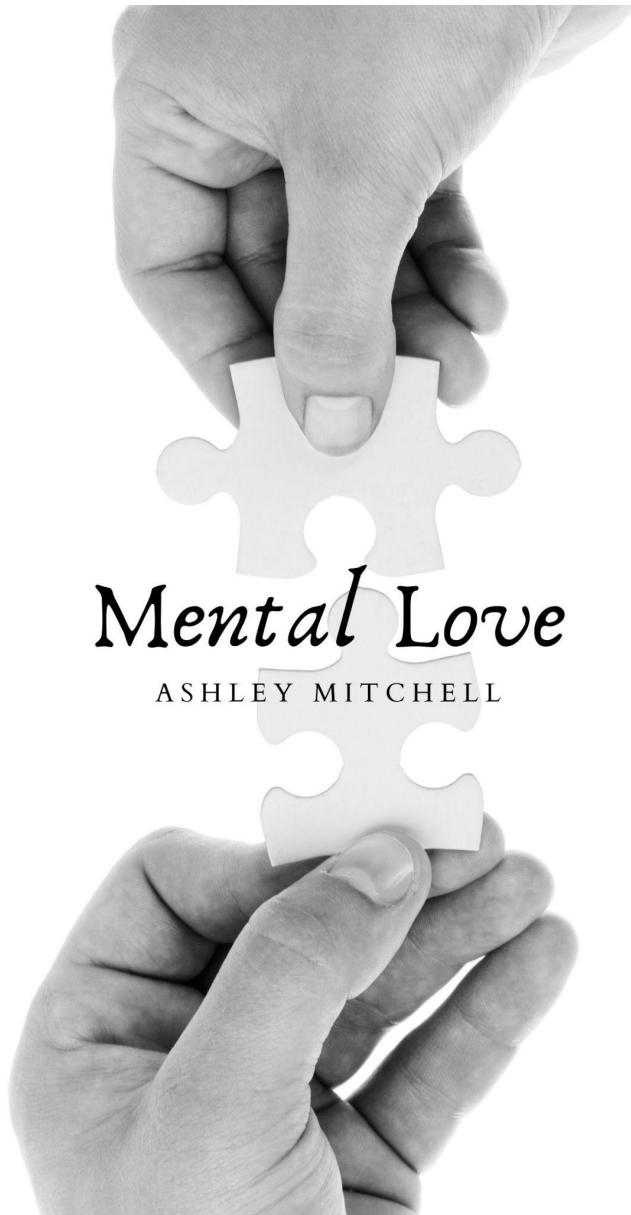
"Get down this instant. You are here to stay, get down." He pulled hard on her hand, Eoifa watched from outside her body as she pushed against his grip with all her might, sending him toppling back, the whole world going silent as his grip slipped from her skin and his head collided against the stone wall behind him. He stopped all movement. Eoifa felt it begin to rain.

She heard Celine scream as she leaned toward the dark, plunging down into the starless reflection of the sky.

In the depths, Eoifa turned and spun, seafoam rushing past her as she fell deeper. The song grew quiet, the coat wrapped around her like a skin, letting out a brilliant light. She opened her eyes to find herself surrounded by a pod of seals. The voices she had heard, her mother, her grandmother, women from her clan she had never been graced to meet, had sung to her, calling her to the sea. She saw it in their eyes, the souls of her - the selkie women had called her to them when the time came. The ceremony, the sea calling to her that day, what could have been a year ago. In her fever, Eoifa had completed the spell, and finally was called home. Her coat wrapped around her became her skin. She could feel herself, in the sleek body of a seal, round blue eyes shining in the clear ocean, feeling more like herself than ever before. Far away, across the lands from her cottage, far from her farm, Eoifa was finally home.

# Mental Love

Ashley Mitchell



The ambulance ride gave me a lot to think about. It actually made me feel better in a way. That's the thing about hospitals, they make me feel safe and secure. This wouldn't be my first time being admitted into a mental hospital. It's been a long eighteen years of this bullshit. I struggle with my mental health and use self-harm as one of my only coping mechanisms. Unhealthy, I know, that's why I'm still alive... I have a lot to learn and figure out about myself and this cruel world. I think this is the last straw... at least I hope it is. I'm done with Gabe's bullshit, I'm a free woman now. The thing about mental hospitals is I'm completely free. Free from Gabe, free from my parents, free from unhealthy habits, free from life responsibilities, just free.

I wake up the next morning and look around my sad, tiny hospital room. I look down at my wrists and notice I've bled through my bandages. I start to feel a little woozy but as soon as I notice a nurse walks in to change my dressings. I've met this nurse before. She's young, pretty, and has this bit of innocence in her eyes. She notices I'm staring at her and smiles. She then walks me into the

main room. There's around nine other patients each doing their own thing. That's another great thing about mental hospitals, everybody only cares about themselves and their own journey, nobody else's. I sit down at an empty table and pick up a sheet of paper and a marker. I love art. Art is something that I have a strong passion for, I feel so connected to everything I create through art. I see beauty in everything including the evil and the painful. I wish the world was more like me.

I wish the world was more like me. A world free of hate, violence, crime... what a beautiful world to believe in. I want to be the change everyone wishes to see in our world. A change much so needed. How am I, an eighteen year old mental case, supposed to make such an impact in this big, blue world? Baby steps... if I could just impact one person my job will be complete.

I look down at my drawing of what looks to be a happy couple holding hands with butterflies surrounding them. It's beautiful. I so much wished for that special connection with someone where literally nothing could break it. I so much wished for love. It's not like I've never been in love before. I was deeply in love with my ex-boyfriend Gabriel.

In the beginning things with Gabe were perfect, it was almost too good to be true.

I was fifteen and he was eighteen. He made me feel safe and secure, he made me feel alive. Most importantly I was happy. As the months went by I started to lose control of my life and Gabe was now in control. I was losing friends, breaking relationships with my parents and family, and most importantly I was losing myself. I also started seeing Gabe's true colors as time went on and I continued giving in to his bullshit.

I've also seen love all throughout my life. My parents, well they're perfect. They always have shown me what love is and supposed to look like, at least the healthy type. Too bad I never took notes.

Day two. Boring. Just the same old regular routine being at the mental hospital. Wake up to a nurse taking your blood. Then breakfast which all the food in the cafeteria is disgusting - ten out of ten would not recommend. After that group therapy - interesting because that's pretty much my entertainment for the day. Then we go into individual therapy which I personally hate the most. Then in between lunch and dinner I spend the day drawing. After dinner, take pills and hit the hay.

Day three of being in this hellhole. Day three out of fourteen... ugh. After breakfast I sit down alone at another empty table and think about what to draw next. Then there he is. Walking right into the room, my new prettiest problem. He looked to be around my age, tall, skinny, droopy eyes, jet black hair, absolutely perfect. He walks over to my table and sits down. I begin drawing, trying very hard not to make eye contact with him.

"Beautiful," he says, pointing at my drawing of butterflies, staring deep into my eyes.

"Thank you," I say, awkwardly.

"Like you," he says, not breaking his stare. I let out a giggle and thanked him shyly. This definitely is not what I'm used to.

"Thanks," I say.

I continue working on my drawing of butterflies. I like drawing butterflies because they give me hope. Butterflies represent beauty and change, and I hope this doesn't sound weird but I look up to butterflies in a way. I have a few butterfly tattoos on my left shoulder - a sign for myself that growth is painful, change is painful, but nothing is more painful than being stuck where you don't belong.

I noticed Edgar had a lot of tattoos on his body as well. Dark tattoos - skulls and what not. Not just tattoos but also scars. Edgar intrigues me and I like it. I want to know everything about him.

I focus back on Edgar and I notice how much pain is inside of him. I see it in his eyes, they're dark and dead. It doesn't scare me. With pain comes beauty.

"Why butterflies?" asks Edgar looking down at my paper which is filled with butterfly doodles. The thing about butterflies is that they are full of so much love, happiness, and growth. I respond to him with a quote I live by.

"Perhaps the butterfly is proof that you can go through a great deal of darkness yet become something beautiful." He smiles at me, I like his smile.

"I like that," he replies.

"What's your name?" I ask him, looking down at my socks.

"I'm Edgar," he replies, directing my chin with his finger to look directly at him.

We make eye contact, and for the first time in a very long time, I feel something. "And yours?" he asks.

"Anna," I reply, butterflies fill my tummy.

"Nice to meet you Anna. You seem cool," he says with a smirk.

"You too," I reply.

We spend most of day four and day five together. I'm learning so much about him and he's learning so much about me.

Day six. I feel butterflies, something I haven't felt in years. Edgar is making this mental hospital stay bearable. I'm really enjoying talking to him and he's really enjoying talking to me. There's definitely a connection. We've been talking to each other at every chance we get, we sit with each other at meals, group therapy, free time, we even made each other friendship bracelets. I feel as if I'm the light at the end of his dark tunnel, and he is mine. We both give each other happiness, a feeling not much felt by both of us.

That night after dinner Edgar and I got into a deep conversation.

"Why're you here?" asks Edgar. I pause. This is a conversation I've been dreading since the moment I met him.

"It's going to scare you," I say not wanting to open up in fear of abandonment.

"Nothing is ever going to scare me Anna, I love you," he says, instantly putting his hand to his mouth.

I blank out. I haven't heard those three words in a very long time. "Wha-", I'm interrupt.



"I love you Anna," Edgar says gazing into my golden green eyes. I'm shocked. This isn't the type of love I was searching for but it's needed love. We are each other's rock.

"I love you too." I say it back, for the first time ever feeling comfortable staring into his eyes.

"I'll go first," he says taking a deep breath.

"I'm an addict - I love coke. I overdosed one night after taking a little too much. I was pushed to my limit from seeing my dad with another woman. My mom and I used to be homeless until I was five years old. My mom was seventeen when she had me - we had nothing. She married her sugar daddy who is now my dad. I know it sounds crazy but she did it for me. She did it to ensure me a good future which I threw away when I dropped out of highschool. Nobody cares about me anymore." I grab his hand.

"I care about you. Thanks for sharing that with me. That must've been really hard," I tell him, not letting go of his hand.

"Your turn," Edgar says.

"My ex-boyfriend, Gabe. He's not a good guy. I dated him from the age of fifteen to recently when we ended things. Our relationship was seriously toxic. He was three years older than me, bigger than me, and abused me physically and mentally. He got me pregnant by accident right around my eighteenth birthday. When I made the decision to keep the baby, he beat me, causing me to have a miscarriage. That was the final straw, restraining orders were filed and a whole case was made to ensure my safety. It'all just became too much for me and I started cutting again." I look down at my feet.

"None of this is your fault Anna." Edgar says, squeezing my hand.

"I love you." I say.

"I love you too," he says back.

After opening up to each other I lay down in his arms and he holds me. I feel safe. I feel free. A nurse called us to go to bed and that was the last time I ever saw my Edgar.

Day seven. The day my heart was broken again. I woke up that morning and went to look for Edgar. I'm glowing, so happy. I search every room with a smile on my face. A smile that began to slowly fade. I come to realize he's nowhere to be found. Edgar left.

No goodbye, no warning, no nothing. I'm heartbroken. There truly was a connection between us. Maybe it was the right person at the wrong time. Maybe it was truly two mental patients thinking they know what love is. I don't know. I asked the nurse that helped me on my first day in treatment. "Do you know where Edgar is?" My heart drops.

"He never told you?" she asks me with those same innocent eyes from the first day.

"Told me what?" I ask, panicking.

"I'm sorry honey but Edgar was taken out of treatment by his father," she says with a frown.

"His father?" I walk away before she can even answer. I lost him.

The next day I left the hospital. My treatment was done. The only thing I was missing was Edgar but life does go on. Life does go on. After getting released from the hospital I spent a lot more time on myself. I took my art more seriously and eventually applied to an art school. I even got in! Art is the number one thing that keeps me going and happy. Art never leaves my side. After getting into art school I opened my own gallery. Life really does go on.

My art has a very love related theme. Besides drawing happy couples or even sometimes Edgar (who my husband doesn't know about). Sometimes butterflies are forever my favorite. I never really knew what happened to Edgar. I was too scared to do any research on what happened because I was left hurt beyond repair. I focused on bettering myself and my art. I ended up getting married. We met at art school. We get each other, we're happy but all these years go by and I still wonder what life would be like with Edgar. Where would I be? Who would I be?

Fifteen years later. I'm with my husband and two daughters. I'm happy here. I have a loving family. I built this amazing life for myself. I drop a few coins into a beggars bucket. We lock eyes. All of those feelings from years and years before come back - butterflies. There he is, Edgar, he's homeless. I keep walking, only looking back once to see Edgar still gazing at me. I spent the entire rest of the day thinking about him. Someone who I haven't thought about for a while.

Later that night after putting the kids to bed, I tell my husband I'm going to run to the store to grab some tampons. What I'm really doing is going to run to Edgar. I find him, sitting against an old brick building.

"Edgar?" I call out his name a little scared to be standing in a dark alleyway at ten at night.

Edgar looks up at me. "Go home Anna. Go home to everything I could never give you." he snarls.

"No," I say, surprised with the amount of guts I have to be doing this. "I have a question I need answered," I say.

"If you want to know why I left the hospital that day well it wasn't my choice. That son of a gun took me out and put my mom and I back on the streets. Just go home Anna," he says in pain.

"Edgar I-" I begin to speak and he interrupts me.

"That day I left the hospital was the day my life ended," he interrupts, taking a deep breath.

"I deserve to know why," I say.

"He left us. He left my mom while I was in treatment and since he was the one paying for it he signed to discharge me from care. My mom and I were back on the streets and have been on the streets ever since that day," he says.

Edgar was still the same man I remembered. I just had to look deep. "Let me help you." I say sitting down next to him.

"Anna, please. You have a husband and kids now. Go home," he says not giving in.

I spent the next two hours of my night with him trying to make him feel that connection we felt so many years back. He wouldn't budge.

"I'm going to go Edgar. Is there anything you want to say to me before I leave?" Hoping he will say at least one word.

"Take care of yourself Anna," he says, turning his back towards me.

I get up and give him a kiss on his head.

"You too," I say, a tear falling down my cheek. It was a long walk back home.

A few months go by and I randomly get a bouquet of flowers at my doorstep with a note attached: "Perhaps the butterfly is proof that you can go through a great deal of darkness yet become something beautiful." He was the only person I ever said this quote too. I go back. I'm not giving up on him again.

I find him at the same spot. "Edgar?" I call out his name. "Anna?" He calls back out.

"Edgar tell me why you never came looking for me all these years?" I ask him. There's silence. "Tell me," I demand.

"Because look at me Anna. I'm a mess. I'm a loser," he replies.

"All these years went by and I still wonder from time to time what life would be like with you. Where would I be? Who would I be?" I begin to go on and on.

"I wonder the same," he says looking into my eyes.

His eyes are so beautiful but with so much beauty comes pain. Back in art school I learned about this one quote that in this moment reminds me so much of it: "... Beauty is pain but beauty wouldn't have to be so painful, if we cared more about what's on the inside, rather than what's on the outside..." I'm going to help him. "I'm not leaving you like you left me." I say surprised by my own words. There's more silence.

"Tell me about him," he says.

"Tell you about who?" I ask, confused.

"Your Husband," he says.

"His name is Bryan, we met at art school. We get each other, we're happy but all these years go by and it's still you," I say, looking him straight in the eyes.

"Bryan," he says.

"Edgar." I say. "I never stopped loving you..." I continue but pause thinking about Bryan. I also love Bryan. "It's always going to be you. I'll do whatever for you, for us."

"What about your daughters?" he asks.

"Hunter and Layla." I start.

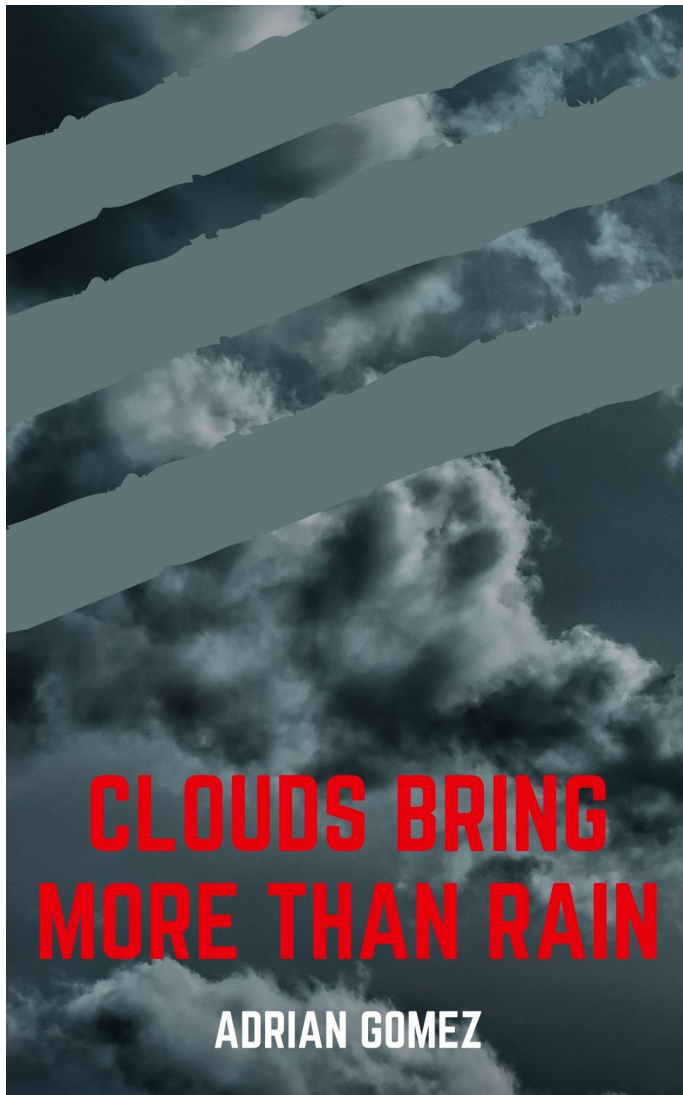
"Let's start a secret life. You and me. I'll still have my family and you. I'll fund your life with me," I say.

He grabs my hand.

It's been a year since then. I still live happily with my husband and two daughters but I spend my time "working" with Edgar. I bought him a tiny apartment where he lives comfortably. I got him a job as a janitor at my art firm. It's always going to be him. Call me crazy or even call it mental love. Mental love.

# Clouds Bring More Than Rain

Adrian Gomez



The bustle of the city during rush hour roared through the apartment sending honks and yells to creep into his dreams. He laid still in his sleep. It was only in these unique moments that he would find himself at peace, although it would never be admitted. "LOOK OVEEER YOUR SHOULDER music," his ears twitched as his eyes popped open toward his apartment window. He got off the couch quicker than the music had woken him up as he insisted on seeing who was responsible for disturbing his afternoon snooze.

"I hate these old heads with their loud ass motorcycle speakers!" he said disgruntledly as he continued to scan the streets below his apartment. His mood did not lighten when his eyes rose to find dark clouds covering the orange glow of the sunset. Even into adulthood he could not find a remedy to be able to soothe him through the gloomy days for which he longed to sleep through. It was days like these where he could not escape the memories of his Aunt's house. The days when the sun did not come to shed its light were those which he hated most of all.

Still gazing out toward the city he reflected on the days in his elementary years when his home became a temple after dark clouds appeared outside and he was made to clean every inch of their one room home in silence. He also recalled the times when he was not allowed to leave the house, he could still hear his aunt's voice, "You're not going outside you'll get sick!" His aunt and her home always found a way to be the subject of his passing thoughts and this was especially the case during the rain when he could vividly remember every inch of the home. The thick shag carpet that sat under the light brown wooden coffee table in the living room. "*Took, like, thirty minutes to vacuum*", he thought. The cold white tile that marked the beginning of the kitchen. "*She made me scrub every inch of that floor 'til that tile cracked*". The ceiling lights that gave each room a yellow tint while giving off the soft buzz of electricity. But upon this memory he did not recall how long it took to dust the lights nor how much he hated the noise they made only the smell of butane that crept into his sinus as he stared at the light in the hallway.

He watched stop lights change colors on the visible four blocks that led to his apartment complex as he continued to reminisce about that butane smell. During his early teenage years,

he would grow more and more curious of his aunt's rainy-day rules and often took the broom to inspect further. He would sweep down the narrow hallway, past the ceiling light, following the funny smell up to his aunt's room where his curiosity would only increase. It would be a couple of years before his curiosity would finally win him over and he would gain the courage to take a peek into what his Aunt did on these rainy days which she held so dear. He remembered he startled himself as the door creaked when he opened it but was relieved to see his Aunt laying still on the bed. Relief was replaced with another emotion that placed a knot in his stomach as he inched toward his Aunt who, upon closer examination, looked eerily still. This would be the first time he would see that metallic purple hand-held torch, along with her little black box, and the real reason why he was not to leave his aunt's home during these days.

The memories that came back to him on days like these proved to be darker than the clouds suspended in the sky when he left the view of the window once the next recollection of his Aunt came to mind. The recollection of his pain from the past continued to follow him as every grey sky reminded him of the days where nobody could hear what went on inside his aunt's locked home, only the patter of rain could be heard.

The commotion of the rush hour traffic seemed to die down as he made his way back to the couch. His mind, now more congested than the streets upon which he was gazing, made him lie awake uncomfortably wishing the amount of clouds would subside. He forced his eyes shut such that you could see his prominent crow's feet wrinkles on the sides of his face as he focused on happy thoughts still hoping he would wake up feeling better. Soon the muscles on his face would relax, his eyes would become still, and he would again find himself in peace as consciousness left his body and he was no longer burdened with the traffic of his thoughts nor the vastness of the overcast above. Only his light snores and the movement of the hands on the clock could be heard while his imagination ran amok on that couch.

This time when his eyes peered open all he saw was the darkness of the night. He was well rested and had escaped the maladies that came with pending rain. He sat up slowly and realized just how dark it was after he followed the sounds of the second-hand tick and struggled to make out the number. The creaks of the floor boards could be heard as he made his way closer to the clock which read 12:16, he thought, "*Damn, I gotta get something to eat, I'm hungry as fuck.*" His stomach made noises as he carefully chose the right pair of shoes that would match his raincoat so he could make his way toward his usual spot for a drink and something to eat. After securing his keys, wallet, and phone he made his way out the door, down the couple flights of stairs leading to his apartment, and out into the street. The wind surprised him and sent chills down his back as he could now see his breath blow away in front of him. On his way toward the Traintrack Tavern he could feel a soft mist brush the front of his face when he looked up and realized the moon was nowhere to be seen and the clouds remained. He could not help but again think back to his aunt's words, "You're not going outside you'll get sick!"

Her memories vanished with each step as he watched his 2015 Chicago edition Jordan 1s wisp through the crisp evening air. He could not help the smirk that crept across his cheek as he continued to stare admiringly at his sneakers thinking about the now shot up resale price. He was unsure about anyone spending over a thousand dollars on a pair of shoes but he was glad he had taken care of him over the years. Before he knew it, he could see the flickering of the Traintrack neon sign in the distance and his hunger fled in place of his thirst for a glass of gin on the rocks. His step quickened as more moisture blew into his face until finally he was greeted by the bouncer who did not even bother to search him nor ask for his ID.

Once inside, he made his way toward his regular spot when he noticed the empty bar area. He thought to himself, "Looking a little light today for a Friday." His stomach spoke out again but his mind remained on that clear liquid being poured over the cold ice cubes as his eyes scanned the room for the waitress. He saw her taking an unfamiliar man's order which must have been big on account of her exceptional customer service which seemed a bit foreign to him. Nonetheless he waited patiently until she approached him but as he was licking his lips to request his drink, he heard a voice call out from behind him, "Hey whatever that guy wants it's on me!" He immediately whipped his neck around to find the unfamiliar man giving a thumbs up as he sucked back the liquid of the fourth out of six glasses laid out in front of him.

He turned back to the waitress and said, "I'll take a double gin and tonic, please" with a smile.

He refocused his attention back to the man and saw another hand gesture motioning him toward a larger booth that the man was sitting at. He grabbed his coat and accepted the man's invitation to which he was greeted, "How ya doin my name's Frank and I can't find a damn soul to celebrate this good day with."

He watched Frank's leathery hand extend out towards him and was surprised his hand was even more rough than it looked. He sat down and immediately was bombarded by a story about how Frank was in the oil business and recently had a couple good days at work. Frank dove deep into detail about the inner workings of his business and explained how there are unforeseeable profits to be made through written loopholes in contracts that allow for renegotiation of more money. This tactic was alarming to him but before further questions could be asked the waitress returned with the double gin and tonic drink to which he snatched from her with a quickness.

He then proceeded, "Well Frank, sounds like a good day at the job, CHEERS, and let's keep these comin!" pointing to the already sipped glass. He steered conversation away from work because of the previously revealed unsettling nature of how Frank acquires riches but it did not matter because he thought there was no shame in drinking off the tab of the wicked. As the drinks continued to flow and time continued to tick more and more people would find themselves in a similar situation as Frank felt generous enough to invite several others to the large booth. After four of the cups of gin had come and gone his vision began to fuzz and he would soon feel all the blood flush from his face. His pale eyes looked up to find himself in a small crowd of people that seemed to have appeared at the Traintrack that night . He could hear the roar of the wind and the thuds of thick rain droplets hitting the sidewalk as more people entered the doors. He trembled at the thought of stumbling back to his apartment so he quickly decided he would get going before Frank insisted he have another drink.

He decided to make his exit out the back door of the building, again, in order to avoid further confrontation with Frank and he left unnoticed. The rain now came down heavy as he mumbled drunkenly, "Damn this rain gon' fuck up my shoes." His steps felt labored and all he could think about was returning to his apartment where he could once again shut his eyes and find peace. He continued walking through the rain carefully with every step looking down at his feet to ensure no puddles made their way into his path when the sound of an offbeat step made his walk stutter. He began to move a bit faster, less conscious of creasing his sneakers, as he listened for another off step but the only thing that could be heard was the rumble of the rain hitting cement. His speed continued to increase when he heard the sharp whistle that could

only come from a pinched bottom lip. He nearly jumped to face where the noise had come from when he opened his eyes wider as if it would make his vision somehow clearer, only to find darkness. His mind began to race, wondering if he is being followed or merely encountering stray noises of the city. He stopped for a second in order to listen even closer but once he was met again by rainfall he turned around to find himself facing a gun wielded by a masked figure.

From behind the mask he could hear a muffled, "Don't fucking move" as the offbeat steps from behind him would sound again. The steps grew closer and closer until he felt the large hand reach into his back pocket retrieving his wallet. The gaze of the one-eyed revolver stared in his face and he could count the four bullets that were loaded in the wheel. After his phone and keys were taken as well, he heard the voice behind him, "Gimme those shoes too." He felt the blood rush back to his face and his eyebrows grew heavy as he turned his head to respond, "I ain't giving y-" smack

That night as consciousness left his body he was not able to find peace only the pain of his throbbing head and nightmares of his aunt. Again, the image of his aunt laying still on her bed came to mind, he remembered her pale skin along with the black leather belt fastened tightly around her bicep. The more these images played in his head the harder his heart began to beat on top of the concrete as he struggled to regain consciousness. His nightmares proceeded as the memory of his Aunt continued. Her eyes moved aimlessly when she realized he had entered her room, that day with the broom, and upon meeting eyes she lifted her head slowly as if someone were restraining her. She almost looked surprised as she reached down to pull the emptied syringe out of the crease of her elbow and loosen the belt off her bicep. Her surprise quickly faded as her eyes rolled to the back of her head and she lay her head back down even slower than she had just sat up. He watched frozen with shock as she placed the syringe in her little black box and set it back on her nightstand while her hand fished for something else. She found a small glass half filled with water and hurled it towards him, with what strength she could summon, and yelled, "That house better be fucking spotless!" He remembered the thud he felt above his left eyebrow along with the confusion of whether it was left over water or newly seen blood that dampened his black t-shirt. THESE recollections brought his eyes to open and his pounding heart made him gasp for air as he found himself face down two blocks away from the Traintrack Tavern.

He felt his head pounding harder than his heart as sunlight began to shine over the horizon of the city and birds chirped to signal the new day. He had hoped the events of the night before were merely nightmares that accompanied those dreadful memories of his aunt but as he extended his fingertips gently toward the back of his head he winced, realizing that his nightmares had become his reality. He lifted himself up and sat on the edge of the sidewalk where he would bury his face in his arms as tears streamed down his face. His head hurt more with each tear shed but soon sadness would turn to anger as the emptiness of his pockets and bareness of his feet began to sicken him.

The morning was brisk and made for an uncomfortable walk back home as the rain of the night before left behind moist concrete. His diaphragm burned at each step from the remnants of the several drinks at the bar. Upon returning to his apartment his headache was unbearable and he longed for his bed which had seemed miles away at this point. He could feel the beat of his heart between his ears as he shut his eyes once more and reached into his pocket for his keys. He felt his left eye twitch as they both remained shut when he realized they were gone also. Again, he felt his face warm with blood as his temper soared when he kicked



his own door off the hinges in order to get inside. He knew walking through his mangled door that those two masked men who robbed him took more from him than he could ever forgive. This time as he changed his clothes he paid no attention to the shoes he wore only the hateful thoughts that he mulled over. These thoughts blurred his vision, all he could see was the eyes of the masked man along with the four bullets loaded in the wheel of the revolver.

He immediately set back down the stairs and toward the street as his vision returned with magnification while he combed the sidewalks with only his sneakers in mind. He visited all sneaker stores within a ten-block radius, questioning every owner and bystander about a pair of stolen Chicago 1s. He was met by no results when his explanations were brushed off and disregarded by each that agreed to listen. His face took on a new shade of red with every stale response he received while his patience dwindled as he began to think he was running out of options. The sun was now setting over the horizon and more doubts came to mind, convincing him there would be no way he would ever catch the masked figures that robbed him. The more the sun lowered the more his anger would turn to sadness as he would also come to accept that he may never see his beloved sneakers again either. Walking back to his apartment slowly he again focused his attention back to his bed which he longed to sink into and the peace he was once able to reach.

Upon facing his broken door again, he was surprised it was able to maintain its position in front of his doorway. He walked in, this time, carefully moving the door away, then back in front of the entrance of the apartment as he dragged his feet entering. Darkness again surrounded him and he could only hear the persistent tick of the clock when he again was able to lay his head, shut his eyes, and lose consciousness. This time as the hours passed his mind remained clear, free from recollections of his Aunt or even the events of the other night only darkness remained. Not even peace was seen during this slumber as his eyes scurried under his eyelids while he tossed and turned all night.

The next morning, he woke to the sun as bright as ever, even warming the tips of his ears and nose as he yawned out loudly. He had a strangely familiar feeling in the morning, one of disbelief which led him to again feel the back of his head. His fingers poked carefully from the back of his neck up to his scalp to find that his head no longer hurt. His eyebrows raised to his forehead and his eyes widened at the thought that the unfortunate events of the last couple days had merely been the nightmares of his subconscious. He quickly got out of bed and ran towards his door where he stopped in his tracks to find the door still leaned against the frame and detached from its hinges. His eyebrows returned and his eyes sunk to his realization that he WAS in fact living his nightmare and would not be "waking up" soon.

He made his way back to his room, again, dragging his feet with every step as he was saddened by his reality. Laying back on the bed he reached for his laptop on top of his nightstand and carefully placed it on his stomach. Upon opening it he hears the distinct ping of an email notification that reads, "11 new unread messages." As desperation began to set in he clicked in hopes of finding any indication as to where his phone, wallet, or most importantly his sneakers were. After reading the first couple emails he thought, "All this shit is junk I need something I can u-", "he read the words, "Chase Bank" before he could finish his thought and immediately clicked on the email. The email thanked him for opening up the platinum credit card and before anything else was read he opened a new tab to log into his Chase account.

Although most attempts to retrieve his money were most likely restricted by his bank the culprit still made out with an application for a credit card and \$400. He inspected further to see

why there was \$400 approved but not several other transactions, to find that it was all spent at one place. He saw the location, "Companion Wine and Spirits", he had never heard of the place. It came up on Google maps as fifteen miles away in a suburb off the west side of the city. He stared at the location on the map for a second and found the grin make its way onto his face again.

The bus ride he took toward the suburb seemed eternal as he looked out the window at oncoming traffic. He wondered what he would find out about the people who robbed him along with any hint of where they could be. Upon arriving at the bus stop nearest the liquor store he is surprised to see pleasant faces around where people walk dogs and sit down to have meals. He walks the two blocks from the bust stop to the liquor store and is even greeted on the sidewalks with slight nods or waives. He thought to himself, "*The fuck are armed robbers doin out here??*" He got to the small hole in the wall market and immediately approached the young man sitting on a stool in the back. He sat behind the register and upon closer inspection he was much younger than expected under all his curly black hair.

He continued to ask the boy whether or not he had worked two nights ago and remembered a certain \$400 purchase. The kid nodded slowly from side to side which felt like a left hook to the liver. His shoulders slumped as he allowed the next person in line to approach the boy when he heard loud clinks of tall cans followed by, "Hey let me get a lighter too." The voice made his hair stand on his arms and stopped him in his tracks. He turned around to see a dingy woman covered in a hoodie, rain poncho, and puffer vest but only shorts on her legs. She was near barefoot on account of her worn out shoes that looked to talk while she walked and the hair that sprouted from her hood looked thin and almost silver like a spider's web. Her odd smell did not faze him as he walked closer to her and tapped her shoulder but to his surprise the familiar voice proved to lead to a familiar face.

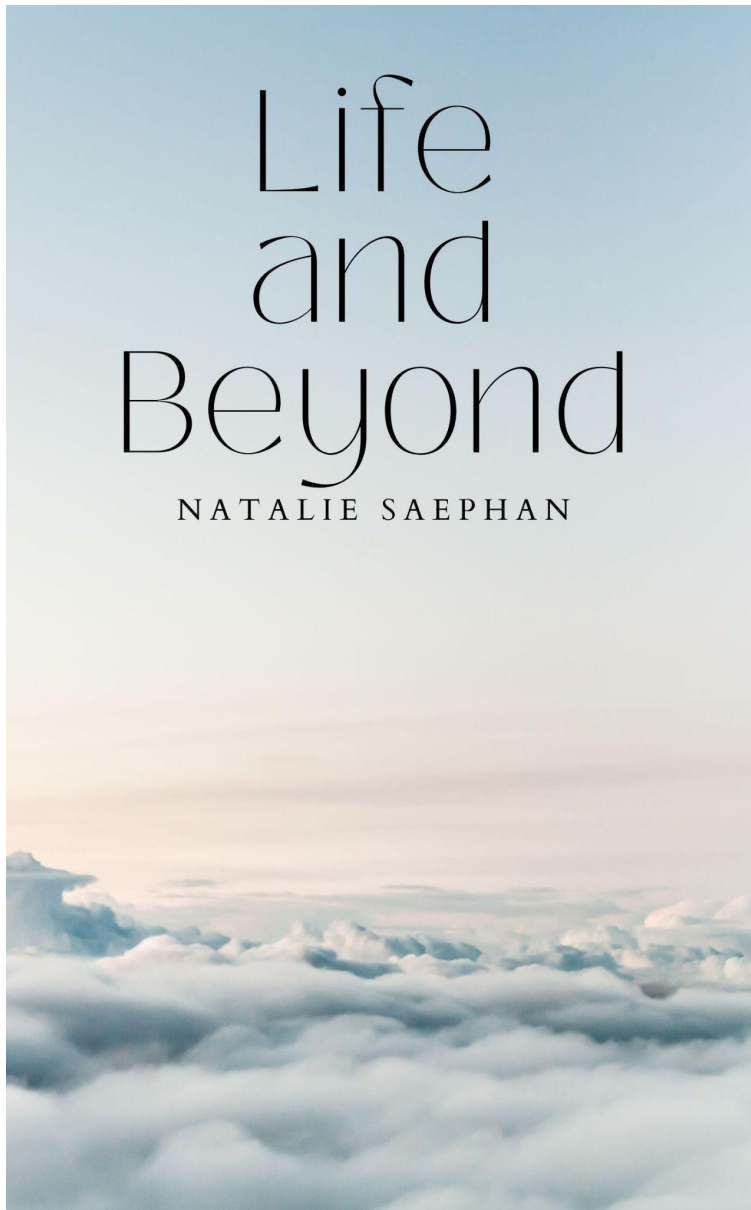
Looking back at him he could see what had become of his beloved Aunt who had now kept a steady long-term relationship with heroin which had left her to a life on the streets. His mind raced once more as memories flooded his mind starting with the first time he had seen her high that day in her room. Each memory subsequently was worse than the last and his vision again faded when he felt his cheeks red with anger. He had always wondered over the years what he would say to his aunt had he seen her again but each time as the scenarios played out in his head he never could gather the words to say.

Although these scenarios did predict a similar situation of a life on the streets for his aunt he could never have imagined the shape she was in. Beneath the black hood and straggles of hair her face looked as pale as ever and it almost resembled a Tim Burton character the way her eyes and cheeks sunk in. Her legs looked like she had done cross country through rose bushes as she had calf muscles that protruded but nicks that scabbed and made patterns. He raised his sight back to her face where he saw empty eyes that could not recognize him and chapped lips which she licked as she watched the boy bag the cans of beer.

His thoughts scrambled as she took the bag from the boy and looked towards the exit when he finally gathered the words to say. This time he knew she would not disappear as this scenario unfolded and decided to speak up after the many years without her. He could feel the beads of sweat form across his forehead along with the lump of nerves in his throat which he swallowed before approaching her again. He rubbed the faded scar above his eyebrow before he asked quickly, "Have you seen a couple guys hanging out around here with a pair of Jordan 1 sneakers, maybe robbing people?"

# Life and Beyond

Natalie Saephan



On a random yet beautiful Tuesday, I get dropped off at school. Here I am back at CastAway High. There are four buildings all laid out so that they create a square and are painted green and blue. It's quite random, but our mascot is a lion. Everything is old and worn out because the school is too cheap to do anything about it. As I was approaching the doors, something felt really strange to me. Although I do not want to be here, I always look forward to seeing my friend Lena.

I'm Rue by the way. I am 5'6 and have green eyes and blond hair. I get my blonde hair from both of my parents, but I get my green eyes from my mom. My dad has these ocean blue eyes which I sometimes want my eyes to be, but to have emerald green eyes is also pretty cool. To give a little more insight on what my life is like, growing up, I did not have much considering my parents were always arguing and never paid the slightest bit of attention to me. I know I lack the love and affection that every child needs from their parents growing up. Of course, this isn't my only issue. I also have other problems to deal with, just as any

other teenager would.

I worry about school, Lena, my family, and my future. I often think "What am I going to do with the rest of my life? How will I know if I make the right decisions?" My life has never been easy. To make things worse, I am an only child meaning it can get pretty lonely most of the time. I do have my one close friend Lena, who makes my life a little brighter. We met in Kindergarten and have been inseparable ever since. Lena is the type of person who will support you no matter what. She is nonjudgmental and is very loving. We both have a lot in common

when it comes to what we like to eat and do. We love eating sandwiches and going on random adventures. I know for a fact that Lena will always be my best friend.

I also have one more best friend which is my grandpa Eric, my mom's dad. Even though grandpa passed away not too long ago from a heart attack, he will always be my best friend. He was always there for me when I needed someone to talk to. There were plenty of times where he took me out for ice cream when I was feeling sad or down and those memories will forever stick with me. I always went to grandpa for advice because he was much more wise than Lena so I feel he gave better advice. I know I don't have the best parents, but I had a pretty great grandpa and will always remember the wonderful advice he gave me. He told me to live everyday as if it were my last. This way, I will live each day to the fullest.

I enter the halls to see everyone staring at me from every corner. There is a group of girls standing by their lockers gossiping about the news they heard. I can feel the whispers as I know they must have bad things to say about me. Why me? I wonder what it is. I decide to head straight to my locker instead of meeting Lena at her locker like I usually do, but I see that she is already at mine waiting for me.

"What's everyone's problem? Why are they all staring at me?" I ask.

"Well I don't know how to break the news to you, but Sophie told the whole school that you are insane and have mental illnesses," Lena says. Her face is bright red as if she were embarrassed to be seen with me. I felt my heart sink to my stomach. It is no one's business to know that stuff. Sophie is about 5'2 with brown eyes and curly brown hair. She has two best friends named Hailey and Sara who are always with her. I know they are good people, but Sophie always manages to brainwash everyone. Sophie and I used to be best friends in high school, that was until I decided it was time to make new friends. I guess she got jealous and we haven't been the same since. I knew she didn't like me, but I never thought she would do anything this extreme.

I continue the conversation with Lena, "Well does everyone believe it?" Lena hesitates and doesn't know how to answer. I decide to wrap up our conversation as I rush over to the bathroom. On my way there, I turn back to see Lena looking down at the floor with the saddest face I have ever seen. I barge into one of the bathroom stalls and slam the door shut. I call my mom to pick me up, but of course, she doesn't answer her phone as always. I hear the school bell ring indicating that the first period has started. When the halls are empty, I walk out of the school and don't look back. I don't know where I am going to go or what I am going to do. All I know is that I can't go home.

"What am I going to do for the whole day?" I asked myself. I have no car, no money, and no friends. I have plenty of things to choose from since I have about 8 hours to waste. I can either go to the beach, pier, or the mall. I don't usually like going to the beach during the day and since I have no money, I decide to head over to the pier to watch the seals. When I get there, I stand on the highest bench so I can spot each and every one of them. They are laying on their stomachs and are making all kinds of loud noises. I see a unique one that has a different pattern of spots on it. It kind of reminds me of myself since I have always viewed myself as an outcast.

Seals have always been my favorite animals for some reason. It probably might just be because they're cute. I take a seat and pull my backpack off so I can get my journal. In this

journal are all of my thoughts, feelings, and secrets. I begin writing down all the things that have gone down so far today. I wrote down a couple questions too. "Why me?", "Who told her about everything?", "Why is my life so shitty?" I tend to ask myself this last question quite a lot.

A couple hours pass and I am starting to get hungry. I pulled out the turkey and pesto sandwich I had packed for lunch and started eating it while beginning to walk. I see a park a few blocks down and decide to take a nap at the end of the yellow and white slide which was covered up with blue tarp. Quite some time has passed. I open my eyes and it is suddenly dark. My back aches and my neck is sore. Not to mention the aching in my chest from all the pain Sophie has caused me. I head out of the slide to check the time as my phone reads 10 pm.

I have nine missed calls from my parents, but it's not like I care. After all, my parents only care when they want to care so I figured I would do the same thing. I try not to overthink these types of situations because I end up feeling bad for my parents and do what is right, even if they do not deserve it. This time, I decided to not overthink it so I won't care as much. I didn't look into more than I had to. I continue walking and can spot the beach just a short walk down. I see what a beautiful night it is as I listen to the waves and the sound of the wind. The sky is dark enough to spot a few stars. The sand still has a bunch of footprints engraved from earlier today. I was debating between walking on the actual sand and just staying on the sidewalk, but I decided to stay on the sidewalk right next to the sand. This way, my parents won't be able to figure out where I've been from the leftover sand that will end up in my shoes. I have only been walking for two minutes, yet I already see a suspicious figure heading in my direction.

As the figure gets closer, it appears to be a man. He is about 6'2 with black hair wearing all dark clothing. I started to walk a lot faster knowing I had nothing to protect myself with, but he eventually caught up to me.

"Can I help you with something?" I asked as my voice trembled.

He pulls out a gun and yells, "Give me all your valuables."

I am so confused because I have never seen this man in my life. Tons of thoughts were racing through my head including, "Why me?" "Why do bad things always happen to me?" Just as I thought this day couldn't get any worse, tears fall as I realize that there is no way out of this.

Scared for my life, I handed him my watch, phone, and my empty wallet. I looked up to realize that the man was also crying with me.

I asked him, "What's wrong? Aren't I supposed to be the only one that's crying?"

He says, "I don't know who I am anymore. My life has come to robbing kids at gunpoint. I have two kids and my wife just left me. I have no other choice because I can't support myself and my family on my own." I tell him that it's not too late and that there are always other ways to get help, but he doesn't seem to be all that interested. His face begins to go back to more of an angry expression when he realizes that he must finish his crime and that his purpose wasn't to feel sorry for me...or himself. I guess some people prefer the easy way out, even if they do feel bad about it in the end. After giving him my belongings, he seemed to be uninterested in me so I thought I was off the hook, right? Wrong.

He slaps me across the face with his gun. As I fall to the floor, I can see him running off as everything begins to get blurry. I don't remember much of what happens next. I wake up in a nice, soft bed. I am in a hospital room where everything seems to be white. From the tv, to the bed sheets and pillows, to the walls and curtains, everything seems to be a plain yet shiny white color. I have always wondered why hospitals are so bland. I instantly have a flashback of the time where my grandpa had to pick me up from school and take me to the hospital because I had sprained my wrist. I don't exactly remember all the details or how it happened. All I remember is ending up at the hospital needing a cast.

My grandpa felt bad for me so he took me out to get ice cream. Out of all the details I had forgotten, I remembered that he got mint chocolate chips while I got rainbow sherbet. Of course..almost all kids love fruity ice cream. He got in trouble by my parents for not returning me to school right after the hospital. "How could you be so irresponsible? You know how important education is?" I remember my mom yelling at him as if she were the parent in their relationship. I turn to him and apologize for the trouble I have caused. I start to cry because I feel I am the cause of all problems.

Grandpa wipes my tears away and reassures me. "Do not worry. Punishments are temporary, but memories last a lifetime." That's also something I will never forget. I zone back in from the flashback and am still stuck in the same hospital room.

I try to get up but can't seem to move much. I even try to lift my right arm, but it doesn't seem to budge. I turn to see my mom, dad, and grandma sitting in the individual chairs by my bed. They are all wearing white suits and dresses along with black shoes. They have happy expressions on their faces, but it seems as if it is forced. The room is filled with joy once I know that I am near my loved ones. I kept asking them questions. "How did I get here?", "Where am I exactly?" They remained silent and that's when I realized something strange was going on. I tried to think back to what happened that night at the beach, trying to fit all the pieces together. Before I even got the chance to think, I felt a sharp tug as if someone were snatching me. I snap up and my body is freezing cold. Did I wake up from a dream? I realize that I wasn't at a hospital and none of that was real.

So what actually happened? Where am I? An angel pulled me in because they decided it was my time to go. I have now ended up in a bright room full of strange faces. Who knows what this place is. It might be a place for the ones that have passed. A place filled with beings that no longer have a soul. Everything is in light colors and the people seem to be very angelic. I walk around trying to make sense of things, but no one seems to want to talk to me until suddenly, I hear a woman's voice calling my name. We get to talking and she tells me that she is one of the angels.

She also explains what happened to me and how I got here. "The man ended up killing you. The last dream you had before coming here tells you why you were alive and shows who loved you the most." I was still in shock. I never even got the chance to say goodbye to my family or Lena. It's crazy to think that my parents were the ones who loved me the most. I guess they did and still do even though they never did a good job of showing it.

I ask the angel, "So what's going to happen next? What is my purpose here?" "You are one of us now. Your job is to watch over the people you care about most while still living life as you normally would, but up here now." She also explained that you are stuck in the first building and get your voice back when you learn and accept the fact that you are no longer alive, but

still have a purpose up above. I think it's pretty cool how you need to accept in order to leave the building. It's kind of like how on Earth, I had to learn to accept things in order to move forward in life. Too bad I never got that far. She showed me outside the building. It got even brighter and I realized I wasn't going to be stuck in a room. There is much more that this place has to offer.

There is a little town where the angels do everything humans would normally do. My heart filled with joy as I saw angels walking their angel dogs. I haven't seen any other animals here besides birds. I'm not even sure if there are any cats around. They have everything here. There are floral shops, clothing stores, places to eat and drink, ice cream shops. Everything is so bright and colorful. The buildings even have murals displaying themes such as love, family, and friendship on them. I felt more at peace here than I ever have before.

Maybe I am going to like this place. It is very beautiful here and most of the people seem to be quite nice and welcoming. It's something to get used to of course. I still have so many questions as to how everything works. Am I going to be making friends? How does currency work here, if there even is any? What am I supposed to do all day long? Are we able to connect with the world I just came from? I am going to get bored, won't I? I decide to save my questions for another time because I know that I have a lot to catch up on. It's going to take a lot of time for anyone to explain anything to me. I continue walking around and exploring the place.

Everything seems to be less hectic even though the same things that are happening down on Earth are the same exact things that are happening here. Maybe I feel happier and more at peace because I have finally found my home. Somewhere I belong.

As I am looking around, I spot my grandpa waiting for me on one of the park benches. He still looks the same. Every detail I can remember about him has remained the same, even after all these years. He still has a long white beard. He is even wearing his favorite shirt he used to wear when we went to get ice cream, a burgundy button up. He has on khakis and dress shoes. I miss him so much. My heart finally feels full and all the weight has been lifted off my shoulders. Maybe when grandpa left, a part of me left with him. I don't even know how he got it in a place like this. I go and sit next to him. He smiles at me and tells me how much he has missed me. We exchange stories and catch each other up on all that we've missed. I tell him about all the significant things that happened since he left and I share the events that led me here. I tell him about all the school dances, the crushes I had, the people that were involved in my life and how I became less social since he left. I even gave him an update on my parents. "They are still alright. They haven't gotten any better at their job of raising me. I left without developing any kind of relationship with either of them." He looks angry and disappointed in them, but pulls himself together when he realizes that nothing can be done about it now. Afterwards, he makes an attempt to make me smile by telling me about all the wonderful things I am going to experience here.

He hugs me and whispers, "Your life has just begun."

It is now five years later. I have decided to revisit the story of how I ended up here. Things have been pretty great for me. My grandma joined us not too long ago and my grandpa couldn't be any happier. I have to admit, I have missed my grandma way more than I have my parents. My grandparents took such great care of me then and I know for a fact they will take great care of me now. I have found my purpose here which is to guide the Earth people in the

right direction. For one of my tasks, I have been assigned to help Sophie find the issue as to why she is always so bitter. My job is to put thoughts in her head such as, "Why am I like this?" and "When did things get so bad?" to really make her reflect and get to the root of the problem. We have found that Sophie is this way because she has been neglected by her parents growing up. She never got the love, attention, or affection that she deserved. Now, she tries to seek that attention by causing scenes and stirring up drama. I never thought to have a conversation with Sophie or even approach her. She's the type of person I usually stay away from considering how much she has changed since the last time we hung out or spoke, but it turns out we aren't so different after all. Now that I think about it, things could have been so much more different if I would have just talked to her. It's crazy how we never really know what others are going through and how they become who they are. I had a feeling things weren't so great because how can someone so snobby have a good life. Even though I am not as bad of a person as she is, maybe we could have bonded over the things we had in common. Maybe we could have become friends again.

Life is different here, but I kind of like it a little more. I have met new people who have guided me on the right path. I have made a bunch of new friends. Their names are Lindsey, Megan, and Gabe. Lindsey kind of reminds me of Lena which is probably why she's my favorite. We get along really well and have a lot of things in common. All of us usually like to watch movies together, go out to brunch, or just relax and have ice cream. If I could change one thing about this place, it would probably have to be the fact that Lena isn't here. I know I have Lindsey now, but it's not the same and it never will be.

I remember when we used to hang out together after school and on the weekends. I always looked forward to doing anything and everything with Lena. Even on the days where we would just go to my house and sit on our phones without talking to each other, I still loved knowing she was there with me. I miss her more than anything, but I know it is not her time yet. I wish I would have told her how much she meant to me much more often than I did. I also wish she knew how much I care for her and how I would still do anything for her. At least I have learned that you should always do the things you want to do because maybe one day, it'll be too late. I guess I am going to have to wait awhile before seeing her again. As for now, I am content with just being able to watch over her.

I wake up and check my clock as it reads 7:30 am. I get ready and head outside to start my day as I usually do, but I get interrupted by a text message. It's from my grandpa. "Meet me at the ice cream parlor. It's very important." I head over as fast as I can, more worried than ever. I finally get there and see that my grandpa isn't alone. My mom and dad are standing right beside him looking as nervous as he did. What's strange is that they are wearing the exact same outfits I last saw them in. My mom has on the same navy blue shirt with black jeans. Her hair is tied into a high ponytail. It seems as if she has the exact makeup on too. My dad is wearing a black t-shirt and dark blue jeans.

"What are you guys doing here? How did you get here? Why?", I asked.

"Your parents had a terrible car accident and are now joining us here." I felt relieved to see them again, but I don't know how they feel. Just as I am processing everything, they both come up to hug me while my grandpa joins in. "I'm sorry for not being a better mother to you, Rue" my mother says as tears fall down her cheek. "I know we could've been better, but we were so caught up in our own mess that we didn't even realize what it was doing to you." They seemed to feel pretty bad about the whole *not loving me* situation so I decided to forgive them.



I know my parents and I have never had any sort of relationship, but maybe now is a chance to start. Afterall, it is never too late for anything.

## Veins of Steel

Jacob Fisher



The Fallen Pedal was nearly empty all day. It's my flower shop, a modest shack that's tucked away behind layers of local plants and bugs. Only the locals and incredibly savvy travelers know about it. To find it, you must traverse the picturesque trail that begins in the unpaved parking lot. This gives you a chance to enjoy the local nature from which my flowers and plants actually come from. Getting intertwined with nature melts away all my worries and leaves me thriving in the present moment. I'm the happiest in the present, but I find myself all too often dwelling on the past, and how it could shape my future. I take a look around my humble shop and notice the slight musty scent which is ever so eloquently covered up by the smell of fresh flowers. The sun is about to be setting, and I can see the millions of tiny particles of dust flying around as a beam of light shines through the window, targeting a vase. I lock eyes with this vase, grab a golden rose from its water and bring it to my chest. Widening my nostrils, I inhale the subtly sweet scent of the rose, sending a tingle down my spine and into my toes. The sunlight always seems to have its way with me. Today, I only had one customer, a burly fellow looking for a bouquet

to gift his mother. Usually having only one person in the shop would send me down a hole of darkness, but the sweet scent of the rose kept my roots grounded today; another day of delight is finished.

*Darkness smothers me all too often. Despite living in a vibrant garden, everything within me is blackened with soot and ash. Really, I'm not even depressed but rather directionless. I lose myself in the gloom, like climbing up a chunk of granite if I were an ant, just barley gripping onto the slick coating, blinded by the night sky above.*

The piercing twang of my alarm clock woke me, with a tone that twists my body deeper into the mattress. I open my eyes to darkness, pre-dawn. It was finally the day I had been preparing for; months of savory sweat for the chance at sweet victory. I couldn't dread it more. I'm nervous, but if I'm honest with myself it's more than mere nerves. Peeling off the covers and extracting myself from the mattress, I notice the damp and cold moisture that had accumulated from a night of sleeping.

"Night sweats again." I say out loud as if there were someone else in the room to hear it. I was accustomed to the yellow stains that patterned my mattress.

It was now 6:30 AM, and the potent scent of coffee beans coated my nose hairs; I sync the espresso machine with my alarm clock. This is just one of the many personalized touches which turn my house into a home. As I shuffle in my fur lined slippers into the kitchen to retrieve my fresh roast, my cat Bitters rubs my leg to say good morning. In fact, he walks past me three times, rubbing my left leg, right leg, then both at the same time. This is standard practice for Bitters, as he then plops onto the floor in front of me, awaiting his morning belly rub. The satin hardwood floor creaks as I bend down to pet him.

"You're almost as old as this place Bitty," I say with a smirk. He's not, my house was built in 1926, but I like to remind him of his age. He probably has no concept of time. As I pour oak milk and drizzle honey into my coffee, I glance over at my living room, my favorite room in the house. The centerpiece of the room is a psychedelic shag rug that I actually made myself. Atop the rug is my coffee table, made from a local woodworker named Betsy, here in Portland. It's a live edge oak, the cracks filled in with white epoxy, but the wood kept untreated in order to capture the evidence of years of use. The corner of the room holds my beloved bean bag. I must have read hundreds of books in that bag, it's the coziest seat ever. I take a deep breath with a smile and smell the sweet lilies which are hanging in a pot, waiting to soak up the sunlight in front of my large eastward window. Contently, I plunge into the deep couch, swing my legs onto the coffee table, and flip on the Home Goods Channel.

A heavy knock at the door widens my eyes; I'm startled by things which I know are going to happen. Jeff, my riding partner, enters with his wide coffee-stained grin.

"Top o' the morn! Big day Arty. How are ya' feeling?" I look him up and down, examining his body language and noticing his unique physique. Jeff is a tall, lanky, blonde haired, unkempt dude with the legs of a horse. I wouldn't be surprised if the last haircut he got was paid for and styled by his mother...twenty-five years ago. If you're able to get through his messy outer layer though, he truly is the best person I know.

"Couldn't feel better Jeff," I say with a forged smile. I lie constantly, much like how a cactus will lie about not being dangerous to the touch. I've been working on the difficult things though, as I know it's the only way to grow; that's why I'm riding in this 700-kilometer Brevet. "Hey Jeff, are you nervous at all?" I ask with a quivery voice. He gazed at me with wonder.

"Yeah, I am a bit, but mostly excited, I can feel the jitter in my bones." I can't respond, lost in thought. The movie playing in my head screams out the past and I can't stop telling myself that it alludes to the future. My conscience continues to repeat *it was long enough ago, you've overcome the scars*, but it's far too difficult to heal from the mental bruises. Jeff must have noticed I was lost in my head.

"Arty!" He utters with his mystic eyes and bold nose.

"You've got this...We've got this!" says Jeff.

"Listen Jeff, I know the countless hours we spent on the trainers, but something just doesn't feel right...I never have knots in my stomach" I say in my usual reserved tone.

"I get it brotha'. You've been through it man, but you're truly the strongest person I know. I've always looked up to you for your resilience and passion," Jeff said. This meant something; Jeff's mother had died of cancer when he was just a boy, and in my honest opinion *he* is the most resilient person I know. Hearing this somewhat untied the knots in my stomach.

"Ah man, you don't mean that...you can't!" I say, my cheeks flushed.

"You know I don't mess around man. You're as solid as sea rock. You're weathered and tough as nails!" Jeff says with the biggest grin I've ever seen, his teeth as yellow as the sun. Jeff smiles, but seldom to this degree. I smile too and sip the remaining foam of my oat milk shaken espresso.

I still can't stop thinking about what happened years ago. It's lingering in the back of my mind. I've ridden thousands of kilometers since, but this Brevet meant something more than just a Sunday ride. Jeff gives me another look that says, *come on man, just let it go...break free from your thoughts*. We both focused intently on the rising sun peeking through my window above the sink. "Let's go," Jeff said through clumsily chewing his Peanut Butter Clif Bar. I'm a simple man when it comes to my sources of joy, meaning I tend to seek out a few specific things when I seek happiness. One of those being my bikes; yes, I have five bikes. My favorite one has to be the custom fabricated steel frameset made right here in Oregon. I actually watched the frame-builder braze all of the tubes together. I've owned it for about seven years now, and it'll always be the first bike I grab. Hopping onto the worn saddle made of leather and steel will never cease to put a smile on my face.

Each stroke of the solid forged aluminum crankset pumps my blood, and the waxed canvas luggage adorned to my lugged steel frame contains all of my emotions. Riding my bike is how I choose to set forth on the journey of life. Dawning the two wheeled masterpiece I call Stout brings me into a dimension like no other.

The air in autumn is crisp, as if the oxygen is so pure that it burns. The sun in October also seems to have more of a blinding effect than the usual brightness. Plants thrive in this weather. Jeff and I had begun the self-sufficient bike tour down the coast at 7:00 this morning. The goal of this Brevet is to make it 700km south and land in Eureka California before Thursday. Here we are, day one of six, traversing the lush coast of Oregon. "Throw me a peanut square!" Jeff blurted from behind me through the rippling wind of the beach. I tossed the square above my head, and let gravity do the work. I've always said that everything is better while riding a steel road bike; the confidence you have is second to none. My tires, smooth and tacky, use all of their 43-millimeters of width to grip the pavement and soak up the cracks, dips, and bumps as if they aren't even there. Riding Stout on the coast is a dream.

A dream. A howling wind stings my skin with a resonating ring in my ears. Two suns emerge from the clouds, slowly displaying their crepuscular rays and joyous laughter. I couldn't

quite make out what they were saying, but I could tell they were in love. The tone of the yellow sun is mighty, and he has the stature of a thick redwood. The orange one however seemed daft and confused. What was it that they were saying? *Hey*, I yelled with a blood curdling screech so loud that even the granules of sand heard me. *What are you two talking about?* I yell even louder this time. They look down simultaneously as if I were a dog begging at the dinner table. What the orange sun said, I could not understand. Its voice was booming and sounded like the devil himself. It began to grow in both height and width as it continued to chant that deathly noise. The orangeness of its body turned into a luscious red, much resembling the flesh of a blood orange. The red sun exploded, splintering the sky with its magma, and leaving the yellow sun cowering behind its cloud. I watched as the mouth of the yellow sun shriveled into nothing, returning to its natural inanimate state. Now, I was alone.

Breathing the succulent sea air was always a favorite pastime of mine. That same salty air reminds me of simpler times as a child, growing up on the beach and all. Specifically, I remember walking along the water with my sister one day. I always remember this when I sniff the sea. We were enjoying the beaming sun and the hot sand, skipping along actually, laughing and singing too. Just having the best time. Once I noticed that I am the only one singing, laughing, dancing, my world began to swirl. I had gone ahead but not looked back; my mother had told me to always keep my eye on her. The waves on this coast hold a certain vengeance for fun. The waves hated laughter and love. They took her, not only from me but from my mother. I had no means of retribution. I was left helpless and alone.

Jeff and I were leading the group of twelve up one of the dozens of grueling climbs the coastal highway brings. Most would be panting and gasping for air, but thankfully we're all trained athletes, and riding at this pace is light work. We soon approached the dirt portion of our ride, turning the silky pavement into a grit that rattled the contents of our luggage just enough to notice. Not every rider in the group is experienced on dirt, but Jeff is, and it shows. He was a professional cross country mountain bike rider for over a decade before he retired. He lives and breathes dirt trails. Jeff's always been the kind of guy who oozes confidence, probably because he's used to riding rocky dirt trails at 40kmph while jumping over flowing rivers. Some say he's over-confident and often takes risks that others wouldn't, but none of those people are on this Brevet. We are all here to take risks and push ourselves to the edge. Jeff is the leader and we're all in...after all, our 20kmph speed is merely cruising compared to what Jeff is accustomed to.

I feel absolutely amazing. I have taken that dread from the morning by the throat and tossed it down the cliffside like a pebble. This is usually what happens to me on the saddle, every worry and pain dissolves into nothingness. I wish I could say Jeff's pep talk this morning was the root of my happiness, but I'm happy to say his spirited riding is acting as my emotional therapy.

It's now mid-day with about five hours of riding under our belt thus far. The sky is so clear today, it feels like I could see land across the Pacific Ocean. The sun continued to beat down on our foreheads, mine especially. I'm a magnet for heat and bugs it seems. I always have Deet and sunscreen holstered at an arm's reach; I have to get pure Deet, the regular bug spray doesn't do it for me.

"You and your Deet. A match made in heaven!" Jeff says sarcastically with a bit of a snarl.

"Damn, can't a man and his deet have some peace!" I say, jokingly.

"Of course you can!" Jeff replies. "ha-ha, if only deet was performance enhancing!" He jabs once more. At this point I know he's messing around, but he's gotten under my skin. I have a history of owning easy buttons to push, and Jeff likes to take advantage of that at times.

"Will you fuck off man, Jesus" I tell him with angst and grit in my voice.

"Arty, you know I'm messing around, what gives?" Jeff says innocently. He knows that I have an issue with my temper. Jeff has a good heart though, and he wouldn't want to deliberately hurt me, so what was he doing? I guess you should learn to just jab back, but some things stick with you forever.

I felt juiced up, so I sprinted to pass Jeff on the outside, just kissing the yellow line in the middle of the coastal road. I could feel my heart pumping from the angst and speed. *Dah Duh Dah Duh Dah Duh* growing faster as my legs follow the pace of the beat. I glance at my bike computer and read, *Cadence: 130 Speed: 33 KMPH*.

"Wooooooweeee!" I scream to let out the built-up angst as I slow my cadence and speed.

"You're a maniac, you know that?" Jeff said to me, furrowing his left brow.

"Yeah man, but you know that's why you love me, right?" I say, making Jeff smile and chuckle.

About 15 minutes of silence pass, and I still am holding the lead spot from Jeff, leaving him to draft my lively pace for a rest. He deserved it, as he's insisted on leading for the entire first sixty miles. The remainder of the group lay about two hundred feet behind us, naturally us two are just faster. Jeff and I have spent so many years riding together, so we know each other's exact moves. The silence is the best part of the ride. You get to listen to the drivetrain of your machine hum and haw, all while soaking in your surrounding environment.

Through the silence, I notice a bird singing in the distance. Immediately I am sent through a maze in my mind, following this bird. She lands at a memory so distant that I don't even recognize anything at first, but she continues to sing her lovely tune. I look out onto the vast green field which lays ahead, my family sat laughing and smiling on a green argyle picnic blanket enjoying wine and fruit. I peer to my left now, and I see myself, a young version sitting alone by the lake. I was twirling a white tulip between my fingers, my eyes bloodshot, eyelids sagging, and mouth still quivering. I float over to my young self and realize in this dream; I am the bird. I begin to sing, and young Arthur breaks free with a smile. *Hello Birdy*, he says with a cute chime...

"Arty, I'm comin' on the inside," said Jeff with vigor, interrupting my day dreamscape. As he pulls past me, I know precisely that he is going to softly put his hand out for a light low-five. Then, he looks at me with his raised eyebrows and a crinkled smile...every time. Jeff can't stand to be behind anyone for far too long. He prefers to lead every group ride, and I usually am right behind him.

The wind was strong all day on the coast, stronger than I remember it usually being. Gusts of wind that nearly topple me over with one blow. The silent whistle whispers in one ear

and out the other. This wind did not sound particularly friendly. Wind though always worked my nerves, even while in the garden, it spits dirt and dust into my eyes and nose. This wind though was seasoned with grey sea salt and seagull essence. The birds seemed to thrive in the densely damp air; it must have been like swimming to them. Each pedal stroke felt heavier than normal, so I could only imagine what flying felt like.

The sky isn't dark yet, but the night's glooming. The sun had lowered into its sleeping position, and we were about to settle at our coastal campsite which was nine miles away now. Evening on the coast is always my favorite, with the sunset and the cool breeze. I've always been an evening person. Jeff is behind me again, and for the first time ever, it seemed as though he was eager to get off the bike. The lactic acid was settling, I could tell. Jeff though, being the overachiever he is, ends up passing me as I take a squirt of water. He passes me on the left, and stares directly into my eyes as if our pupils are connected with a straw. He holds this stare, as do I, until he fully passes me, his body twisted with some sort of pent-up angst.

"What the fuck was that about?" I say under my breath. "Jeff man, are you good!" I have to yell through the wind. The sky had darkened quickly, and our headlights are now coming in handy, but it was still difficult to see past the crown of the beam. Jeff is now considerably farther in front of me, I could only see his taillight. The blinking red light sort of hypnotized me into a lull. Just like when a magician will hypnotize his guest and take away the swaying pocket watch with that smoothly swift motion, Jeff's blinking light was gone. Immediately I thought that it died, which is understandable after a full day of riding. But the eerily silence of the sea waves crashing was cut jaggedly by an intense and deep scream. I clamp down on my brake levers with more force than I thought I could ever fathom. I throw my feet from the pedals to the ground to act as an emergency brake of sorts. The screech of brake pads along my aluminum rims was a sound all too familiar to me. I had stopped just in time; a blind hairpin turn was invisible from twenty feet away.

"Jeff! Jeff! Jeff!" I scream with all my might. I peer down the cliffside, and I see it. The hypnotizing, blinking red light. I stand in disbelief and utter shock, gawking at the light soaring down the cliffside. My hands are paralyzed in a half-clinch. Incredible thoughts are racing through my head, my feet go numb, then my hands. My vision is blind except for the blinking red light. Why won't it stop? The scream of Jeff is still audible, but getting softer, and less dramatic. The less I could hear Jeff, the more it made me sweat. Tears poured down my face as if I had mistaken eye drops for lemon juice. I couldn't hear anything; I don't know if it's just silent or if I too am dead. Where is the rest of the group? Instantly, I was alone. The flashbacks of my near fatal crash four years ago are racing through my head as I continue to fixate on the blinking red light. I could imagine what Jeff had just experienced, and I felt myself swelling up just thinking about it. The cool sea breeze and salty mist probably coated his curly mustache as he went. My heart is racing. I glance at my watch and read *187 BPM*. I couldn't tell which was sweat and tears, they tasted the same as they poured down my face. My face, probably the shade and hue of a firetruck by now. The blinking light now had suddenly dimmed, never to blink again. Jeff is gone, and so is my soul.

Now, I look around and see nothingness. Not black nor white, but purely nothing. I have the urge to snap my neck directly upwards towards what I assume is the sky, but I see the blinking red light. The light, moving slowly across the sky. Is this the spirit of Jeff or just an airplane? I stare at the blinking light, as it floats among the stars traveling from west to the east. I feel a pinch in my neck, and drop like a sack of soil in my garden.

I've always thought about the day where I become one with the plants. The point in my life where I dig myself into the rich soil of my garden to join the carrots and Thai chilis in their journey of growth. I've especially thought about that day ever since I crashed into the Prius in a head-on collision. I never thought I would even be able to stand after that day. I had to eat through a straw in my neck for eight months; I was paralyzed from shoulders to my toes. Every doctor told me I would never walk again. What a horrible thing to say, even worse to be wrong about. It only took me two years to get back on my feet, and three to get back on the bike. I thought that day was my last, but I lived and in fact I thrived. Life is often a wavelength with peaks and valleys, and I had just gone from the highest peak to the lowest valley in about one minutes' time. Jeff is gone, I am alone.

I was unaware that I needed to be woken, though I sprung alive with a splash of cold water. My eyelids fluttering, I see twenty eyes surrounding me. Ten mouths all begin speaking at once, as if I had suddenly un-muted the universe. Groggily, I crawl over to the cliffside, ignoring the voices. Above me, I see a helicopter with something dangling from the door. I follow the thick dangly rope down the cliff to the water where I see a flood light with dozens of people frantically, but methodically searching. The end of the rope held an empty stretcher, awaiting a passenger. I fall from my hands and knees down to my face and chest. The dirt tastes of minerals and salt. Someone grabs me gently, brings me to a seated position and feeds me water.

"Just breathe Arthur, four seconds in, hold, four seconds out," someone says in a comforting tone. I know everyone here, but I just felt so alone.

"I just...I...I can't b-believe" I said, shivering with fear-driven excitement. It was still pitch-black outside; there we were on the corner nine miles away from our destination. Jeff's same riding that had painted that smile on my face for hours had milled my face into a tender, damply salty, dirt covered monstrosity.

*I bet I look like a burnt pizza* I thought to myself.

The day had flipped from a peak to the valley in an instant. At least when I crashed, I had the power to fix whatever wrong had been done, this time, Jeff was gone and there was no getting him back. Why the fuck are they even bothering to look with the stretcher? Do they really think he could be alive? How is no one else sobbing like I am? None of this feels real, yet often the most lucid of realities feels this way. Isn't it funny how the most real things you experience feel like dreams?

Unconscious dreams are dastardly scrumptious. It's pitch black, my eyes are open but closed at the same time. I'm almost enjoying the silence so much that I don't even have the urge to hum a tune. Suddenly the keeper of the sky flips the switch to the sun. I see it slowly (but faster than usual) rise from the sea. *How delightful!* I say to myself. I hear a faint echo of *how delightful* in the distance. It's growing louder and deeper in tone, until I recognize the voice. A voice that is so close but should be the farthest away. *Jeff!* I scream but no words leave my mouth, I had water in my ears. He emerges from the cliffside, a giant. He must be two-hundred feet tall, and he continues to grow above the horizon. Jeff's hands, the size of a single-family home, lower into an open palm placed onto the coastal road. *Come*, he says. I climb up his dry and cracked finger and sprawl out on his palm. Promptly, he steps up the cliffside, crushing the road beneath him. Jeff is massive. He kicks redwoods out of his way, and grunts like a lion. He closes his hand onto me, putting me in a cave of palm sweat and begins to sprint eastward. Here I am, in Jeff's hand enjoying the silence.



My mother always told me I have veins of steel. Steel rusts if not taken care of, and my body felt as though it was quickly deteriorating. I lay back down, water dripping from my lifeless mouth, and gaze at the stars. I used to do this with my mom in the yard when I felt down, and it always made me feel slightly better about myself. Suddenly, I feel both of my hands latch onto other hands, warm and damp. I squeeze and rub their fingers. The rest of the group joins me on the ground stargazing, and I can't help to crack a smile and chuckle. Even in the worst moment of my life, I'm still able to break free and have a laugh. That's what I call veins of steel.

# Surviving the Last Tempest

Brian Havig



Sister Arith Seabrooke stared out over the roaring sea.

The storm hadn't quite reached their ship. It still toiled in the distance, and she found that she couldn't draw her gaze from the storm, like a crowd drawn to a public hanging. Distant lightning cracked, and slammed into the roiling ocean, sending up a splash of electrified spray in a brilliant, but horrific display. The dark grey clouds above sparked with light, then dimmed once more.

Waves began to crash against the hull of the ship, causing the wood to creak and groan as they crested waves. The ship rocked gently, but constant, and unending. The relentless motion made Arith sick to her stomach. Sea travel was not something she was used to, and she found herself incredibly uncomfortable. The sickness did little to distract her from her nerves.

*My faith is my guiding light,* Arith thought to herself, intoning the prayer she had said countless times before. *Saint Alicia lights the darkness, of mind, and soul.*

*But is she still watching you?*

Arith heard a soft wail of pain rise up from the decks below, barely audible over the roar of the ocean. One of the refugees, severely wounded, most likely. The pitiful sound hurt her, made her heart ache, and a chill crept up her spine. There was only so much that could be done for the survivors of the homeland. She was only one woman.

Captain Apollo Stavros strolled up beside her. He wore a wide, humorless grin, and had a glint in his eye that only came from the confidence of years of believing in yourself. Perhaps that was a bit cocky of him, but as she had quickly found out, not even Arith could fault him. That grin had been infectious during their long journey at sea, and a point of warmth in a cold, trying time that she had grown fond of. It certainly helped pierce through the darkness.

"Afternoon, lass," he said with a thick accent that Arith still could not quite place. South Harbor, or maybe the Makkaton range, but he certainly was *not* Wenton. He rested his large, tattooed forearms on the taffrail, and looked out over the violent sea waves beside her with a distant gaze. "Can you sing me one of your marching tunes?" He asked, not looking at her.

*Straightforward with that he wants.* Arith had learned over their short journey together that Apollo was not the type of man to beat around the bush. He spoke plainly, and you never had to guess at what he wanted. "Marching tune?" She asked, attempting her best to feign confusion, but she knew right away it wasn't convincing. She was no good at lying.

Captain Apollo pointed at his cheek. "Yer scars, lass. You was a Sister of the Order Tempest." It wasn't a question. "Only time a woman is that scarred is when she served."

Arith reached up, and gently caressed one of the wicked furrows that ran across her cheek with her finger. She jerked her finger away, as if pained, and flinched. "I was never very good at singing them," She replied softly. Her voice croaked despite her best effort to maintain her composure.

"Can ye try?" Apollo urged, his voice just as soft, "it would...it would ease th' hearts o' the men. The wounded." He sighed, shrugging. "They had to abandon their homes. *You* had to as well."

*Curious, Arith thought, that was very indirect for Apollo.* He had always seemed to be a direct, care-free man. This was an odd, but welcome chip in his cheerful façade. *No, he certainly isn't a man who is used to being flustered like this. He's just as terrified as the men below.*

*Just as terrified as me.*

She frowned, trying to remember those songs from so long ago.

Arith rocked gently in her saddle as her horse trotted over the uneven ground of the rocky terrain. The land was mostly barren out here in the great plains: just muted, green-brown grass and rock as far as the eye could see.

Riding a horse, while convenient, was by no means a perfect method of transportation. Arith's thighs, and rear were sore, and chafed, but she didn't complain. She could have had it far worse. Most of her sisters marched along the rocky ground in their full, resplendent plate, and carried all of their equipment on their backs.

One thousand Tempest knights, a full legion, each a fully-fledged soldier and religious ambassador, marched behind her in perfect lock-step unison.

Arith's position as a hospitaller allotted her special privileges within the company, which she appreciated, but was one she felt guilty taking advantage of. She was allowed to ride with the company command, and veterans at the front of the procession on horseback.

Commander Evangelia Antonis rode at the very front. Her blonde-white mane fluttered out behind her in the wind like a long, flapping banner that caught the early morning sunlight,

and shimmered. She seemed to always march and ride with her helmet off, despite the code of conduct instructing that the helmet should always be worn when near battle. Evangelia claimed that she liked the feeling of wind in her hair.

*Suppose I can't fault her, Arith thought, I don't wear my helmet either.*

A soft, singing voice echoed around them as they marched. Sister Erin, probably the youngest member of the legion, rode beside the group. She was a ward to one of Evangelia's honor guards, and allowed a position and mount up front. She had been ordered to sing for their march, and her soft voice drifted around them.

Arith frowned at the choice of music. If it had been her, she wouldn't have picked a hymn of *mourning*. It certainly set the wrong mood. The young ward's voice was good, beautiful in fact, but the tone of the hymn was haunting. *Not exactly the kind of thing I want to hear as I march into battle against demonic hordes.*

As if reading her mind, Evangelia grunted. "Erin," she growled, glancing over her shoulder with a sharp eye, "something different, *please*."

*Well, they don't call her The Lion for nothing.* Arith smirked despite herself.

Sister Erin yelped, her song halted, and hunched low in her saddle. "Y-yes, Commander. What would you like to hear instead?"

"Something cheerful," one of the honor guard, Arith hadn't learned her name yet, said. "Do you know any cadence?"

"C-cadence?" Erin asked.

"Aye," Evangelia said, "one of those, if you would." Arith could hear the smile in the woman's voice.

"I-I'm afraid I don't know any." Arith didn't think it possible, but Erin actually managed to slump *lower* into her saddle.

A few of the honor guard laughed, voices echoing inside of their helmets. One of them opened her face plate with a snap of metal, and she shouted into the air. It was probably the most *vile* and *tasteless* verse Arith had ever heard. *She wants to do what!?* To Arith's chagrin, the next honor guard in line actually *joined in*.

Once the opening verse had been shouted, the line behind them echoed in time. The row of sisters next in line slammed the hafts of their halberds down against the stone, creating an echoing snap that rolled across the open hills like thunder.

The row behind them joined in, and one by one, the entire company began to bellow the cadence. The women shouted the song, in perfect unison, into the sky.

*Saint Alicia!* Arith thought grimly, *save these poor women if this is what they find entertaining!* As repulsed as she was by the flagrant display, and degenerate verses, she

couldn't help but crack a smile at the comradery of it, and soon Arith found herself humming along to the catchy melody.

*Sisters! Hear me, ho!  
We march to the land's unknown  
Tempest, the demons fear!  
Home, we'll see  
After our march is complete  
and if we should fall,  
kiss our men good-night,  
and rear them strong daughters!*

Captain Apollo threw his head back, and laughed.

It was a hearty, warm laugh, that cut through the chill of the grey air, and Arith couldn't help but smile at the man.

"Ah, lass," he said, turning to her with that wide smile, "it seems the Tempest company was no better than th' common sailor!" He actually wiped away a stray tear.

"Our marching cadences were a bit inappropriate," she admitted. "The cardinals back home would have been very cross with us, for certain."

*A home, and cardinals that I will never see again.*

Apollo's smile faded, and he nodded. He was an attractive man, older, like Arith herself, with a scratchy, dark beard. His skin was tanned, and blemished from long days spent at sea. Burnt by salt and sun. "We should get below deck," he said, motioning over his shoulder with his head. "The rains an' wind will be 'ere soon enough."

The storm rumbled in the distance, as if in response to the man's words. Grey clouds above them slowly began to churn, and twist. Waves crashed louder, and taller than they had moments earlier.

Arith nodded. She was no sailor, and would trust in his judgement. She followed the captain to the stairs that led below decks. Around them, the rest of the skeleton crew were finishing tying everything down, and making their final preparations for weathering the coming storm.

Below, there was nothing to muffle the sounds of wailing, dying men.

A stale, metallic smell assaulted Arith's nostrils, so pungent that she could *taste* it. It was a smell she was all too familiar with, but it still affected her every time it struck her: it was *never* pleasant.

The lower deck, once storage, had been entirely converted into an infirmary ward for the sick, and wounded refugees. They laid in makeshift beds, arranged in haphazard rows along the length of the ship, and nearly took up every last bit of available floor space. Some were better off than others, sporting superficial wounds that they would recover from.

Others were not so lucky.

Taking a deep breath, Arith began her rounds. She started by quickly checking in on those patients who were not at risk, giving them brief words of encouragement, and praying over them. They thanked her, and she moved on.

Arith had to climb over beds to reach the prow section of the ward, where the worst were kept.

A man waited for her on a makeshift bed beside a pile of stacked crates. He was dark-skinned, though he was so pale that it was difficult to tell. His left arm had been removed, and the entire left side of his body was covered in tender, red burn markings that laced across his skin like streaks of lightning. The man was barely conscious. Eyes closed, his eyelids fluttered as he fidgeted on the bed, softly grunting and groaning in pain.

Arith knelt beside the man's bed, and pulled out a box from her hospitaller's satchel. Inside was a pestle and mortar, along with a small pinch of dried, green herbs. She carefully crushed the herb, then mixed the debris with water to create a thin cream to rub across the man's wounds.

It was dirty, thankless work, but someone had to do it, and she was the only one on board with medical experience. Arith took pleasure in performing the menial task. There was a cathartic nature to the repetition of it.

The man seemed to ease as she spread the ointment across his skin. He stopped fidgeting, and there was a small look of relief on his face. Arith smiled. It wouldn't last long, but perhaps it would allow the man to sleep for a little bit.

She knew that this man would die. He had nearly died of shock from losing his arm. He was barely clinging to life. The wound was infected, and Arith did not possess the medicine to treat it. She was stubbornly tending to the man in some vain hope that he might survive. Even if it was impossible, Arith still felt a sense of responsibility for the man. She wouldn't accept herself doing nothing, even if the attempt was futile.

She had lost far too many already.

Arith sniffed. The sharp, copper tang of blood filled her nose. The smell mingled with the rough, smoke-thick air, making her nauseous. There was something else in the air, too. She couldn't quite place it. It was a strange mixture of lavender, and fecal matter.

*I only ever smell that around demons.*

All around her men and women moaned in pain, buildings burned, and she could hear shouting as soldiers rounded up the last of the creatures. The battle was at an end, but there was still much work to do.

She crested a small hill, just on the edge of the small town, and saw commander Antonis there with a group of survivors from the village. They all looked scared, and hunched over like scared scuttlers about to hide in their shells. All bore superficial wounds, but the scars they carried inside now were ones Arith knew would never heal.

Evangelia towered over them in her gleaming plate, easily a head taller than the villagers. Despite being spattered with black ichor, and her face covered in soot, she still managed to strike an imposing figure. Arith knew it was a front however. *She's just as tired as the rest of us.*

"Which direction did the demons attack from?" Evangelia asked as Arith approached.

"The south, Ma'am," a middle-aged farmer answered. He cradled his left arm across his belly, and was covered in dried blood. "Sorry, I don't have any more specifics for you. The militia was too busy fighting itself."

"Fighting itself?" Arith cocked her head as she stepped up beside the commander. Her black hospitaller's coat whipped gently in the wind. She was also dirty, and spattered with blood, though it was the dark crimson of dead villagers, and dead sisters.

"Aye," the man nodded. "Strangest thing. Just before the attack, I'd say maybe half of my men, lifelong friends and family, just up and turned on us." He shuddered visibly, eyes dropping to the ground. "I...I watched Carmine run his spear straight through Jenkin's gut without so much as a warning."

Commander Evangelia glanced to Arith with a stern, knowing look.

*And so, He was given the power to sway the hearts of men.* Arith shuddered.

"Thank you," Evangelia said, turning back to the villagers, "return to your wounded. When you're able, make for the capital. The guard will let you into the valley."

The villagers nodded in thanks, and shuffled off with dead eyes.

Arith raised an eyebrow at Evangelia.

The commander growled. She had a way of doing that when she was thinking deeply. Arith broke the silence. "They're getting bolder. Mayfield is closer to the capital than any attack before. Men turning on their family—"

"We march," Evangelia said curtly.

"We cannot simply ignore—"

"We," Evangelia cut her off, "march. That is all we can do. We can fight, and end this incursion before it has a chance to find traction. This was merely a splinter force of the horde, sent to probe, and test the defenses of humanity. What they found was untrained villagers, civilians. The Order Tempest will march out to face them. We will drive them back to whatever hell-spawn sent them to us."

Arith twitched. Her eyes ached, and she yearned to scratch them. Around the two women, the once happy farming village burned. The fires would go unchecked until only ashes remained. Partly because they lacked the means to fight the flames, but also because it would serve as a pyre for the dead, and as cleansing flames against the demons.

She wanted to berate the commander, wanted to beg her to reconsider. Arith was so, so tired. They had lost so many already. She couldn't think of anything to say. Over the years, the two of them had become close, and Evangeline had confided in her as one would to a close friend. But despite all of that, Arith found that she couldn't find the words, couldn't think of a single thing to say to her. *Damnit girl! Say something to her!*

Arith simply nodded, and that was that.

The storm struck their ship that night.

Rain came down at a steep angle, striking the hull like a million tiny arrows. Wind screamed as it wriggled through the smallest openings, and whistled like a howling demon as it escaped out the other side.

Arith grabbed firmly onto a rigging net to stop herself from falling as the ship dropped over another wave. She grimaced as her muscles pulled, and she was splashed with freezing water.

Men moaned in pain, and fear. Many of the wounded soldiers had been bedridden, and couldn't stand, so Arith had tied them down with rope, sheets, and whatever else she could find around the ship. Despite her efforts, she knew many of them wouldn't survive. There were cracks in the hull, and salt water sprayed, and soaked the storage deck.

A man howled in agony as saltwater coated his open wounds.

Arith gritted her teeth, feeling the strain in her arm. Once there was relief, she let go of the netting, and quickly shuffled along the floor towards her next patient.

*Save as many as you can, she commanded herself, don't give up! Just save one, one more! Don't let them die!*

A mass of black, purple, and red bodies surrounded them.

The demons seemed to contort, and writhe across one another in a seamless mass, splitting apart at random junctions, and seemingly birthing a never-ending stream of horrors. Arith found that looking directly at them caused her eyeballs to itch, and she made a habit of looking away when she could.

Dozens of her sisters lay at her feet. Their bodies were torn, split, broken, and their armor, once resplendent and shining silver, was rent open, and dulled by thick, black ichor. She had done her best to save those she could, but there was nothing she could do for them now. Even the ones she had managed to save wouldn't be able to escape, or fight back against the endless tide of demons.

She knelt in the dirt, clutching her rosary, muttering the last rites for those who lay dying.

"Hold!" Commander Antonis screamed. Her face was coated in ichor, and her blonde locks were knotted, and gnarled with blood. "Where are my lancers?"

"Spent!" Sister Halle shouted back, desperation creeping into her voice. She had run out of shells, and had resorted to stabbing the hordes of demons with her lance-cannon.



Arith heard Evangelia curse. It was a sharp, exacerbated outburst that she had never heard from the woman before.

A fraction of the Tempest company remained. They held a hill, but barely. Below them, the mass of demons writhed, and began to spread. The creatures howled, dripping ichor and slather as they stampeded up the hill. No two were alike. Some sported massive talons, others gnashing teeth-filled maws, and others seemed to flow like liquid, covered in writhing, poisonous tentacles. They ran over each other in their desire to overwhelm the soldiers, like a raging black avalanche roaring uphill.

Arith looked up from the dead. *God help us, I can't even see the horizon anymore.*  
The sun was trapped behind thick, black clouds, and a mass of writhing, demonic bodies stretched so far into the distance that the horizon line seemed to ripple.

Arith stood, ran to Evangelia, and yanked her by the shoulder guard. "We need to retreat!" She screamed to be heard over the roar of battle.

Pain flashed across the commander's face, her *friend's* face. There was defiance there too, there always was, strong, bright, but faltering. The Tempest had never retreated, never failed. Sisters fell, but they had never been routed.

Until today.

"Eva!" Arith pleaded again.

The commander cursed again, then shouted, "Fall back!"

As one, the sisters broke, and fled.

Egged on by the retreating soldiers, the writhing mass of demons surged forwards. Wicked, taloned hands reached out for the fleeing women. Arith turned over her shoulder, and watched Sister Halle be dragged down by a mass of bodies. She screamed as her armor was crushed, and blood sprayed up, before she disappeared into the blackness.

*Run! Just keep running!* Arith's lungs felt like they were on fire. She pounded across the fields, chased by the horrors, and surrounded by the screams of the dying. One by one, she heard her sister's dying cries as they were torn down, and utterly destroyed. The enemy had no remorse, no mercy. There was only the endless horde of darkness.

Arith ran, and ran, and *ran*, until she couldn't anymore.

She dropped, face first, onto the grassy ground. The grass was rough, brown, and dying. Arith winced. Her fingers curled in the dirt.

The sounds of demonic chittering echoed silently over the horizon, but it didn't seem to be getting closer. In fact, the sound seemed to be moving away from her. The sounds grew quieter, and quieter, until all she could hear was the thundering of her heart, and a soft, gentle breeze rustling through dead grass.

Tears streamed down her cheeks, and she let out a pathetic, defiant whimper.

She couldn't hear the cries of her sister anymore.

The storm raged through the night, and ended the next morning.

Sunlight illuminated the world for the first time in a fortnight, and it glimmered off the calm waves like a sea of brilliant diamonds.

A bird fluttered overhead, riding the gentle breeze, and squawked sharply.

Few of Arith's patients had survived the storm.

She knelt on the deck, letting the sun warm her skin. Her robes were tattered, soaked, and clung to her by threads. A series of cuts and scrapes had only just healed, and she ached something fierce.

Captain Apollo stood over her, leaning against the taffrail, and nursed his wounded leg. "Barely made it through that one," he muttered.

"The crucible is the...is the..." Arith began the verse, but found that she couldn't finish it. She was so tired, and surprisingly, she found that she just didn't *care*. All she wanted to do was feel the warmth of the sun on her skin, and enjoy the clear, open sky.

Though many had passed during the storm, the others who had survived were likely to make the rest of the journey. Their destination was not far out, and they would be able to start anew.

*I just had to survive that last tempest.*

## Avid

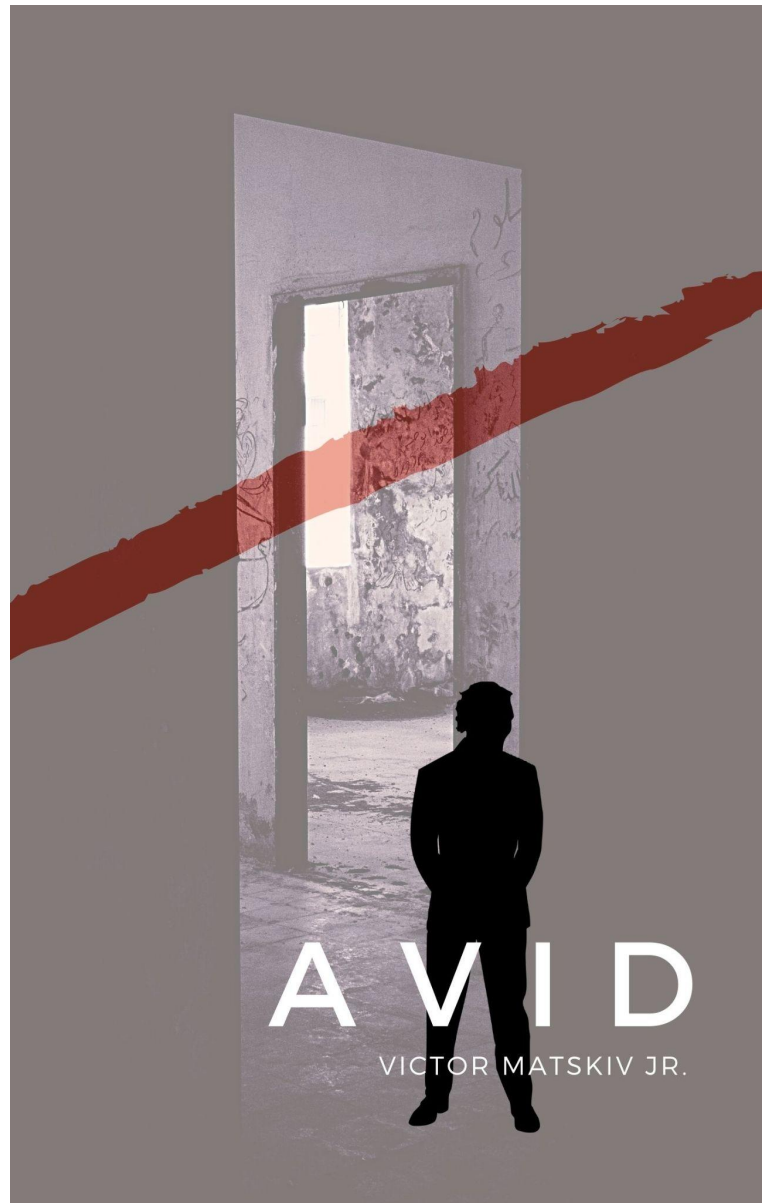
Victor Matskiv Jr

Her long and slender legs spoke to him, one crossed over the other, both wrapped in black leggings. He tuned her out as she discussed what he could only surmise is important for him to hear, but only for so long. She turned to face him, essentially flaunting her lab coat. Her mature expressions, the glasses that reflected light off computer screens, and casual ponytail hairstyle - it sometimes defeats his self confidence, because nobody could capture his gaze for so long. Marianne asks him if he's listening, to which he stutters and recites a random scientific-sounding word she said. While the shine in her glasses covered her eyes, Noah knew she rolled them. At least he saw her smile.

He remembered this scene as he succumbed to the sound of the wind and the sight in front of him. Shock and vigor ran through his body as he kept repeating "I couldn't make it" to himself. Every other quick moment, he nearly fainted. However, even now he gazed at her. Even as she lay across the colorless grass, painted by the

light shadows of the tree leaves above. Even when her hazelnut eyes were lifeless underneath her cracked glasses... and when blood poured out of her wounds - he was fixated. The adrenaline began fading away, he could feel the air grazing against his skin again, and the blood coloring his fist that held a red machete. His muscles ached as his head raced, and his eyes twitched when he stepped backwards, heels touching the corpse of a man he killed. He unfixed his gaze, trying to look at the dead body, only to vomit from the smell.

The scent of gunpowder and corpses wafted along with the wind, creating a suffocating density. Tears flew down Noah's face as he breathed, collapsing on the ground subsequently, shaking vigorously. He dropped the machete when a sudden stinging urged his left side. With his dirty hands, he lightly parted the clothing to find a bright red spot. The pain surged as the



wound became exposed to the cold air. He cursed under his breath while squinting his eyes and taking a deep breath.

After a long moment's notice, he turned his attention back to Marianne's corpse. Coated in blood, he noticed an auto injector held tightly in her right hand. He roughly uncovered the fingers and took it.

After rubbing off some of the blood, Noah could see text printed on the surface of the pen, written Subject-102A - HANDLE WITH EXTREME CARE. He knew what this was. He stared at the injector as the wind strengthened and the sky turned orange, and clutched it. He took a long moment to make his decision, then cleaned away more blood to find instructions. Then, gripping the pen tightly, he pressed hard, holding his breath, against the side of Marianne's neck. Click - the device quickly beeped three times. He exhaled as he brought forth the injector, noticing a blinking red light at the back of the pen.

Noah sighed, realizing it was empty. Now, the sound of the rustling leaves in the wind spoke to him. He set aside his anger and thought backwards. He needed to find one of them. A Ghoul.

The orange sky began turning blue, and a few stars - the brightest ones like Sirius - were now making their appearance. The wind pushed against his ears as he listened, instinctively holding his breath.

A crow's cries echoed in the heavy breeze, then the low-humming of a distant, unseen plane grew marginally louder. The leaves rustled violently, matching the rising tension of the world. The clothes on the corpses wafted aggressively and the poisonous smell of their drying blood disappeared, replaced with nothing. At this point, the last slivers of the sun hid behind the Earth, drawing the night darker, without a Moon to shine on it.

And then he heard faint howls, blending with the wind, masking their approach. A quiet collection of moans and elevating screeching filled the air with an increasing dread, coalescing into a droning that mimicked what one would consider the sound of the end of the world. In a rising panic, Noah put the injector in his pocket and unholstered his pistol, clicking the hammer. He quickly ejected the magazine, met with dirty bullets inside it. He brushed the surface of them with his fingers, forgetting they were covered in blood. He rubbed it with the sleeve of his jacket, then slid the magazine back in the gun and pulled back the slide, struggling for a moment. Dust flew out of the ejection port and a dirty bullet flew out. Noah ignored the bullet and quickly let go of the slide. He held the gun as tightly as he could, and stood up. A moment, and then Noah could tell the general direction from where the howling came. He stumbled across the colorless grass, jogging the opposite way.

And the howls grew louder.

They deafened the echoes of the crows and the violent leaves - even the loud concrete thumps Noah made as he jogged. The pain in his left side grew worse. His breath suffered as he ran. His eyes watered as the wind brushed against them, and his flashlight flickered like a life about to die.

WELCOME TO NEW TEMPIX, the sign stuck with a hatchet read. Noah ran straight past it as distant firework-like pops were heard within the town. As they rapidly fired, the howling

finally overtook the volume of the night. He frantically turned as heavy groaning emanated from alleyways, like hunters waiting for their prey. They shuffled across concrete, taking advantage of the dark to conceal themselves, drooling in anticipation. Past decimated cars and abandoned tanks, skeletons leaned against walls and empty baby carriages scattered across the road - faint black particles floated in the air, collecting together in the dark areas, where the light of the flickering street lamps didn't reach.

The pain in his left side suddenly spiked, flinching Noah. Continuously walking, he looked behind him to see a trail of blood. His hand was covered in bright red. He picked up the pace as the noise down the dark road behind him grew louder. He could hear the groans in the alleyways, and wondered why none of them emerged. A few more meters, and his foot trapped itself on the ground. In trying to jerk his leg out of it, he tripped. The gun dropped just in front of him. Collapsed on the ground, he built up the strength to sit himself up.

The noise grew louder.

Knees scraping across the bare road, he grabbed the object that held his foot, but his failed attempt to free it left him panicked. The object itself felt as though it were covered in dirt and bugs, and liquids. It was firm but also weak, as though the surface of it was peeling. He held it tightly, urging more force on it, eventually snapping it like a branch. He froze still as little bits of sensations crawled in his hand that held the object - fingers. Further behind him, under the flickering spotlights on the road, black silhouettes emerged, forming a single distant stretching mass.

He reacted immediately and shot the object in the dark with his gun - meeting a ghoulish screaming, followed by a dronish gurgling. Little bits of liquid flew onto his face, somewhat burning the skin underneath like hot water. Desperately, he collected himself, standing up on his aching legs, and kept walking. The distant mass behind him grew larger in size. The popping in the town didn't stop, and Noah could see orange tracers painting the sky as quickly as shooting stars. The pain in his left side forced him to collapse downwards as his hand covering the wound became showered in his blood. His leg limped from earlier, and the scrapes on his knees were bare to the cold air. As he profusely hyperventilated, facing the ground, he could see bits of black liquid drop from his face. His exhausted strength was barely enough to wipe it.

On the verge of unconsciousness, the auto injector fell out onto the ground. He noticed it, and couldn't help but think of Marianne. Noah leaned in next to her to see the computer screen she was glued to.

"You see--" her glasses blinded him in the dark - "What does this look like to you?"

He couldn't answer that. He could see a detailed photograph of an open wound on a corpse, except the inside of the wound was empty - pitch black. Noah's confusion about whether the photograph was authentic, censored, or low quality struck him with a loss of words.

"You can't see anything, right?" Marianne interrupted his thought process.

"No."

"I asked an unfair question of you to really show how mysterious Ghouls are. This is what their insides look like - pitch black, emitting no energy our technology can read. No heat, no X-Rays, nothing," she elaborated.

"Hunks of flesh shaped like humans, walking around with dead space inside them," Noah muttered.

She nodded, clearly proud of herself - he could tell. "Although--" Marianne continued, busily typing on her chunky keyboard. "After running some on-site tests of these subjects, we theorize that this black mass - we call it Subject-102A - is a new type of matter that consumes the energy found in the bonds within particles and neurons and whatnot. Then-- it effectively uses it to replicate itself, converting regular matter into Black Matter. That's what you see in the photograph. With enough time, a Ghoul will become a creature colored as dark as a black hole."

"English please. I might be the overseer, but I'm no scientist."

She smiled cutely. "Under certain conditions, it might be possible to revitalize dead neurons, damaged parts of organs - revive dead brains," she said, sitting perfectly still, leaned towards Noah a bit close for comfort. Leaned back to gain space, his mouth hung a bit open as he looked to the side at the computer screen - with a document on-screen titled HUMAN BEING REVIVAL PROJECT - 2027.

He looked at the injector on the ground, written Subject-102A on its surface, and remembered. He wasn't done.

His body felt as though it were crumbling, but he shakily grabbed the pen and stood up, nearly fainting. He slowly turned behind him, leaning his head back in an attempt to relax - the mass of Ghouls in the distance were drawing closer. Breathing and bleeding hard, he shifted his body forward down the road again like a walking corpse.

The morning after, the pain in his left side reminded Noah that he was, in fact, not dead. In a dark room, he rested. Through the slivers in between the wood planks that boarded up every window, pale light highlighted the dust particles, still hovering. The shots from last night stopped hours ago. The howling went away. The wind quietened. He couldn't see his leg, but he knew something was wrong with it. He felt unfocused, staring at the gray ceiling. His need to go check on his leg was outweighed by the need to do absolutely nothing. To sit still and embrace listlessness. His wound was sewed, albeit shabbily, and the bleeding has stopped since then. When his neck became stiff, Noah leaned his head elsewhere - to a wall. There was a dust-covered desk beside the front door. Papers burnt like charcoal were scattered across the desk and the floor. Sitting on top of a desk was a photograph of a child. The name Elena was written in pen across the picture.

It reminded him of something.

Grunting out of mild pain and exhaust, Noah slowly unseated himself from the couch. He held his bandaged wound with his hand and stumbled towards the restroom. There was still electricity, the lights switched on. Noah saw the sink he had used to clean his wound, and where he had washed his hands. It was soaked, as if somebody bled on it. The red towels he had used

last night laid everywhere in the restroom. He then saw himself in the mirror. He hated the way he looked. Especially now. He was miserable.

He sat down on the floor, carefully avoiding the bloodied towels, and leaned against the wall.

He lifted his right leg and rolled up the sleeves of his black jeans. At first glance, there was nothing visibly wrong with his leg, but it ached very aggressively. He caressed the surface of the leg, scratched and dirtied as it was, to find a small area where the surface of his skin was as hard as stone. He was left puzzled because there was no bruise, and no cut. He applied pressure slowly with his thumbs, and felt a small surge of pain. He immediately withdrew his hands.

He thought about it for a moment as the pain faded away, and his leg began aching again. A strained muscle? He sighed as he looked away, giving in to his exhaust. Accompanying the silence was a faint buzzing within the walls. Noah felt his heart pounding as he closed his eyes and tried falling asleep. But he gave way to the smell of the restroom, feeling the need to leave. It smelled like blood.

He remembered the child. It reminded him of the children.

Walking through the dust, gun held in hand, he waited to hear the wind as he approached the front door. No birds were heard, no crows, no pops in the distance nor howling. The air was silent, the dust floating in the dim light rays spoke the loudest.

He grabbed the dirt-stained doorknob and slowly opened the door. Pale light extended and struck the room, blinding Noah for a few moments. He raised a hand over his head, and aimed the gun with his other as he nudged the door with his foot.

When his eyes began adjusting to the open light, he saw bodies. On the porch of the home was a pale body, covered in a pitch black substance, scarred with many wounds. A modicum of dried drool could be seen just underneath the body's head facing down. Beyond the porch were more bodies. Noah held his gun up as he examined his surroundings.

Bodies were laying on the ground everywhere, extending across the entire road, lining up in the hundreds. All of them had dead pale skin, and were covered in the same pitch black substance, with lacerations across them.

"They sleep during the day," he remembered Marianne saying.

Across the road in front of Noah, on another porch, stood one of the bodies, staring at Noah. Its eyes glowed in the shadows, and its back was as hunched over as a troll's. Its mouth was hung open and it drooled.

"They prefer the dark. Being in the sunlight drains them. During the day, the best they can do is stay in absolute darkness," She said.

A distant humming could be heard within the Ghoul's throat on the opposite porch. It made a sound as though it were cackling, and then vomited black blood, collapsing on the ground. Noah stared at it, struck with disgust. He hated it. He hated all of it. He wanted to kill it.

He lost himself in thought as he watched the creature convulse on the ground. It stretched its arm into the sunlight, under which the rotting flesh visibly shined, outlining the pitch black creases. Like a dark oil, black liquid coalesced at the forefront of the arm, and dripped onto the sidewalk beneath it. The ghoul crawled out from the shadows, facing Noah. Its jaw was missing.

Bits of black particles emerged from the arm as it emerged further into the light. Its pacing slowed to a halt, and the gurgling in its throat silenced itself. The bright sickly pale eyes shut, as if they succumbed to sleep. The arm twitched, and then dropped on the ground. The particles disappeared.

There was no wind. There were no birds chirping. There were no shots in the distance. The leaves couldn't be heard rustling. The world stopped dead in its tracks as Noah immersed himself among the corpse-covered road. He held his head in his hands, and shut his eyes. He could feel his hatred flowing like adrenaline, pulsating and irritating him. He could feel the light touch of the air brushing against his skin, and waving his dark hair. But he couldn't hear it. He grabbed the pen out of his pockets and looked at its instructions again.

COLLECT ADHESIVE BEFORE EMPLOYING SUBJECT.

He circled around this idea. It reminded him of a conversation he had with Marianne. He was surrounded by the culmination of scientific greed. And he was now relying on that same greed to bring someone from the dead, and gain self-gratification. It was on the mainland, just before sunset, at a standard restaurant. The two of them sat outside where they could see the sun phasing in and out of passing clouds. The cobblestone ground was wet from rain early in the day. Passerbyers went along down this downtown plaza, going on dates and sharing candy. Half of them wore masks, the other hugged and kissed in public. All of them were oblivious. He must've had a dull expression on his face because Marianne reached out and touched his hand. The two of them took off their own masks and put them aside. Marianne sat opposite the table from Noah, dressed in black and white, a dress with no sleeves and a thin jacket. Her earrings glowed with the disappearing sunlight and with the emerging stars in the sky. He couldn't help but laugh. He lost himself again, and felt like a child for it. It was funny to him how he and Marianne were worlds apart from the passerbyers in the plaza. He thought Marianne felt the same way as she occasionally stared off at them. They both opened the menus.

"Do you like Chardonnay?" Marianne asks, glued to the menu with her eyes sparkling.

"No--" Noah raised the pitch of his voice, almost like a question.

"Why not?"

Noah put down the menu and looked off into space. "The last time I tried it, it tasted like Champagne."

"Champa--? When was the last time you had it?"

Noah could tell Marianne was confused not only about the Chardonnay. "Dunno, I must've been 18 or so."

"So you're telling me it's been a decade since you last had it?" Noah realized the fallacy of his taste buds.



"You should try the Chardonnay here, it's great!" she chuckled, closing her eyes. Noah couldn't help but smile, despite being embarrassed. She seemed like she was enjoying herself.

"Sure."

And momentarily, they had both forgotten about the differences between them and other people. How their jobs consist of secret illegal scientific experimentation and containing viral outbreaks that could end the world. They went on for a lost amount of time as they talked about their daily lives outside of work, remembering how to flirt in the process.

They were interrupted as a loud coughing could be heard behind the glass, inside the restaurant. People with masks were scattered away from what appeared to be an epicenter. A lone man stood with one hand on his desk and the other over his mouth as he coughed vigorously. No doubt everybody could also feel the same pain his throat felt. Waiters broke through the crowd and brought in first aid kits and various other supplies. One of them stood in the back on a phone, clearly calling the ambulance.

Noah and Marianne stared in silence, sharing the same grim expression. Minutes later after the man was escorted somewhere else, the area in that restaurant began getting deep cleaned, and customers were rearranged to other tables, away from the quarantined table. Waiters came by, carrying thermal scanners, examining every person. When the tension settled, a waiter brought their Chardonnay.

"What we did seven years ago never went away, huh," Marianne sighed.

Noah picked up his glass and had a reluctant sip. It really did taste good, for Chardonnay. But he didn't have a response to what Marianne said. His head was sunk down, facing his drink. He looked up and found her visibly upset.

"No," he said.

A moment of silence as the sun hid behind mountains just below the clouds. Less passerbyers were seen, and the air grew cold.

"And we can't tell these people, let alone the world, that we made this mistake," She continued.

"Mhm."

"And now we made another mistake, another outbreak. Except this time it's much worse than Covid. This time, if we're not careful, the world could really end," She hung her head back, staring at the darkening sky.

As Marianne talked, Noah was absorbed by his reflection in his drink. She was right. "Is there a point to all this if it breaks us?"

"Hm?" she tilted her head like a curious cat.

"The agency we work at - they work in the shadows in order to bring about scientific progress, and then lead the world. They predict our future, and create it for us. Are they worth it? They make 'mistakes' like Covid, and now with the recent outbreak - when is it enough for them?"

He watches her as she contemplates.

"I guess that's... hard to answer. Sometimes when we try and do something, it doesn't work out. Especially with science. We tried experimenting with Dark Matter and this Ghoul outbreak happened as a result. It's an absurd anti-miracle. Completely unpredictable. Nobody could've seen that coming."

"Shouldn't we be more cautious at that point? Wasn't the Dark Matter project already controversial in the first place? The paper it was based on listed many risks--did the upper management not think that it was too dangerous?"

She took a moment before answering that.

"Should we have stopped then? During the Cold War when we participated in the Space Race, do you think we let the risks stop us before we sent people to the Moon?"

"That must be differe--"

"It's not, though. People are risked, just like resources," she said with an ever-increasing upset tone. She then employs a hardened expression on her face. She looks up at Noah stoically.

"Science is inhuman. It doesn't adhere to us. We would be selfish if... we thought we could do things the way we want. It doesn't work like that."

Noah is left with no words to utter. He'd never seen Marianne act or look this way before.

She continued. "The universe and the way it works doesn't adhere to us--we shouldn't limit ourselves to human standards of scientific ethics. Otherwise we get nothing done."

"Huh?" Noah starts to react.

"But there can't be a point in pursuing scientific dreams if we stop being human--it's not about limiting ourselves, it's about drawing a line!" He slightly raised his voice out of concern.

"People die," She said. "Those deaths don't matter to science."

"That can't be all there is to it--" Noah's eyes widened. He could see her eyes very slightly twitching, as if she were holding back.

"Mary--" he reached out.

"I'm sorry. I can't right now. I'll see you another day," she abruptly leaves. Left astonished, Noah thinks about what she said.

As he saw the black corpses on the road amidst the silent wind, he thinks about all the sleeping Ghouls in front of him who were once people. They had all submitted themselves to experiments the rest of the world would never approve of. In life, they worked for advancing science, and then sharing that with the rest of the world.

He questions if in that case they all wanted to die; if that's what pursuing science meant. Whether Marianne wanted to die, hunted down by men with guns and shot to death.

He looked at the instructions again - COLLECT ADHESIVE BEFORE EMPLOYING SUBJECT - and remembered something Marianne did. He looked at the back of the pen, where small red lights blinked the first time he tried injecting her, and pushed a button. A tiny capsule came out. He turns the pen marginally, finding a glass panel with a view inside the capsule filled with an ocean-blue. That was the adhesive. Without the adhesive, the black blood would break out of the pen. The adhesive was also engineered to reorient the structure of the blood, that way it can be used to bring somebody back to life. Though it's never been successfully tested, he knew.

He walked over to one of the sleeping Ghouls on the road, and gently pressed the injector against the body's neck, worried he might wake it up. After a couple of button switches, the pen begins extracting black blood from the body. He waits there a long moment for the device to finish. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see something shining just under the torso of the body. At a closer glance, he could see it was a small cross. In contrast to the rest of the Ghoul, it shined with no stains on it. No blood covered it, red or black. No dirt, wet or dry - and no dust. It reflected the sunlight like a glowing star.

The cross was of the same design his late parents kept. They had both gone to church every Wednesday when Noah was at school. They never took him with them. This alone, he remembered, drew envy into him when he knew other kids who went to church with their parents. So when they died, he figured he ought to visit God. It was incredibly boring. However, after his conversation with Marianne, he felt the need to go visit again, after a number of years. His job had him sulking at every corner and the idea of an all-seeing being who was responsible for all of mankind's sins resonated with him.

He joked to himself in his head about he must be more of a religious fanatic than a scientific pursuer. It was ironic, considering he was the overseer of the Human Being Revival project. The church was devoid of people. The colors of the candles and the eerie medieval architecture shook him. But he didn't mind sulking among the fall colors. He sat down against a silky-smooth wooden bench and pondered. He wasn't here to pray. Mere moments later, he heard the echoes of the large doors at the entrance, and quickly turned around to find a man, neatly dressed in a black suit. He had dark sunglasses hung over the collar of his white shirt. He looked fairly young - younger than himself at the very least. As he walked down the aisle between the benches, he noticed Noah, and began approaching himself. Noah cracked an awkward smile, wondering why a random person took interest in him.

As he got closer, Noah noticed his eyes. They were very different from everybody else's. It matched his facial expression - apathetic and impassive. His eyes were very cold, from the color of them to the way he looked at him. They weren't alive at all, but they weren't dead either.

Instead, they looked occupied, or almost omnipotent. They struck Noah as the kind of eyes that could see the future. The echoes of the man's footsteps halted just in front of him, and he was given a hollow stare.

"Are you Noah Steiner?"

Noah's eyes widened with shock. To his surprise, his voice was a bit higher than he expected, as if he sounded younger than one might think.

"Of course you are. I knew that," the man said.

Noah froze. His heart beated hard, invoking a rising tension in his head. The man sat down next to Noah and looked off at the statue of Jesus.

"Overseer of the Human Being Revival Project at White Flora Innovations. 28 years old, never married," he said. A deathly silence followed.

"I guess that would make Marianne your first try," the man in the suit finished. Noah stared at him, struck as if he were about to die. Logically, he knew, there was nothing wrong here. If he knew about White Flora Innovations - the agency he worked at - then surely he must be an agent himself.

"Who--"

"Is it fun staring off at God, Noah?"

"I--I'm sorry?"

"Well that's what you do all the time. Your lack of experience in both faith and science leads you to the former. You must've joked in your head at some point about the irony of that, right? Considering you're the Overseer of the project and all."

He must've been sweating a lot because the man nonchalantly brought out a handkerchief. His cold eyes kept their gaze upon Noah, as if piercing him. He shakily accepted the handkerchief and rubbed his forehead.

"I won't tell you who I am. You shouldn't know. But--" he said as he brought out a small cross, leaning forward, "I happen to be a man of faith... for the most part. I would like to talk to you."

His expression remained stagnant the entire time, as though he were engineered never to blink or smile.

Noah cautiously accepted his offer.

"So, Noah. Why is it that you're here today?"

Noah stuttered, looking away from the man's distant gaze, trying to save himself. "W-what are we trying so hard to... accomplish?" He responds.

His head raced, wondering why the fuck this guy was here and what he wanted from him. "When is it that we can say 'that's enough' when people die?" Noah asked as he felt the man's deathly stare.

"Is that something you want to ask God?"

"Huh?"

"You're here for a reason, aren't you? Not for the embrace of our creator, but to answer your own question. In a way, you're asking how much value a human life has."

Stunned at his response, Noah immediately retracted his stress and thought about it. "I guess--mhm. How many lives we need to give for the sake of science."

"That seems fairly broad, considering you being here."

"What's that s'pposed to mean?"

"If you were only considering science, you would remove God from the equation. There would hardly be a need to think about it, even. When you compare a human life to science, naturally you value human life because science, on a level we consciously think about, doesn't exist without it. With that in mind, you could easily use your power as the Overseer to shut down the project," the suited man responded as he relaxedly sat back with his arm over the bench behind him, legs crossed, and gazed upon Jesus.

"I--I guess I could've, but I'm not sure if I should. It's not somethin' I didn't consider."

"Well of course. But at the end of the day, science is tangible. We hold power over it, and that's why the agency was created in the first place, to gain more power over it. Human life, on the other hand--" he pauses as he extends his hand, "--isn't tangible no matter how you look at it."

Noah keeps listening.

"What you're thinking about isn't science, but how much human life is worth as a whole. In other words, is it worth dying? You're weighing how much you matter. How much Marianne matters," he finishes.

"Why am I here for God then?"

"Because he created us. He gets to decide how much we're worth."

Noah faces forward, looking at the statue along with the suited man. The man then sighs for a small moment.

"After all, he must be human to place value upon something," his voice flattens - "Science can't do that. Science is inhuman. It doesn't adhere to us."

Noah heard those words before. He slowly turns his head to the man, who had faced away from the statue and Noah, into distant space, maintaining his apathetic expression.

"That should do it," the man muttered under his breath. Then he blinked for the first time.

"What... was that...?"

The man fixes his gaze at Noah.

"It's a justification. One that lets you become a monster. Against God, if you will," the cross shone brighter as lights passed by the windows.

"It means, Noah, that as long as you need to do something monstrous, it's okay to stop being human - to stop adhering to your humanity. You understand what that means, don't you?"

Frozen still, Noah's mind raced with a new perpetual stream of horrific thoughts he knew he shouldn't have.

"I need to go," Noah rushed up.

The man's flattened voice coursed with a hollow apathy: "Feel free."

At times, Noah held a conversation with Marianne in his head. At first, he would talk to her about things that he thought people would talk about on dates, not that he would know. Things like her hobbies, and his hobbies. Something unrelated to their work in WFI.

But yesterday, when he found her lifeless body under the cold-colored tree, the only conversation he could strike with her was hardly even one. Instead, it was a barrage of questions, embedded with self-righteous anger and pained expressions. Noah looked back yesterday and felt a chill down his spine when he remembered the sensations he felt, the light wind grazing against his skin and the blood that poured down his hands - it builds a queasy feeling that makes him furious.

And even now, as his leg throbs with an increasing pain, he feels an utter dread that reminds him he's at the end of the line.

On another porch, Noah sits down, making large creaking sounds that seemed to echo in the air absent of nature's sounds. He rolled up the sleeves of his right leg and was struck with a deathly scene. The spot he had pinched before was now swollen, and coated with a black and infectious-looking paint. It looked like the spreading of watercolor, and it was visibly spreading. The color of the skin surrounding the wound was becoming progressively pale. In mere moments, his entire leg was pure pale skin, partially covered in the black blood that leaked out of the wound and spread around his limbs like veins. Noah could feel himself getting warmer, as though he were coming down with a heavy fever. His forehead reverberated with a sharp pain as he held his head in his right hand and lost himself.

The end of the line was here. Noah's head was filled, just barely, with the thought that he knew was about to die. In mere moments, he's going to pass out and lose his consciousness, forever. When he next wakes up, he'll be devoid of thought and expression.

His grip on the injector was beginning to loosen, even with all the strength he could muster.

His vision went black.

He was dreaming. He dreamt of the events the day before yesterday. It was the day after his argument with Marianne in the restaurant. After his conversation with the man in black in the church, Noah sped to a private airport and flew over to their laboratory, where the Human Being Revival Project was being conducted. He remembered the panic he felt, urging him to find Marianne as soon as he could, and stop the project. He wasn't sure what was happening, but he felt he couldn't be selfless.

At the entrance of the laboratory, Noah had found a man leaned up against a small hill. A pathway of blood led to him. The pathway came from within the facility. At that point, Noah unholstered his handgun and continued.

The hallways of the facility were empty. Despite the soldier's body at the entrance, the walls inside the laboratory kept their pristine white colors, as clean as a newly mopped wood floor. The gray floor was less clean, stained here and there with footprints of mud. Noah's footsteps echoed in the hallways as he slowly crept along the walls, anticipating something to jump from around the corners he didn't turn.

Far into the lab, he had eventually found an unopened door that led to another hallway. The door itself was also as clean as the walls, aside from a bloodied handprint, the size of a child's, near the bottom. As he stepped close to the door, it automatically opened. Behind the opened door was a room, as dark as a night without the Moon. The blinding light from the hallways leaked into the room, but not enough so as to expose the darkness. At his foot was a small bracelet, interwoven with colored beads. Apart from the dark, loud fanning echoed within the room, as though several vacuums were on. There was a very faint scent of iron. Noah stretched his left arm to the wall next to the door and searched for a light switch as he maintained his stare at the dark. His eyes nearly shut as the lights came on, and then he saw more blood.

At the very end of the room was an intense splattering of red, painting half the room, as though a bomb had gone off. No bodies were seen. Just the blood, and the small bracelet beneath him. Noah scanned the room, momentarily directing his widened gaze to the right side where benches against a wall were located. On one of the benches was a small box, with a light emanating from within. The light was a stale pale, similar to spoiled milk. A soft shadow could be seen from inside the box, but it was unclear what it was. He rotated the box to find a large sticker against the glass surface, scratched and dirtied, wet. All the text was illegible, with the exception of a few scientific words.

He put down the box and walked to the end of the room where a hallway leading left and right laid itself out before him. Down the left side was a long corridor of doorways on the side, with signs next to each of them. Each sign read "Test Subject 01" "02," and "03" and more.

Down the right side, the hallway extended to another end where an extra door was. The flooring in this hallway was covered with more of those boxes, some of them as white as spoiled milk, and others colored like a pale canvas with black watercolor.

He made his way through the immense pool of splattered blood, careful not to slip as he saw his own reflection in the red liquid, and traversed down the right side, where he knew the main laboratory resided. However as he made his way down, the door suddenly opened. From within the room on the other side emerged Marianne, wearing a bloodied lab coat, holding hands with a child. The child herself looked half-asleep, and was injured down at her knees, where minor scrapes of blood could be seen. She could barely keep up with Marianne, even as they both stopped dead when Marianne noticed Noah down the hallway. He saw as Marianne breathed heavily, staring at him dead in his eyes. She was hunched over as a troll, looking defeated and pained.

The door behind Marianne opened once more, with a man coming out this time holding an assault rifle. He shouted as he shot at Marianne's direction, injuring her from behind. She yelled as she collapsed on the ground, and the child as well. Just as the man began running to Marianne, Noah aimed his gun at him, however stopped moving when he saw what was on the other side of the closing door.

The door closed itself, and Noah was frozen still, implanted with horror. He stared at the collapsed child, whose face looked dead. She slightly drooled. He then looked at the floor where the boxes were, and saw the text on one of them.

TEST SUBJECT - 04 - EMMA HEAD

And another box nearby, with a heavy shadow of black from within.

TEST SUBJECT - 04 - EMMA ARM

And there were more boxes, each labeled with various names for people and names for limbs - heads, arms, legs, the list went on.

His focus was distracted by Marianne, whose screams had been echoing in the hallway.

The man had been crushing her head with his foot and pulling her long brunette hair. He slammed her face into the floor, and her glasses cracked. She hadn't been struggling as much, as the man stopped being so rough suddenly. She extended her arm, her palm facing Noah.

Without a word, she begged.

The man aimed the assault rifle at her hand and shot it. Blood splattered across the floor as Marianne's voice went coarse. Her face grimaced, and tears flew down on her face beneath her cracked glasses.

Noah aimed at the man, and pulled the trigger repeatedly until the man fell backwards against the door, which opened itself again to make way for the body. It became visible to him again. The pile of bodies in the dark room behind the man. Children's bodies.

He stared at Marianne with contempt as she crawled on the ground. She slowly stood up. She used her other hand, pressing it against the wall, as she limped towards Noah, past him. He didn't pay her any attention. She kept her pace, and he stood still, not following her.



In his dream, he held another conversation with her in his head. "You had no choice, right?" She stayed silent.

"You didn't have any test subjects. You had to use the serum on somebody, right?" He didn't expect an answer. And he didn't get one.

His eyes opened slowly, met with a sickened blue sky. For the next long moment, he watched as the clouds in the sky slowly passed by, wavering in front of the sun, making way for beams of light that slightly burned his skin when they touched him. He didn't blink once. He also didn't breathe. As a matter of fact, he could hardly move, as though all of his strength were sapped.

However, in a few moments, he could hear the wind again. The leaves rustled lightly. Birds chirped far away. The air carried a grazing chill that felt pleasant against his burning skin. He twitched his fingers, just barely. Then he attempted moving his neck, met with a struggle. He then tried moving his arms, met with a little more success. Though, even as he slowly unfixed his body from the ground, he didn't breathe. He made an effort to exhale, but couldn't.

He wasn't able to inhale either. A sharp pain appeared in his throat, and he coughed vigorously as he shut his eyes tightly. He held his hands in front of his face, and felt bits of liquid wet them. When he opened his eyes again, he saw pale hands, with the forefronts of them coated in black. The bits of liquid he had coughed up were blood. It wasn't red.

Only a few thoughts circled at once, as though his mind were scattered. Simple thoughts like "hungry" or "scared" or "Marianne" or "why?" He didn't react as much as he would've liked. He slowly stood up, and remembered the injector in his hand as he heard it fall to the ground. He directed his unblinking stare to it, and stood still as he compiled a slow process of thoughts, eventually reaching a conclusion. That's right. He needed to revive Marianne.

And then he made his way back to the tree where Marianne's body resided - underneath the tree, where the grass looked even more colorless than before, save for the blood that spread across. The wind became quieter as the hours went by; as Noah stumbled like a zombie on the road, hunched over and drooling. The rustling of the leaves hid as well. It was as though the world had gone quiet yet again, making way for his slow and unending demise. As though it were being kind, and pitied Noah, giving him space to think and time to see. He stood over Marianne, pen clutched in his hand.

He kneeled, collapsing under his own weight. He pressed the device against her neck at a pace that fit the world, and pushed the small button. He could very vaguely hear the device - a slight sloshing from inside. He let go of the device, and dropped it on the grass, when the sound stopped.

And then he waited.

He waited for a few seconds. And then a minute.

Two minutes. Ten minutes. A few hours.

Then he blinked, very slowly, after half a day passed by.

It was at this point when a black substance began emerging from within the wounds on Marianne's body. The drying red became a dark black. Her clothes began to pale, and her skin was colored as though it were spoiled. Her hazelnut eyes had faded into the background white of the eyeballs. Hair had fallen out. Her limbs looked like twigs. As though she were melting, Noah watched as she stopped being beautiful.

He sat there as the sun was just above the horizon, as the sky turned orange yet again, and the brightest stars, like Sirius, were making an emerging night sky more interesting. The wind pushed against his ears as he listened and watched, unable to breathe.

No crows could be heard in the light breeze. No planes could be heard distantly flying in the sky. The clothes on the corpses around him wafted very faintly. The leaves rustled not much more than they had been already. The last slivers of the sun behind the Earth, drawing the night darker, and a full moon shone upon the colorless grass.

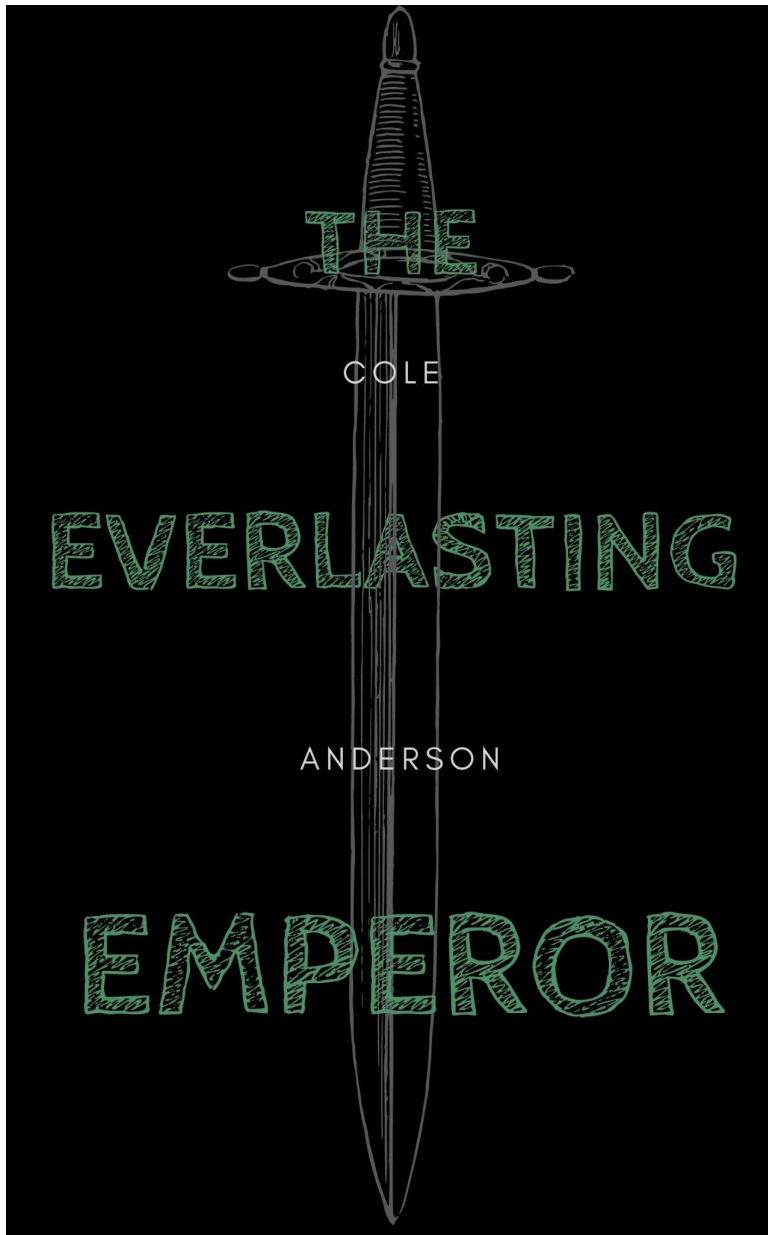
The moonlight stretched across the field and accompanied Noah as he hardly said a few words to himself in his head. The light faded the stars a bit. The grass waved slowly, gently touching Noah and Marianne. Miniature shadows spoke to him as the moonlight cast them, outlining a noisy texture of the Earth.

A few words stood out in his mind. Just a small stream of a thought. They indicated an emotion he lost, the one he had before he died. He slowly reminded himself what it was that he wanted, and why he sat here, devastated.

"I wanted to kill you myself."

# The Everlasting Emperor

Cole Anderson



Captain Duncan McKellen enjoyed marching through the open plains. He liked how the wind swept through the banners and the soft swishing sound of the grass. All the way back home in Doch Pontis the terrain was all sheer rock and dense woods. The high winds roared through the branches and shrieked around the stoney crags.

Here on the Emerald plain it gently twirled the decorative blue plumes, tassels, and crests on his men's ceremonial plate. The deep blue dye mirrored the cloudless, sunny sky above them.

Still marching Duncan pulled a water skin from his belt, and took a gulp. Mid gulp the soldier next to him, Luitenant Tom Donald, casually commented, "Fuckin' ugly thing aint it?"

Captain Duncan's peaceful reverie came to an abrupt, choking halt. They all came to a halt as Sergeant Tom gave his commander a few good slaps on the back and chuckled. Some of the men quietly laughed too.

Recovering himself, the captain shook his head with a smile, "I try not to look at you too

much, Tom." Everyone was openly laughing now. That was good, Duncan thought, the men had been awkwardly quiet since they came out of the treeline onto the plain.

Duncan said, "I agree though, the Imperial Palace is a damn ugly thing, and it doesn't seem to be getting any closer." Putting away his water skin, and hefting his long silver pike, Duncan resumed the steady pace of the march, "Let's go!" he commanded.

Duncan's eyes followed the road ahead of them through the plain. It gradually gave way to broken black earth, and then the steep slopes of a singular mountain. The Hollow Mountain stood imposingly over the insignificant specks in the sea of grass. It dominated the landscape with a finality. There was nothing on the plain but the mountain. Anything that would dare rise seemed to lie dormant in the knowledge it would be struck down. This would be done quickly and with authority. Duncan did not like to look at it as the sheer immensity of the thing made him queasy. The thought that he'd have to touch it while climbing the steps made him unusually anxious.

Captain Duncan was not a squeamish man. He was a veteran of countless skirmishes and even a few minor wars with the barbarians beyond the borders. These savage wars took place far beyond the tranquil status quo of the Empire. *This is not some barbarian witch's keep though* he thought, *this is the heart of the Empire*, and it chilled him like nothing else. Duncan and his men marched long into the evening, and the looming mountain never seemed to get any closer.

The soldiers had marched into the sunset, and stopped for the night to make camp along the road. Sitting around the fire pits, the men muttered passively amongst themselves. The commander surveyed his men with quiet concern. The low voices and clacking eating utensils of the men seemed to be muffled by the oppressive nightfall. It was as if a thick snow had settled over the plain, but the air was still. There was no moon in the still sky, and the stars did not come out. Duncan saw most soldiers either pretending not to notice, or swapped tales of similar experiences.

"No stars..." a small voice said from a nearby fire.

"Just like Ursa Stronghold, you remember?", another replied.

"You were at that bloodbath?" the first soldier asked the second with a wavering voice.

"Uh huh," the veteran replied with a mouth full of potatoes, "Great time." he said, raising his eyebrows and staring at the campfire.

Duncan knowingly smiled to himself, he was at that bloodbath too. Such unsettling sights were not all together uncommon for more seasoned soldiers of the Imperial Army. In fact it was a popular hobby among the more perverse fighting men to measure outrageous stories against one another. The fact that they had endured every horror imaginable made it quite a creative, and vulgar, way to spend their scant freetime.

The captain's fire sat slightly higher on the rise they made camp on. Duncan and Tom kept to themselves and the sergeants were instructed to keep a close watch on their men. Nobody could show a hint of indecision, not now, and Duncan would make well sure of it. Duncan and Tom casually rested next to their fire, eating and drinking. The smoke from roasting pork sausage drifted lazily out of sight on the dead wind.

Duncan was sharing a particularly eventful story of his with Tom. "Then we finally made it up the walls. These motherless witches specialized in blood magic!" he exclaimed and slapped his inner wrist with his fingers. "I saw the first men go over and land on their feet ready to get to work, but then, as soon as they brought their arms up to swing their blades overhead, they exploded." Duncan punctuated flatly with a shrugging gesture.

"They exploded? Like their blood boiled up and burst out of them?" Tom sat up, his interest finally piqued by the story. Tom had been a lieutenant longer than Duncan had been a captain, and he had seen some real shit (or so he teased the greenhorns). Naturally, he had a taste for the goriest details. "You know I once lost my sword in a blood vent?" Tom added.

"Took the whole afternoon to find that damn thing!" he exclaimed, shaking his fist,

"Didn't even get to loot or take any trophies..." he finished, trailing off sourly.

"No no no. Not like that at all." Duncan replied, shaking his head and hands. "They stopped mid swing like this." and he stood up high to stretch his right arm up above him. He failed to notice that the camp had gone quite below him. The soldiers were silently watching their commander now backlit by his fire. "Then they started to spasm mid air like this." Duncan continued, and started to shake like a beat dog. Some soldiers shuffled uneasily around their fires, and scratched at the dirt. A few smirked to themselves as they watched their captain's foolishness. "Then, held in the air, they rapidly turned inside out by way of the mouth! Their giblets went flying everywhere!" He again demonstrated by wrenching his arms outwards and throwing them up in the air.

Now that he clearly had the attention of his men he drew himself up to his full height, still framed by his campfire, "Now that you've all had a proper bedtime story, fires are out in ten minutes!" The oppressive blackness seemed to weigh down the sound of his voice in his ears. Standing on the slope with his hands on his hips he appeared satisfied. He watched the sergeants spread his order to those who couldn't hear through the thick blackness of the weird spell. Trying not to think about what could be hiding in the dark he focused on the satisfaction of his efforts. The men, a whole cohort, were following him into the unknown as they had on countless forays. *This was different*, he thought again, *We are marching for the palace*. Returning to the relative privacy of his fire he seemed to become a little less satisfied. This was a unique situation. He was charged by his lord Mithridates, the viceroy of Doch Pontis, to deliver a message to the Emperor personally. Plopping himself down next to the fire with a sigh, he muttered, "Unique indeed."

Looking up at the mountain the commander scoffed, it looked worse at night. Despite the lack of moonlight it was distinctly visible, almost iridescent. Duncan hoped that the lack of moonlight might have mercifully hid the mountain. Then the thought of it looming over them in the dark, and it made him reconsider. He sat directly opposite of it, and stared through the flames of the firepit. He fixed it with his gaze as if the mountain might disappear into the night if he looked away. Duncan had experienced stranger tricks than these beyond the borders, and once again he remembered the witch keeps.

They were charnel houses dressed up as fortresses. The innumerable hordes of unnatural, savage barbarians practiced as many different kinds of magics. Sometimes Duncan thought he had seen every way a man could be frozen, flayed, or turned to dust. Every assault on a witch keep he participated in proved him wrong. He was dreading the fact he must enter the palace, and he wondered what would be up there.

The mountain was unnerving, but the Imperial Palace was loathsome. Duncan had seen it once before, during the quincennial celebration of the declaration of Pax Imperialis, but he had never been inside, nobody in living memory had. He was closer than he had ever been before, and he could surprisingly make out some smaller details.

At the top of the mountain the Imperial Palace sat perched like a vulture. The walls were sheer, jagged iron sheets blanketed around each other in concentric rings. Bleak and worn towers loomed over the heights of the walls at regular intervals. On the near face of the outerwall a pair of massive doors rested open under a series of gates. Nobody living knew who had constructed the Imperial Palace, and the intricately geared doors were one of the more apparent mysteries. Some whispered that the palace was older than the Everlasting Emperor himself, and he had been alive so long nobody remembered his given name. Others said that the palace was a gift from the Old Gods who came before the Everlasting Emperor. These same voices said the mountain came down from the sky. Under the Emperor, Pax Imperialis has reigned for over five hundred years. In all that time the Emperor has never left the Imperial Palace. Naturally, his bureaucracy has grown lush around him in the full sun of total power.

This bureaucracy was the voice of the Emperor, and the face of power as no one has really seen the Emperor. In Duncan's village these bureaucrats were called Speakers as they spoke for the Emperor. Some neighboring towns called them Callers, Voices, Heralds of the Yellow Sign, and other esoteric titles. Nobody questioned the fact that these Speakers had no families, and kept to themselves in seemingly monastic isolation. They never mingled with the people, not even on the holiday celebrating their liege. Occasionally, they would emerge clad in hooded yellow robes of state to distribute tax writs, and speak the Emperor's decrees. The Speakers did not actually collect the taxes however. This was entrusted to the local bailiff or sheriff by the Speaker. The local authorities collected every cent on their ledgers, and the Speakers made sure of it. These lone, stoic bureaucrats never met much resistance to these decrees and tax collections. If the mystique of the shrouded figures didn't deter the simple townsfolk, the nocturnal noises in the woods usually did. Even then some brave, or stubborn, villager would cross the line.

Duncan remembered when the first Speaker came to his hometown, seemingly out of thin air. An Imperial Army scout rode hard into town, left a simple note with the hetman, and then left just as quickly. After a few fretful days the Speaker arrived. The local drunk, Eric the Crooked, went to the Speaker's home in the woods.

"I wanna dishcush da fukkin' climbering taxshes! Dey juss got raised ugain! How doo we know heesh even uh real offishal? He juss shows up!" The old bastard wheezed into young Duncan's face. He could still smell the raw whiskey stench on that breath. Nobody saw Eric again after that. Most people either pretended that Eric never existed, or they just flat out forgot about him. It was quite easy to do as the town didn't like Eric much. Time passed and pretty much everybody in the village mostly forgot about Eric, but they remembered the noises in the forest that night. They never forgot what happened to those who opposed the word of the Speakers. More time passed, and the few who did remember Eric the Crooked's disappearance turned it into a cautionary tale for unruly children.

Duncan is a simple man, a soldier. However, just because he longs for a simple life does not mean he is a simpleton. He was always fond of stories, and he naturally excelled at the soldiers game. At the rank of captain, Duncan was entitled to an education, and he used it well. In an effort to learn new and terrifying stories to regale his comrades, he had found something else. Copies of ancient texts that were old in their own right. They were written by long dead scholars, and they chilled him more than any campfire war story could. A few of these learned, and suppressed, scholars told of the hidden horrors which reside in the sprawling tunnels underneath the palace. A small number of them knew of the wonders hidden beneath as well. A

maze of gatehouses, strong points, and armories wound upon itself in the cramped confines. This was the pattern for the Imperial Palace both above ground and below. In the center of this iron web stood the Emperor's Cradle. The monolithic ziggurat towered over the walls themselves and emanated an eerie, ethereal glow in the black.

The longer Duncan stared at it the quicker his heart beat. His breath started to come in shallow gasps. His palms went clammy and then everything went black. Tom had just put the fire out as commanded ten minutes ago. It took Duncan a long moment to figure out what had happened. First he thought he was dead. Then he thought he had been somehow taken to the mountain by some foul witchcraft. He had seen tricks of teleportation before, but never across such a distance. He had seen what happened when the witches strained the limit of this kind of trick. Remembering how their warriors ended up, embedded in stone walls or stuck halfway in the ground, he grimaced.

The action made him realize he was still alive, and then the hand that clamped down on his shoulder told him he was still on the Emerald plain.

"Time for some shut eye?" Tom asked his commander. When Duncan didn't reply Tom shook his shoulder a bit, "Boss?"

"Yea," Duncan choked out with an uneasy exhalation, "Yea, that sounds good." He didn't realize he had been holding his breath.

The next morning they ate their meal, broke their camp, and resumed their interminable march. A couple days went by easily enough. Each night was like the first one, swathed in the weird, oppressive blackness. The days were still warm and pleasant enough. After the fifth day the consistency, the sameness, started to wear on the men. There was never a single cloud in the sky. The stars and moon never appeared. Time seemed to lose all meaning. There was just the march to the mountain, but still it never drew any closer. Duncan and Tom ran out of stories to swap, and they knew their silent cohort had done the same. The only talking that took place was the issuing of commands by the officers. This numbing cycle went round and round until, after several more similar days, the men finally made it to the base of the mountain. It was almost abrupt, and seemed to happen like nobody was looking.

Night was falling yet again, but the weary men did not care anymore, they were preoccupied with the monumental task of marching up the mountain. Duncan knew this without seeing or hearing his soldiers. He felt their dread and exhaustion in his bones. Over the course of the trek their provisions had dwindled to almost nothing, and now they must face the hardest part of their journey. "We camp here." He ordered.

The soldiers set up their camp in a semicircle around the beginning of the jagged flight of stairs. They settled down in despair by their fires, resigned to their fate. Duncan cursed under his breath when he saw the condition of the stairway close up. Some of the toothy steps were higher than they were wide, and all of them were in a state of crumbling ruin.

"How the hell are we supposed to climb that?" Tom hissed in Duncan's ear. He had easily snuck up behind Duncan in the muffled dark, and Duncan jumped.

"Carefully." the captain replied with an edge of consternation that was a little sharper than intended. His internal grip around his emotions were slipping. *I'm so tired*, and he didn't just think it in his head, he felt it all over.

Sighing, Tom apologized, "I'm a little on edge too, sorry. It's just that this damned place reminds me so much of those awful things we fought for so long..." his voice trailed off.

A deep frown cracked Duncan's stubble, "I know it does. Why do you think everyone was so eager to share stories after such a silent march from home. It was the first thing that came to everyone's mind, but nobody said anything, they didn't need to." The two men were both talking at an oddly fast pace, as if they were conspiring.

"I don't care about stories." Tom replied with a groan. "I care about how we're gonna get up this infernal flight of stairs," his voice lowered further, "and what we're going to find up there..."

Duncan eyed Tom over his shoulder, "That's for me to worry about." Their babbling came to a quick stop, and the captain resumed his staring contest with the stairs. After a long, quiet moment Tom said, "I don't like this." His voice sounded crushed in the black.

Choler rising again, Duncans internal grip finally slipped loose in a spiteful retort, "No shit! You know why *we* were sent here!?" He turned to Tom now, and took a step towards him with his arms stretched out wide. "To deliver a message to The Everlasting Emperor, *personally*." Of course Tom knew, everyone did. The Speakers had gone rouge, but that didn't describe it quite well enough. It was more like they had gone haywire, the way a crazed animal did. *There is only one way to protect against a rabid animal, and that is to put it down*, Duncan remembered his lord's words with dread. It wasn't total abandonment of their original oaths, though. Viceroy Mithridates had made it clear that Duncan was only there to ask why the Speakers were killing his people. Duncans' lord had also made it clear what to do if they met with resistance. *It was treason, surely*, but that was their duty to their people wasn't it? To protect them from the horrors of the dark. Nevermind that their liege just so happened to be the ruler of the second largest power base in the Empire. Duncan didn't realize how caught up in his own thoughts he had become, and snapped his head up when Tom spoke.

"I know." Tom replied despondently. Then stiffening up straight, "Permission to be dismissed, sir."

Duncan straightened himself, and nodded, "Permission granted, lieutenant." The captain called Tom by his rank as a reminder of the chain of command, and as a petty jab. The captain stood there alone for a while longer and ordered, "Lights out boys!" He gave the order loud enough that it didn't need to be relayed. Leaning against the wall, he watched as one by one all the campfires were extinguished. Concealed in the dark he pulled the silver cylinder from the sash around his belt. Only Mithridates, and probably the Emperor, knew what was on the delicate parchment inside. Duncan smiled grimly to himself in the dark. He liked stories but was no scholar, he was a soldier, and he knew power. What he had in his hands was a powerful weapon, a blade. He understood that he was the mailed fist that held the blade for his lord, he always had been a loyal soldier. *I just never thought I would be pointed here*, his mind was in exhausted turmoil.



In the dark the captain sighed deeply, dwelt for a moment longer, then pushed off the wall. As he slowly made his way back to his tent he slipped the cylinder back. He could hear the ruffle of his men getting into their tents. The canvas flaps made a whooshing sound in the hollow night. His men were forced to crawl into cramped canvas tents while the captain was afforded the luxury of standing room in his spacious abode. Opening the large flap to his tent Duncan walked inside. He sat down abruptly on his cot, plates clacking, still in his armor. Running over the day's events he began to take a mental catalogue of his soldiers' conditions. He frowned, *They're starting to lose it, and maybe so am I.*

After a while of sitting, the commander listened to the night. There was the clattering sound of his men dispersing. He also heard the whooshing sound of the tent flaps. He could hear the soft sound of embers crackling and popping in the dying heat. He heard the anxious, low voices of his men sharing their fears and hopes. There was a gentle breeze flowing through the grass, and Duncan once again found peace in the subtle sound. This fleeting peace was crushed by the increasingly loud flapping sound of the men entering their tents. With tired irritation Duncan hauled himself up from his resting position, and left his tent shouting, "What is taking you fools so long!? Did you forget how to open a damn tent!?" The captain then stopped in his tracks, surprised by how clearly his voice rang across the camp.

Then, with a claw of ice clenching around Duncan's heart, he realized that he could hear everything clearly. The strange trick of the night that had tortured the soldiers had been lifted. Looking up to the sky, Duncan was confused as to why he still couldn't see the moon, or any stars, *Maybe it's part of a different spell...*

"What in the hell is that noise?" Duncan heard a soldier in a nearby tent, his voice wavering a little with worry.

"Hey! I could hear you!" the captain heard another soldier shout, then another. All around the camp the din of growing shouts and calls grew. There were jokes about the sudden change, or relieved half boasts of how they had made it through the long nights. Duncan could also hear lower voices that touched on his own dawning concern. Men were emerging from their tents now.

"What is that sound though?" The first soldier protested again, the stain of worry growing larger in his voice. *What is that noise?* Duncan's thoughts reflected the soldiers' words. It was as if a whole army of men were entering and exiting their tents all at once. The whooshing sound grew exponentially as the shouts and hollers began to die down. Then the shouts began to rise again, but all the humor had drained from the hoarse voices. It was replaced by mortal fear and naked panic.

"What! What *is* that?! Where is it coming from?!" A few shrill voices begged of one another, but there was no answer save the growing sound. It was a rumbling sound like storm clouds now, and Duncan had to take action before his soldiers fled.

"*Cowards!* Stopping pissing yourselves for a moment!" The captain accused his men with venom. "Hold where you are! I'll not have you running scared from a mere sound! Sergeants, assemble and arm the men!" He returned to his tent to find and arm his weapon.

The sergeants were issuing orders to the men now in curt, commanding tones.

In the mad scramble a lone soldier crouched frozen in his tent. He had wrapped his trembling hands around his silver pike, but he didn't move any further.

"Wings." the soldier croaked quietly to himself. He had figured it out, but nobody heard him. What everybody did hear was the sudden, shredding sound of a tent being ripped open. Chaos broke out like a storm across the camp. Men began to scream as they were torn from their shelters, and carried away into the smothering blackness.

Emerging from his tent in response to the rising shouts, the commander could see that a few men were desperately trying to reignite the nearby fires..

"To me men of Doch Pontis! Forget the fires we make our own light, rally the firepikes! To me!" Duncan tried to shout above the tumult. The men who hadn't been taken yet were fumbling in the dark for their weapons still. There were a handful of stalwart sergeants, along with some veterans Duncan recognized, who fought their way to their captains' voice. He didn't see Lieutenant Tom among them and cursed. He hoped against the insanity unfolding that the lieutenant was at least putting up a fight. The commander smiled bleakly and nodded at them, *At least I'll die with a few good men at my back.* In the faint light he could see the dull reflections of a few firepikes in his men's hands. He had managed to recover and arm his own as well.

"Reporting for a slaughter captain!" Shouted a sergeant whose face was a webbing of scars centered on one blind eye.

Hefting the shining pike over his head in triumph, the captain said, "Good on you Scarface," and bellowed his final orders, "Fire at will!" In that moment he felt the weight of everything slide from his shoulders. He felt relief take the place of responsibility, and it washed over him. It was over at least, *there is nothing left but to fight and die*, or so Duncan thought.

In the next moment, before he lowered his weapon from the air, a dark figure hurled itself down at him. In the low fire light all he could see were two large, leathery claws reach out, grab his shoulders, and lift. He screamed. Oddly, there was no pain as he felt his feet leave the earth. The leathery claws did not puncture his armor, but held fast in an iron grip. Duncan had seen almost every way a man could be killed, but it was the ones he hadn't seen his mind raced through now. Then he saw his men following his orders, and he screamed even harder.

Spitting gouts of vivid, multicolored flames leapt from the tips of their silver pikes, and illuminated their attackers. The flames engulfed some of the winged horrors, plummeting to the ground in burning bunches. They were the size and shape of a man, and they were wearing the tattered shreds of yellow robes. The monstrosities lacked any facial features, and they dragged a wriggling tail behind. The leathery skin was smooth, and almost translucent.

Duncan saw all this unfolding before him in seconds as he was taken. The men who rallied to him, there were about a dozen, stood back to back in a circle bellowing war cries. The eruptions of intense colors were awesome in the enveloping dark. Duncan had always thought the firepikes were beautiful at night, except now. The spraying fire stuck to the Speakers wherever it touched them, and the flames danced on their forms. There were too many though, and Duncan quickly lost sight of the last defiant stand, snuffed out like an ember.

As the screaming, half insane captain flew higher above the lost battle he thought he went blind. He was proven wrong, much to his terror, when he emerged above a writhing swarm of Speakers. The heaving mass was illuminated by a full moon, and an ocean of stars. Speakers darted too and fro, and here and there Duncan saw some of them hauling soldiers off in the same way he was taken. The image struck Duncan silent for the first time since he left the ground. It reminded him of a twisted version of an old story he heard long ago. Scowling he thought, *These are not Valkyria, but perhaps I am headed for a hall of the slain.* With that bitter thought he realized he had finally stopped screaming.

The second thing Duncan thought of was how he would get down. There was no use in trying to fight the Speaker, as he would surely plummet to his death at the first sign of a struggle. It appeared the Speaker didn't want him dead, like the defenceless peasants they had been slaughtering in the woods. Suddenly the Speaker carrying him made a series of twists and dives that made Duncan queasy. As soon as he had thought of where they might be going, the Speaker gave him its terrible answer. Duncan twisted around, and saw they were at the head of a wispy column of black dots carrying soldiers up to the yawning gate of the Imperial Palace.

They flew through the vast gateway of intricate gears and toothed cogs. Slowly, the gears groaned to life, and shed centuries of rust in a shimmering cascade that flooded down the ancient stairway below. Duncan and his soldiers were carried over a mangled nightmare of twisting stairways, and rusting walkways. It all seemed wrong, though. Duncan needed something to focus on so he tried to figure out what was so fundamentally wrong. After a couple seconds it hit him, they were facing the wrong way. The walkways were *sideways*. It was like the palace was part of a whole that was snapped in half by some titan, and rammed into the ground.

The stream of Speakers coalesced into a fog flowing through the porous towers of the keep. Some disappeared into the smooth holes that appeared on the worn metal towers. Duncan noticed with relief that these ones were empty handed. Well, mostly, a few of them appeared to have taken firepikes from his camp, and he did not want to know what the fiends intended to do with them.

With hesitation, Duncan reached up above his head for what he thought of as the Speakers wrists. Grunting with effort he seized them and hauled himself up a bit to look around. The Speaker juddered in protest momentarily, but stopped when it appeared Duncan wouldn't struggle anymore. He noticed that there were great hollow spaces descending down into the core of the mountain. Soaring over one, Duncan had the bad idea of peering closer, rather than following his gut and shutting his eyes. There were more than just Speakers in the keep.

The captain had never beheld anything like it, not even in his wildest trauma induced nightmares. The walls of the bottomless caverns were studded with great black blobs at regular intervals, and they seemed to be marching up out of the dark. The slimy things were nearly the size of four horse carriages, and could carry as much. Duncan couldn't recognize their cargo though. It looked like a type of raw ore, but he couldn't make out what color it was. He could see it clearly enough, but his mind just went blank, and it hurt his head the longer he focused on it. Once they reached the jagged cusp of the crevasse, they mobbed down a hundred different tunnels back into the keep. Deeper, almost at the edge of the moonlight that scraped the surface of the span, were colossal, pale arms. The boney limbs stretched out, and peeled the comparatively insignificant blobs off the walls. Then, after a ponderous sweeping motion, the arm would set it on a new course.

*It's so dainty how they do that, like their picking up chocolates at a royal ball.* Duncan thought, and began to crack up with laughter. He laughed for several more minutes. He laughed so hard that he couldn't breathe, and his chest began to heave with pain. With blackness closing in around the edges of his vision, he would sputter for breath. After a few moments he gasped back to consciousness, and was forced to watch another insane scene play out before him.

It was this way after every wall the cloud of Speakers flew over. A dozen more unimaginable horrors over as many walls. During this period a loud clash rang out, and Duncan vaguely remembered that they had flown through the gate some hours before. Duncan couldn't help but feel that the ancient scholars he had read from were woefully ignorant.

Wallowing in his uncertain doom, he noticed that they were coming closer to what must be their destination. The Emperor's Cradle loomed in front of the cloud of gnats that were the Speakers. It filled Duncan's eye to the point that he thought it would collapse in over him. A sense of vertigo consumed him and he vomited down the front of his ceremonial battle plate. Looking around he noticed that the swarm of Speakers had thinned, and only about a dozen remained.

With a gurgling belch, Duncan released a few questioning syllables. The limp forms rolled their heads towards the oddly echoing sound. Duncans head was throbbing now. The Speakers began to fly in a tighter formation as they entered a narrow approach to the ziggurat. Wind howling in his ears, Duncan saw that his fellow soldiers had rolled their limp heads around, and fixed him with a stare. He could see Scarface from his last stand, and a few of the other officers too. He saw Lieutenant Tom, and for a moment, he was glad he survived. *Survived?* Duncan questioned as he returned each gaze in kind. None of the men had blinked in the face of the wind. They had not turned from Duncan, yet they had not uttered a single word in response either, they just stared blankly. Duncan let go of the Speaker, and slumped down, for a moment he hoped the speaker would let go too. He wished he could just soar through the open air, at peace. He did not.

Taking a moment to gather his strength, Duncan tried to howl over the wind in the narrow canyon of metal, "Hello! Are any of you still alive?" His question was met with dead pan laughter in a choir of familiar voices. The Speakers imperceptibly slowed down, just enough for Duncan to hear the voices of his comrades.

Then his soldiers answered him in unison again, "Your *men* are still alive captain." The voices replied with a disdainful emphasis on the word 'men'. Duncan gaped in awe and horror. What little sanity that was left in the captain trickled away with these words. However, Duncan no longer had the energy to scream, so he just sat there in a petrified gasp.

Still the ziggurat drew closer, and a series of turns in the jagged canyon revealed a cavernous entrance with toothy stalagmites. Duncans' headache worsened. It was like a huge metal maw hung open on the face of the ziggurat. He felt an immense weight settling on his mind. The battered captain had experienced mental dampening on the field, but never mind control, *or the outright possession that grips my men*, in turn he was held tight by fear.

"My people! What have you done to them?" Duncan cried to the wind meekly. He asked this question to avoid the one he was thinking, the one he was dreading, *Who are you?* Again, the choir chuckled.

"*Your people?*" they spat. Then, in immediate response to Duncan's thought, "You know who I am worm." Every word dripped with derision.

"No! You're a monster! A witch! *Worse!* I cannot believe we spent our lives defending this... this abomination!" Duncan was bellowing with rage now, he found his strength in the heat of defiance. The choir laughed once again, but harsher this time.

"Ignorant welp. I can show you true abomination, or better yet, make you *feel it in exquisite detail.*" The choir sang the words with oozing maliciousness. "I am no mere witch, boy. I am your liege. I command, and you obey." The choir spoke with booming authority as the Speakers ascended into the shadowy recess of the maw.

While Duncan flew through the black, he was interrogated by his possessed kinsmen. In the cold wind, he could hear the voices whispering a dozen different questions. At first they started slowly, but then they began to overlap. They asked their questions faster and faster, until they all ran together. The poor man offered no verbal response because he could not form one. His mind was on fire. It was as if the whispered questions blew through his ears to fuel the flames. Expecting to spontaneously combust at any moment, he remembered pantomiming a beaten dog earlier. He danced again for his men as he was racked with spasming seizures. A couple of the voices stuttered with mocking snorts as the memory surfaced.

*You can read my mind?* The captains' consciousness pushed the question out through the flames. In the painful grip of the mental invasion his vision was still black, and he couldn't tell if it was the seizure, or the cavern. He was beginning to lose physical sensation when, suddenly, the whispering stopped.

*I can do more than just read the sparse pages of your mind. I've scrutinized every line in this puny book you call a brain. I've read every disappointing chapter that has closed, and every miserable chapter yet to be opened. I can rewrite these pages, or rip them out all together,* After a pause, *Perhaps that would be best for you.* The singular voice rose from the fire in Duncan's head. He had never heard anything like it. Every syllable vibrated in his bones. It engulfed him from the inside, and he lost all sensation to the voice in his head. *Now prepare yourself,* the voice commanded, *for an audience.*

A portion of time passed, Duncan didn't know if it was a few minutes, hours, or days. All he knew during this time was the consuming fire, lapping at his mind with crashing waves of pain. After an eternity passed there came a blackness. It was not a trick or spell, but rest. Duncan emerged from the blackness lying face down on icy, smooth rock. There was a biting wind sweeping over his bare, sweat slicked back. The speakers must have left him here after stripping him of his armor. He was conscious again, but hesitated to move right away. Such intense pain and mental violation was not easily forgotten. The reason he was here had not been forgotten either.

Taking a few deep breaths, the captain got some blood circulating through his aching body. Hauling himself onto his knees, and then his elbows, he met with resistance. He was

shackled to the floor with cumbersome iron chains at the throat, wrists, and ankles. Slowly, as he could most comfortably manage, he rose to a standing position.

Duncan took in his surroundings with awe, but not terror this time. He seemed to be in a chamber of sorts. Massively rotund columns disappeared up into the shadows of a hidden ceiling, if there was one. The columns themselves were covered in dusty, faintly glowing screens similar to the one scribe desk Duncan had seen in his lord Mithridates' quarters. These were different though. Where the one had been clunky, these were sleek, *and there are so many of them*, he thought. The scrolling screens covered the walls and the columns like glowing scales. This gave off a soft light that was just barely enough to see by. Before Duncan lay a sprawling citadel of sleek metal machinery, and rivers of cables arcing with power. There were ramparts of screen banks, reinforcing batteries of dormant machinery. Everything was covered in a thick layer of dust and ropery cobwebs. A great many of the screens were blown out and shattered as well.

As Duncan's eyes adjusted to the low light, he looked about in front of him. The handful of men who had served as mouthpieces for his interrogation were strewn about him on the floor. Out of the cohort strong host he brought with him, only a dozen or so remained. They were bound like himself, and the captain felt an inkling of camaraderie returning. *We're still in this together.* He was the first one awake apparently, so he set about tallying who was present. He saw Tom, and dependable Scarface. There were a few more hearty men, but to Duncans dismay the rest were fresh greenhorns. They were all breathing, but they were still in whatever catatonic state the Emperor had left them in.

At that thought Duncan felt a stab of pain in his brain, and fell to his knees. Taking a moment to gather his strength for a second time, the captain rose, and the voice reinvaded his head. His men began to quietly coo, and gently rocked back and forth on the floor. *Turn around and kneel.* The voice was the avatar of command, and Duncan obeyed. As the captain hesitantly did so, he finally beheld the Everlasting Emperor in all his grotesque glory.

Between two of the massive screen columns rose a towering throne. The structure of the throne clashed with the sleek form of the surrounding machinery. It looked unrefined, like a monolith of raw iron. Thorny spines protruded from its base to the top. Duncan had found the rest of his men on them. At the summit of this trophy rack sat the Emperor himself. He was easily sixteen feet tall, and his flesh was the same grey color of the throne. Infact, when Duncan looked closer, he could see that the Emperor didn't have any feet. The truncated forelegs disappeared, melded with the surface of the throne. His corpulent hands gripped the throne in a similar manner. His head was encased in a mangle of cables and coils that snaked down from the dark. Other cables protruded from his chest, and wound around the throne. Duncan also saw the tattered shreds of a yellow robe that must have covered the more grisly details, centuries before. *Why have you come here?* The voice of the Emperor rang in Duncans' head. The men at the captains feet were groaning now, and curling up in their chains.

*You know why,* Duncan thought.

*I want you to say it, traitor!* The voice boomed with accusation. Duncan grabbed his head and stumbled, but he did not fall this time.

*What? Traitor? Why does he accuse me of such a thing?* His mind was spinning. "Why do you call me traitor when your Speakers are the ones killing my kinsmen, and your subjects?"

Duncan shouted as loud as he could, and his voice echoed through the great chamber. A moment of silence hung in the air, and then drew out into a long pause. For a second, Duncan thought he might have doomed the lot of them. The men around Duncan stopped rolling.

*A slow, deliberate rumble grew into a maniacal laugh. My people. My kinsmen. They are not yours, fool. You are all mine! To do with as I please. I am the Emperor. You are entertainment. I have seen generations of you squabbling motes spawn and die, spawn and die, and for what? So you could spawn and die some more? Spawn and die at a coastal village? Civilise some mangy imbeciles against their own will? Spend your lives for me? Yes, is that it? You wish to die of your leige? You have done it so often, and so well. You throw your lives away for nothing. Now you will all spend your lives, for ME!* With the last mental declaration the Emperor stood.

Still wearing the crown of cables and wires, a skeletal framework of shimmering metal emerged from the petrified flesh in a cloud of dust. Chunks of dry, powdery flesh crumbled away, and tumbled down the steps of the throne. At the same moment, deafening clangs resonated through the chamber. The machinery had coughed to life when the Emperor burst forth from his desiccated cocoon. The great landscape of machines and screens flickered to life and sparks showered all around. For the time being, the mechanical monster on the throne seemed content to bask in its newfound mobility.

It was at this moment, something nudged Duncans foot. Tearing his eyes away from the spectacle, he looked down at his waking men. The captain started to shake the closest soldiers to speed up the process. If there was a time for action it would be now, while that *thing* was basking in its own new power. They were awake for the most part now, and their commander's look was enough to keep them quiet.

"Try the chain." Duncan said quietly, and curtly. He was hoping that if the Emperor's flesh was old enough to be solidified dust, the chains might be in a similar state. Realistically, they had very few alternatives. With a rush of relief, the crumbling chains gave way with a decent struggle. After the captain made sure that everyone was upright, he surveyed his surroundings. There wasn't much nearby, a few screen banks. The wall behind them had a few gated tunnels that twisted off into the dark.

Whispering, the commander issued orders, "Tom you take four men and try that gate, Scarface you take three and try that one, The rest of you come with me." None of his men hesitated. They did not need to ask where they were, they knew. As Duncan led his group to the far gate, he looked over his shoulder at the throne. It was empty. He looked around at his men to see if any had noticed too, none did. Thankfully they were consumed by their work. After a little bit of fumbling, each team managed to get their gates off. There was a slight creaking noise that made everyone cringe, but it was quickly drowned out by the thrum of the machines. Still working silently the commander resorted to hand signals. He told the men to recon the tunnels and report back in five.

As Duncans group progressed down their assigned tunnel, they resorted to finding their way by feel. After a decent time they stumbled upon a locker embedded in the walls. Delicately opening the rusted, squealing box, the men nearly shouted with joy. Inside was a treasure indeed. They were rusty, and had obviously not been maintained, but the firepikes were a comfort to hold. Duncan checked each one personally, and the yellow rune showed they had a low charge.

*Better than nothing*, he thought as he led his men back the way they came. The groups tensely emerged from the tunnels and regrouped inside the entrance to Duncans'. The throne room was no longer empty. A thick cloud of Speakers were swarming around the throne, like a hive around its queen.

"We had some good luck in there" The captain whispered, pointing over his shoulder,

"Maybe we should keep looking?"

"So did we." Scarface smiled at his captain, and stepped aside. The sergeant had found his own stash of firepikes and dispersed them amongst the remaining men.

Tom had a sour look on his face and he muttered, "I never get to find any damn loot..." A few soldiers smiled wryly. "Well, what are our orders, captain?" Tom asked, and everyone turned to look at Duncan.

Gripping his firepike the commander said, "Finish what we started at the base of this mountain." He let the idea marinate for a second, he knew nobody would oppose him and he so enjoyed theatrics. "There isn't any other option, not after what I've seen."

"Captain." Scarface chimed up now, "I don't know what it is you saw, but I'm ready to kill every last one of those abominations, and another thing..." he hesitated.

"What Sergeant? Spit it out." Duncan jabbed.

"Let's kill that bastard Emperor." Scarface replied with immeasurable satisfaction. The captain looked around at his men and they all nodded in agreement.

"Well then, death or glory it is boys." Duncan said with a smile, and hefted the firepike onto his shoulder. Marching two by two they left the tunnel, and headed straight for the swarm. As soon as they marched past their old shackles, the swarm pulsed in response.

"I don't think we're getting any closer!" The captain shouted to his men over the noise of a thousand wings. He then gave his men to form two ranks facing the flying mob.

"On my order, send them back to the pits!" Duncan was itching for a fight now. He didn't care before, and he didn't now. All that mattered is that they cut this cancer out before it spread to the rest of the Empire, if that was even possible at this point.

*Cancer?* A familiar voice mused in Duncans' head. *You spread like a rot, and I'm the cancer.* The swarm parted just so the men could behold the throne. *I am the scalpel, precise as you couldn't imagine.* The soldiers looked at each other realising that they could hear the same thing in their heads.

Duncan stood in front of his men, and bellowed a challenge at the monstrosity, "Then come and cut me out you senile scribe desk!" There was a titanic crashing noise, and the swarm zipped towards the men.



"Fall back! To the tunnels!" Duncan commanded his men, but when they turned around there was only one large tunnel. A few of the greenhorns started to panic. Scarface slapped them straight. "Fire on the gate!" Duncan commanded now. The men obeyed and the gate melted like butter. Filing through they were careful not to touch the molten metal. They jogged down the tunnel for a few seconds. The sound of the approaching swarm was amplified in the tunnel. "Halt! About face!" The men stopped and turned around, readying their weapons. The light at the end of the tunnel went out as the Speakers reached them.

Duncan waited three more heartbeats, then gave the command, "Open fire!" As soon as he uttered the very first syllable, his men gladly followed orders. In the relatively cramped confines of the tunnel the firepikes were blinding. They were effective too. Wave after wave of Speakers flew into the rainbow inferno. After a moment Duncan felt confident enough to issue another order, "Advance!" The men looked at each other for a second, but followed orders.

"We aren't killing enough of them." Tom said to the nervous greenhorns. "Hey, if you make it through this, you won't have to put up with the teasing!"

"And if we don't?" one of them responded.

"Then what's to worry about?" Tom said with a smile. Then he and Scarface cracked up. This is what they signed up for, killing the monster in the dark places, not policing some ignorant barbarian on how to plow a damn field.

"Keep going!" Duncan encouraged his men, "We're making progress." The soldiers had made it back to the tunnel mouth, and after a moment, the Speakers had halted their assault. "Alright boys, this is it." Duncan looked each, and every one of his men in the eyes, and he was glad they returned his gaze in kind. "We make a wedge, and go for the throne while we still have some juice in these babies." The men solemnly agreed. "I'd say it's been a pleasure serving with you, but well..."

"We're all going to die painful, ugly deaths at the hands of our own deranged Emperor?" Tom ventured to finish.

"Pretty much." Duncan agreed with a nod and a shrug.

"Alright already, if we're done with all the fancy speeches and heartfelt goodbyes, I'd really like to get this over with." Scarface added.

"Right." Duncan said. Walking out of the tunnel, alone, the captain raised his firepike, and shouted, "To me men of Doch Pontis! To me!" and with an ironic smirk, "for the Emperor!" The men charged out of the smouldering ruin to meet their death with their dazzling weapons held high in defiance.

# Lucid

Sehaj Basrai



"I will lucid dream. I will lucid dream. I will..." And at long last, Peter did. The cool air drifting from his window and burrowing under his warm blanket morphed into a green pasture that was all too familiar to him. Grabbing a hold of the grass he laid on as if getting ready for take off, he strangled off the miniscule blades leaving nothing behind but dirt. His blue eyes broke from their standard blank expression he always wore as he stared at the picturesque clouds rolling by in front of him. He made it. Or at least he thought he did. Not only was he conscious, but he hadn't even noticed the two holes he created in the grass until he looked to his hands in order to start his awareness procedure. Step one: Get your left pointer finger and press into the palm of your right hand.

Step two: Check to see if the finger went right through or if your palm stops it, thereby guaranteeing your stay in the real world. While Peter had an inkling that he has now achieved consciousness in a dream state which he'd been trying to grasp for months now, he had to make sure. He took a deep breath as if beginning a meditation

and began his hourly procedure of awareness. He half expected his finger to stop at his palm after seeing it do so for so long but he watched as it sliced through his hand and out the other way.

Peter leaped into the air overjoyed and ecstatic that he had done it. His heart began racing as if running a marathon but he didn't notice as this meant he was one step closer to the closure he'd been clawing at for so long. While surveying the park which he and his sister would frequent for many years, he noticed the floor beneath him shaking. Shaking turned into rumbling as a crack appeared in between his legs and extended as far as his eyes could see. The earth beneath him split in two halves and a split second decision to not pick a side plunged him straight down.

And then he woke up. Heart still racing but in a body drenched in sweat. However, Peter was unfazed as this was his customary morning wake up call, gasping for air and laying in a puddle of sweat. Checking the time, he saw it was 2:37 PM and pondered whether he should try again or get out of bed. His bedside table buzzed as he instinctively picked up his phone to see who it was.

"Can you come on time today? My head's hurting really bad." *Fuck.*

He launched out of his bed with the same spring in his step when he saw his finger run through his hand while dreaming. It wasn't as if Peter necessarily *wanted* to be late to pick up his son sometimes (almost every time), he just felt as if there were more pressing matters to attend to. Ever since he discovered what he thought would be the cure all known as lucid dreaming, his mind latched onto it like a child to a dog on the street. He didn't need any of the research but after reading the plethora of cases in which PTSD symptoms were relieved in many, he decided he had to try it out no matter the cost.

"I'll be there with baby aspirin and a cold Coca-cola :)" he texted Mac knowing full well he probably won't make it on time if he has to stop on the way for the drink. It was 3:20 when Peter finally made it to school but at least he came with both items he promised in hand. Peter desperately tried to make it by the 3:00 bell but it seemed like his brain was in a constant fog that never seemed to lift.

After spending weeks upon months attempting nothing but sleep even in the middle of the day, Peter felt his mind increasingly turning to mush. He pulled up to the quad and picked up the only kid there who wasn't there waiting for their football practice to start or after-school meeting with a disappointed teacher.

"Get in buddy!" he called to Mac who couldn't muster up the energy to reciprocate the same excitement. He didn't take any offense to it as he knew what the disastrous effect migraines could have on somebody after tending to his bedridden mother for so many years.

"That bad, huh?"

"Yeah, my teacher called on me but I couldn't pay attention." He winced, remembering the cringe-inducing moment coupled with the pain.

"Oh no, that's terrible! She better not have taken any points off."

"No, she didn't... but I just sat there. For a minute and everyone was staring at me, waiting for an answer. She called on Lucy who had her hand up the entire time. I don't know what took teach so long to call on her."

"Jeez I'm sorry that happened but don't feel bad about it. You had a perfectly valid reason why you couldn't answer and all the other kids definitely forgot about it by now."

Mac didn't respond. Now this he took offense to. Did he say something wrong? I mean, the kids probably will forget about it with all the phones they've been hooked onto these days, right?

"Want the aspirin? I got the chewable one so it's easier."

"Yeah, thanks." Peter handed him the grape-flavored aspirin which he chewed on with an annoyed expression as if eating some vegetables.

"This grape flavor is disgusting."

"Yeah, sorry it was the only one we had." Mac had told him he doesn't like grape-flavored anything since he tried a grape lollipop for the first time. He didn't notice he could've gotten a different flavor at the gas station along with the coke.

Silence save for the periodic opening of the fizzy Coke bottle filled the car the whole ride home. But only Mac truly heard the silence drowning them as Peter's mind almost immediately wandered back to going home to dream again. His breakthrough today was the largest stride he'd made in weeks since his first couple of attempts.

But what made him wake up when he was so close to awareness? Through filling up over ten journals of just his dreams for the past five months, he realized that every time it was just starting to get exciting, he'd wake up. Right when he stumbled upon a briefcase stacked to the brim with crisp thousand dollar bills, he jolted awake before ever getting to spend a single cent. Upon a chance encounter with his childhood crush down the street, he ran in her direction and was "killed" on impact by an incoming car before he ever got the chance to tell her how he felt. And when he almost got to talk to his sister again in his dream just now, he plummeted face first into a cavernous pit between his legs. All he had to do now was control his breathing and level his excitement upon arrival into the dream world.

The car crawled into the driveway with Peter breaking from the stupor he was in. He didn't remember how he got home but Mac was present the entire time. He was patiently waiting for his father to apologize for coming to pick him up from school late even when specifically asked him to come on time. His hand grabbed onto the car door handle but halted, giving Peter one last chance to apologize.

"A nap will do you some good, hopefully that Coke you were sipping on didn't wake you up. Rest up, feel better." Mac sighed and opened the door, stepping outside but not before saying his piece.

"Dad. I know you're going through a lot right now with your Aunt Jess and all. I miss her too, you know. But... I'm still here. Just wanted you to know that." It seemed he couldn't see the trail of breadcrumbs his son was leaving for him even if he tried. He left his father alone to mull over what his son had said.

Peter could feel his son slipping away from him ever since he began working on his lucid dreaming project. He noticed it when Mac first opened Peter's room to find all the windows covered in thick black, blankets to reduce any excess light.

He remembered one night when he would always lock his door while venturing into his dreams. He had just finished writing three pages of a 2-hour dream he had just undergone and reached for a glass of water that wasn't there. Making his way to his kitchen, he unlocked his

door and opened it to find Mac who was sleeping propped up against the door. Mac fell back with the door opening and startled awake.

“What’re you doing, why aren’t you in bed?” he asked.

“I, uh... I threw up. In the bathroom so you don’t have to clean it up or anything. Just wanted to let you know.”

Peter never processed why he could’ve been sleeping by his room. Was he trying to spy on him, hear what he was doing? He didn’t realize that sometimes, his room had been locked for the entire days with Mac left outside questioning what was going on inside. Some days, he lied and tried telling himself that his dad was just getting some work done. But he would have at least come outside to get some food. His mind couldn’t help but wander to something more nefarious, something more horrifying that he could never say out loud. He would spend nights laying by the door, listening to his dad’s snores or quiet gasps of air during his dreamscapes.

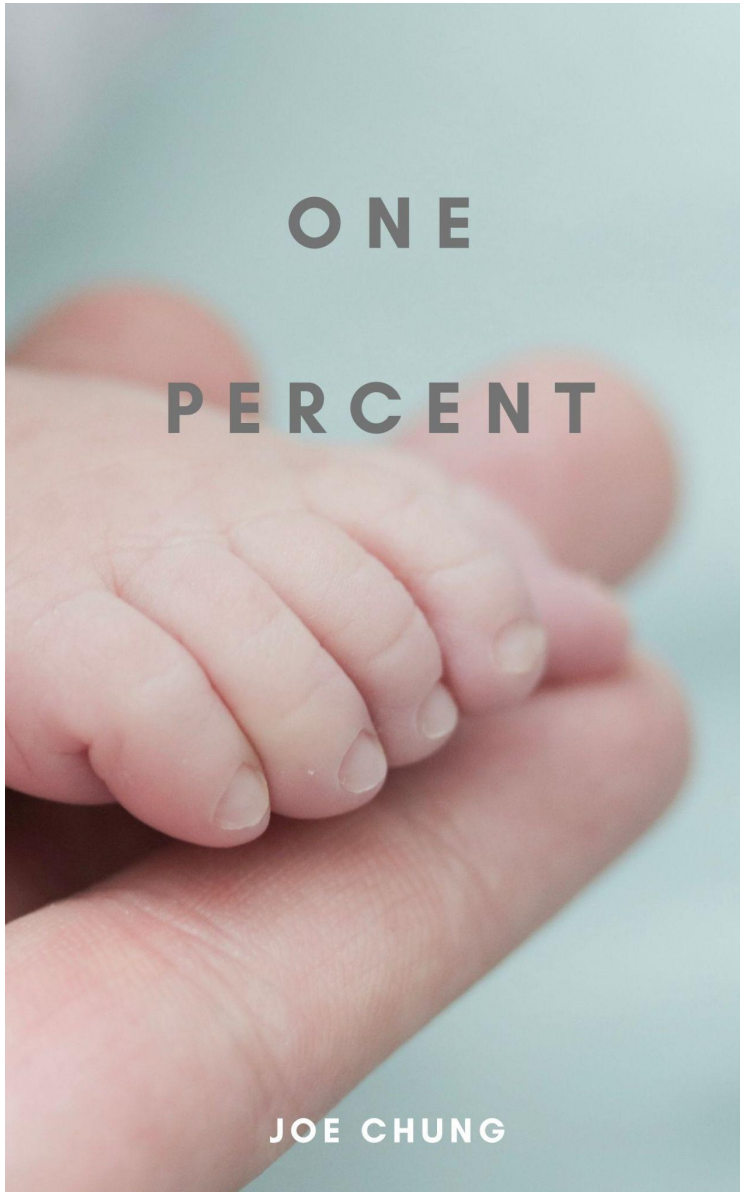
Any signs really that might indicate that he was still there.

If only he could stop this debilitating quest to talk to his sister again who wasn’t alive anymore. But he couldn’t stop now. Not when he’s so close to achieving his goal. He finally got out of the car and took the last of his sleeping pills once he got in bed. Peter decided to leave his door open. Downing at least a whole aisle worth of pills in the last couple of months, his tolerance didn’t allow them to reach their full potential. Or any potential really. But he wanted to do anything that could even remotely help keep him down in the dream just a little while longer.

As he donned his sleep mask and laid in bed waiting for his next dream to come, his mind couldn’t help but wander back to the car ride. What was it that ticked off Mac? He racked his brain, thinking of grandiose solutions or cures until he realized the simple solution staring right at him. He forgot to say sorry. Just then, he drifted off to sleep.

Peter arrived in the same green pasture of his last dream but mentally prepared to experience awareness in his dream, he maintained his excitement. Breathing deeply, he controlled his heart rate as best he could while thinking of his favorite animal: a peregrine. Just then, he saw two expansive wings connected to a voluminous body dive in front of him.

One Percent  
Joe Chung



Outside the apartment window, I spot a UPS delivery driver pushing his hand truck towards the ramp of his truck and wonder about all the different places that he must have visited today. It mostly strikes me as a lonesome job but one that must be balanced out with the occasional heartfelt thank yous from those who have been anxiously waiting for their packages to arrive.

Newlyweds repeatedly refreshing the delivery status of the perfect dining table that they finally found after scouring the internet for days, refusing to succumb to the convenience and sameness of IKEA. Dad who jumps at the arrival of a new toy train set so that he can get ready to play Santa for his two-year old son on Christmas Eve. I wish for these musings to be true as I watch the UPS driver slam down the back door of his truck and disappear towards the driver's side.

After a momentary reprieve, I am again awash with dread over how Peter is going to respond, wishing I can just press the skip button like I do right before a gruesome murder scene in a horror film. I suddenly feel lightheaded

and decide to plop down in the kitchen chair for support. Will he immediately refuse delivery and request a return to sender or will he gingerly unbox the package in the most tender - I perk up when I hear his jangling car keys as the front door swings open like a cat caught knocking over the house plant. I feel naked with my empty hands so I quickly reach for the used coffee mug still sitting on the kitchen counter from this morning. While holding it loosely in one hand, I casually lean against the counter. I'm ready, I assure myself. Peter emerges through the front door in his bicycle helmet loosely attached and his blue and white windowpane shirt sleeves rolled up to his elbows. At the sight of him, I can feel all my assurance leaving my body.

"Hey, you're home early," he says as he flips through the pile of mails that he always brings on the way up to the apartment.

"There wasn't a whole lot to do today at the office," I lie about the fact that I called in 'sick' today. Cool, he says in passing as he tosses everything into our makeshift recycling receptacle made from a Safeway brown paper bag except for a single envelope. He then decidedly slits it open with the edge of his index finger.

"How was your day?" I ask.

"Uneventful," he says distractedly. He pulls out a bill from the envelope then without warning, he peers into my eyes and holds his gaze. "You seem a bit strange today."

I jerk my body upright and answer, "Strange like how."

Just when I'm ready to drop my act, he drops his eyes back on the bill and says, "Strange like you've seen a ghost."

Only if that ghost appeared in a form of two parallel pink lines on a short white stick. Of course, I don't share the last tidbit. I'm just looking for the right moment or better yet, maybe he will somehow telepathically figure out that I'm... "Jesus, I can't believe how much we are paying in electricity," he yells. Then he coldly roams around me to flick off the lampstand next to the couch, "There's still some daylight, Daphne." I look out the window and notice the hues of orange lining behind the neighboring apartment building.

Then he flings his back against the couch, seemingly sucking all the air out of the cushion. He closes his eyes before letting out a quivering sigh, "I'm sorry, Daphne. Things were actually a bit crazy today at work." and twirls his right index finger coincidentally aimed at my belly, "There is this new hire and I mean he's a mess. I don't know how he made it through the interviews and –"

"Peter," I interrupt. I'm pregnant." I sound tired and defeated like I just said I'm depressed. Instead of relief, I feel like my knees will buckle at any moment as I lean even harder against the counter.

His eyes flash open as if he's awakened from a coma, "How's that possible?" Then he retracts before I can answer him, "Are you sure? We've had false alarms before."

I tell him yes and pull out the three positive sticks out of my pocket on cue as if I've been anticipating this question the whole day. I drop them on the coffee table.

He holds one of them close to his eyes. "That's terrific." His sarcastic words belie his unfocused eyes.

I sheepishly say it must have been the time that we both got carried away the night after Chris's birthday party.

After a short pause, he says matter-of-factly, "You're right. I think we forgot to use protection that night."

His clinical response makes me think we are actually discussing who's to blame for leaving the kitchen light on all night. I never liked that word in the context of our relationship,

'protection' and what exactly are we trying to protect ourselves from? Suddenly, I want to claw into him but become afraid that my sense of bitterness will somehow seep through the baby so I decide to backpedal and sit next to him on the couch, "I know it's a lot to take in one sitting, you don't have to say anything right now but I just thought it'd be best if you had a chance to think about it before we revisit the conversation in another time."

"Right, right, thanks, really." His eyes are busily looking for a place to land. He then says, "I thought you were on the pill. I swear you told me you were on the pill."

"Peter, you know I have stopped taking them a couple of months ago now after a series of bad headaches. We had this conversation before and you said then it was fine because you would be using a condom instead."

Then he stands up as if he just spotted a spider crawling on the opposite wall. He walks toward the wall and stops with his arms akimbo. He stands in silence. I feel the urge to fill the pressing void but can only muster a big sigh that seems to go nowhere, wondering if I should have waited for another day when he's in a better mood. I suppose I should have expected his non-committal response and decide to punctuate the conversation by pushing myself up from the couch when he whispers in the open, "So who's the father?" He's still facing the wall. His biting question gradually swirls into my conscience.

"What do you mean?" I say in disgust. Then I see him turning around and his eyes are filled with tears.

"I said who's the father." This time a tinge of anger saturates his voice.

"It's you! Obviously," I reply. Out of all the different pretend scenarios in my head, this was not one of them.

"No, it's not possible," his voice clearly rising.

"What the hell do you mean? Man and woman have sex. Last time I checked, that's how babies are brought into this world, Peter."

"Daphne, look at me. I can't have a baby."

I scowl in disbelief, "Yes, you can, Peter. That's different from not wanting one. I know you've told me on more than one occasion that we can't possibly raise a baby until we are financially secure but I'm sorry I've ruined your perfect life plan."

Peter takes a pause and gives her a knowing look as if he's already figured out everything she will say. He opens his mouth to speak then closes. He exhales.

I stand up and take a small step towards him. "That's right, Peter. No matter what you say now, it won't change the fact that there is a baby here," I reflexively place my hands over my stomach to mark exactly where the baby is in my belly.

Peter hand chops the air in half and points the edge of his fingers at me, "No, you're not understanding me."



"If you are not ready to have a baby. Our baby. That's one thing but don't stand there and pretend it's not-"

"Listen, I won't ask again, Daphne. For the last time, tell me whose baby this is."

"I don't understand what you expect me to say."

"I expect you to tell me the truth."

"If that's what you want, then there's nothing more for me to say because it's already been said."

"Okay." Peter sweeps his hair back with his hand and looks up into the ceiling. "What if I told you I physically can't have a baby."

"Of course you can't. I'm the one with the baby, you-"

"I had a vasectomy."

The mention of 'vasectomy' transports my head underneath a large bell that is struck so hard that the sound rips through my skull and causes a sharp pain that trickles down to my womb.

Seemingly unable to support his own weight, he rests on the dining chair directly opposite from me and speaks without looking at me, "About six months ago when I told you I was going off on a business conference in Florida. I was actually staying at a local hotel while recovering from the procedure."

I drop down to the couch. "That's insane," I whisper to myself as I glimpse at the pistol shaped Florida magnet on the fridge that he brought home. This is the same man who told me he wanted to spend the rest of his life with me two years ago. A man whose blunt honesty I found so charming when he told me that he wanted to kiss me in the middle of a cooking class on our first date. And did, floured handprints and all. Insane.

Peter buries his face in his hands, "I understand how much you wanted a baby but for you to try to trick me into believing that it was our baby. Frankly, I'm not even angry. I'm just shocked." Then he walks over and holds me by my shoulders on his knees, "Now be honest with me, Daphne. I know vasectomy isn't foolproof but it's got like 99% success rate. Tell me now, Whose baby is it?"

It was about eight months ago. Contrary to my fears, the fertility clinic could have been any doctor's office. The same outdated magazines about celebrity gossip and home decor neatly stacked in the racks attached to the corner wall and the row of single cushioned chairs lined against the wall facing the wide u-shaped receptionist desk. I was noticing the chipped nail polish on my right index finger when my name was called. A lady in pink scrubs was smiling at me, standing with a clipboard. She motioned me towards the glass door around the receptionist desk.

I pushed a picture across the desk and told the doctor that I wanted to have a baby who resembles the man in the photo. It was a photo of Peter standing by the lakeshore during our

summer road trip last year. He's smiling as he looks away from the camera. You can see the cropped forehead of the little girl who stole Peter's attention right before the shutter went off as she ran unexpectedly between us. I don't remember seeing her again or even knowing who she was but am grateful to this day for this imperfectly perfect photo. I said I would like a donor who's similar in skin tone and ethnicity as him. Artificial insemination. I too was surprised that it was an available option for single women.

Then I received a call from the clinic six months ago. They have found a matching donor. A cold sweat dripped down my neck as I fought off the urge to hang up and pretend it was all make believe but words were exchanged and I had somehow scheduled an afternoon appointment during the week Peter was going to be away on a business trip to Florida.

On the morning of the appointment, I remember driving him to the airport. It was quiet inside the car, only interrupted by the occasional clearing of our throats while the white noise from the local radio dependably filled the silence. Peter leaned against the window and stared quietly at the glinting surface of the ocean alongside the highway. Then he let out a soft, succinct 'huh'.

"Daphne, did you see that," he asked me with his gaze still fixed on the oceanside, "I think I just spotted a dolphin."

"Dolphin? Really now. I haven't heard of any dolphin sightings out here."

"I don't know, It sure looked like a dolphin jumping out the water." Then he chuckled slightly and said, "Maybe you're right. It could just be the reflection of the sun playing tricks on my eyes. Now where's that coffee." He held up the tumbler from the cup holder and took a sip of his morning coffee. After a lull, he asked me if I had any plans while he's gone. I told him I'm going to take it easy and try to catch up on some Netflix shows. He didn't ask me which show I would be watching but seemed to have fallen back to searching for his dolphin. Then I dropped Peter off at the airport, telling him that I loved him. He replied in kind as he slipped out of the car.

As I drove back on the highway, I questioned my sanity. Admittedly, this wasn't how most people would bring a baby into their lives but Peter would understand. He must understand. I understood that baby wasn't in our cards yet according to his life plan but I wanted him to see that sometimes life happens on a slight nudge.

I was a few blocks away from the clinic when I approached the red light. I passed through a sunlight that briefly blinded my vision before coming to a full stop. Then she was in front of me. The same little girl in the photo. I swear it was her. Perhaps I badly wanted to believe that it was her. She was crossing the street while holding onto her father's hand, one strap on her pink backpack with pointed bunny ears had slipped down to her elbow. Her flowery dress that draped to her knees fluttered slightly with each small step. She mumbled something to her dad and her dad looked down at her. Smiling.

And then I started to cry uncontrollably, I could hardly see anything in front of me. I pulled over to the side of the street and rested my head against the steering wheel. As tears streamed down and dripped on my thighs, I wondered whether Peter would ever smile at our child in the same way. Will I ever bear to keep a straight face every time he refers to our child

as, "my baby" or "my little girl". I don't remember how long I was crying. Through the windshield, I could see the outside of the two-storied fertility clinic.

I never did go back. My baby is one percent. But who should be the father? "You're right, Peter," I take a deep breath to steel myself. "This isn't your baby."

Peter bangs his fist on the table, "How could you do this to me, Daphne." His outburst of anger surprisingly does nothing to me. This is the calmest I have been all day. "I loved you," he says. I can hear a faint thumping sound of a heartbeat traveling through my veins.

"Now before you go off accusing me of being a cheater. Hear me out. The fact is I don't know who the father is either."

"That's convenient," he retorts. Indeed, I tell him about my visit to the fertility clinic but conveniently leave out the most important detail that I never did go through the donor insemination process. Instead I tell him the opposite truth, that I, in fact, am holding a baby of an anonymous sperm donor. I gently cradle my belly to protect its ears as Peter screams into the air and drowns out the hurtling wind of lunacy and finger-pointing with the silent lullaby from within.

## Forever Frozen

Victoria Drozda

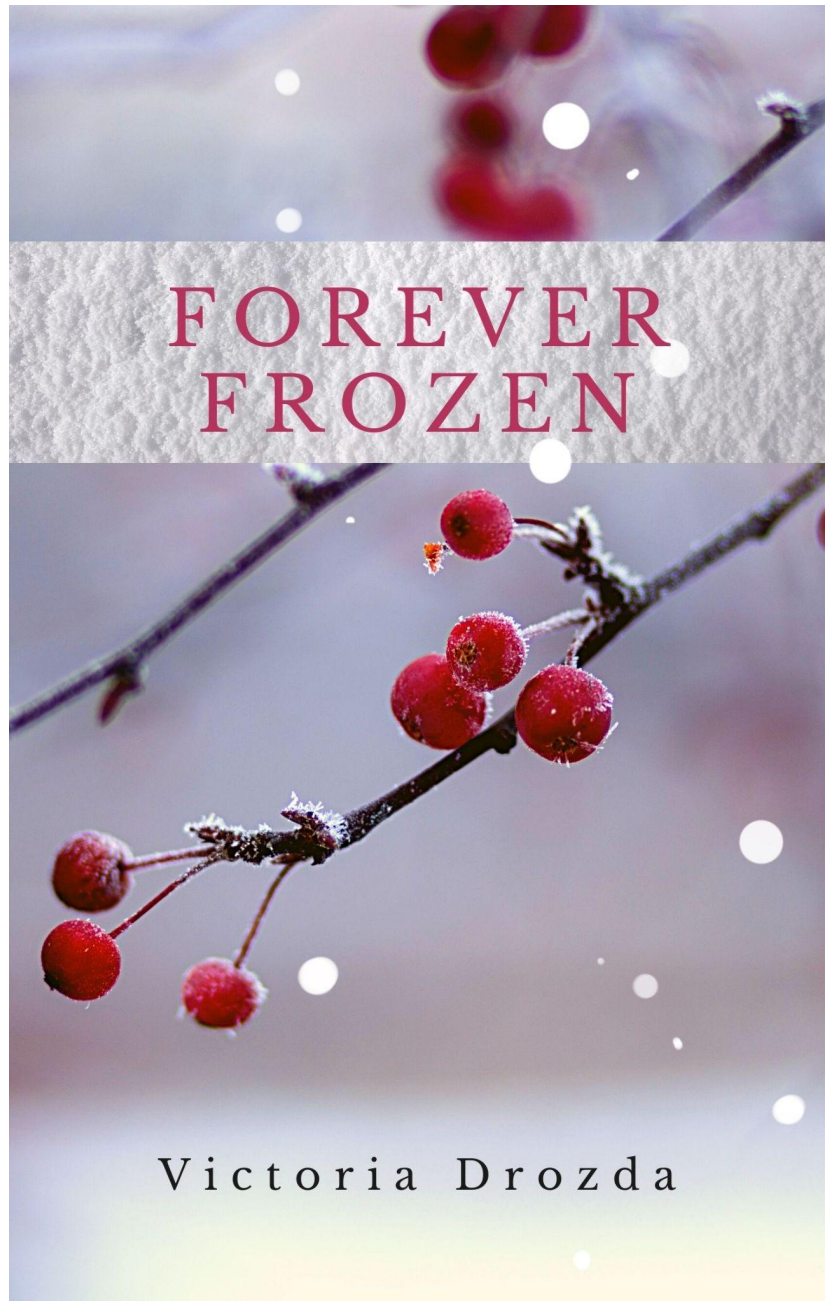
Still.

The forest was still as it watched its intruder make way through its snow domain to his chosen destination. Each step, the sound of crunching snow bounced through the empty forest filling the evening silence. Then the hooded figure paused at a circling of trees; bare branches lightly coated with frost, rising toward the darkening sky as if in awe: twisted and weak.

The castle of trees with its gracefully entangled thorns and branches in its bented interwovenness greeted him in a grand demeanor of unwelcoming. The figure crept into the structure with careful motions so the thorns wouldn't claw at his hands as much. The ice coated path made it difficult for him to get inside without losing his balance. Overhead the sky blazed to life, painting itself in flaming reds and violent purples from the absence of its beloved sun, turning the frosted world below dim and ghostly as he finally made it inside.

Inside the castle of trees was just as ghostly and dim as the one outside. Maybe even more so as it caged its dear guest in with looming branches of white. Not a single living visitor welcomed him, but he wasn't here for the living. He was here for the one lost of it. He was here for the woman made of unmelting snow.

For inside the thorns and branches in the circling of trees was a beautiful statue of a woman in white stone. A woman that looked as if she was made of unmelting snow; forever frozen in cruel icy bliss. Cold and hard; she looked just as alive as ice until thawed. Her snow-white arm reaching out as if in a spell, her long dress twirling in an eternal pause as her



smooth hair sailed down her back in chalky waves in her surrounding colosseum of leafless trees and thorns.

He walked toward her, pulling his hood down so the icy wind bit bitterly at his wrinkle drawn face.

"I hope you didn't wait long for me," he said, putting an aged hand on her cold cheek. Her glaze looking passed him unchanged. He could still hear her voice as she sang that day and remember her eyes.

Those beautiful unforgettable eyes.

. . . .

A voice sung through a seemingly empty forest.

It wove through the trees and stretched to every silent place like a pulsing melody. Even the air: cold and bitter; seemed to have little effect on her sweet voice as it did to the icy glazed forest. Her feet barely brushed against the frost dusted ground as she hummed her unfamiliar tune. Her long fingers drummed back and forth along the smooth branch that she sat on top making it seem as if her hands were dancing with the rhythm of her own silvery tune.

She tilted her shoulders side to side a little bit causing her long hair to play with the white fur of her collared dress. The soft gray skirt of her dress moved with the swing of her legs like waves on the sea, rippling gracefully. She stared off into the secret lake of rich liquid blue. A blurred reflection greeting her teasingly. In splashes of white and blurred gray in rippling black.

She looked like a snow top mountain: strong, elegant and sharp.

She paused.

"If you like my singing so much," she said, as she hopped down from her branch.

A smirk grew on her lips as she rubbed the golden chain of her locket between long frost white fingers with one hand. The shiny heart-shape locket swung back and forth at her mercy. And with the other she walked around the tree, her fingers still dancing to the ghost of that beautiful unfamiliar melody around its colorless base.

She paused right where she started and looked up.

"You should just tell me instead of hiding in the trees." Up to right where he was watching. Her eyes were the same color of the lake's forbidden depths; a blue so dark and rich it looked black.

. . . .

But that was a long time ago.

He withdrew his hand. The shadows grew slowly around the trees stretching toward them like dark ghostly hands carving life as the sky transitioned to a sugary rose pink. He took out a heart-shaped locket from his pocket. The chain broke but the silver locket still shone in the

tinted light as if new as he opened. Inside it caged by thin metal was an image of a mother and child sharing matching smiles that greeted him so happily. The image slightly faded as if falling back into time.

He gently closed the locket with a soft aching click and tied the broken chain together in a clacky tangled mess of a metal knot before carefully placing the locket around her slender neck. He took a step back as she started to melt from where the metal touched, spreading from her neck to across her face and down her dress, bathing her in color. Her icy colorless covering became alive; skin turning sun-kissed, long lips slightly agape painting into liquid ruby as she blinked her deep lake blue-black eyes.

He lifted his hand for her as if to ask her to dance, she smiled at him and took it. Her hands were soft to the touch but cold.

Stone cold.

He looks out onto the small lake frozen over with winter's crystals like glass; beautifully clear, it's dark secretive depths danced over with fractures of frost white.

. . . .

"So you never danced on top of ice before?" she asked, an amused expression on her face as she sat on top of a tree branch swinging her legs back and forth.

'You say that as if it's a bad thing,' he laughed.

She shook her head and jumped down.

"Then you have to come to the festival. No excuse and I know you're not busy." She smiled, walking over to the ice quilted lake and gracefully sliding onto it. "It's just like regular dancing, except you don't step on the other person's feet."

'That was one time!' He interrupted and she laughed.

She slid backwards, hands behind her back, one graceful step after step as she faced him. She looked so natural on that glass like ice. It was like she always belonged there.

"And I only danced with you one time." She slowly spun in a circle, eyes closed, head slightly tilted back, arms spread out and balanced like wings. It looked as if she was held by invisible strings, as if she weighed nothing. "Besides this is different. It's like dancing in a sea of bright glowing stars. Each step feels alive, every swirl, every touch." She carefully straightens up. "It's absolutely enchanting."

He watched her with a small smile.

"What?" she asked, with a hand at her hip.

'Nothing,' he said, smiling. 'Nothing.'

. . . .

They walked around the lake arm in arm just like they used too.

The sky was now painted in stars over a soft dark violet canvas. A few blinked down at them secretly, trying to hold onto its dear dying light before being consumed by the night's rich darkness like a stolen kiss. The crescent moon entranced in pale silver, sent its precious light to gleam off the icy, making them shine and causing the world below to become enchanted.

"It's quiet tonight," he said, pausing for a bit.

She looked up at the sky and touched the locket.

"She's grown a lot," he continued.

She gave him a puzzled expression: her lips in a thin pout, brows almost bridge together making a careful wrinkle between the two arched lines.

"Our daughter," he explained.

She relaxed her face and looked ahead as they continued their walk.

"Her hair is almost as long as yours now and just as beautiful. She likes to sing too. Has a beautiful voice like a songbird." He stopped and looked up at the sky. A collection of rebel winds pulled whispers of clouds to sneak past the moon.

"She misses you."

She said nothing.

He took both her hands, so that she could face him. He ran his thumb gently against her knuckles before kissing her hand.

It was cold like snow.

"I miss you too. Every day, every moment, every breath I'm away from you feels like forever. And one day, my love, I'll bring you back." He put a hand on her cheek. She mimicked his gesture, her touch cold but real. "I promise."

When he removed his hand, her skin was back to being the color of fresh snow blissfully forever frozen. Her arm rising again, invisible strings tugging on her dress and hair in an unseen storm. Her deep blue-black eyes now a frost-over pool. The locket that fell on the ground between them shone up at him helplessly.

Carefully picking up the locket he wiped the snow stuck to the cold metal as it melted to his touch. He stared at the locket for a moment before putting it safely in his coat pocket with a sad sigh. His old age-less hands feeling the shape of the cold metal heart on its worn out chain as if making sure it's still there.

"I'll visit you again soon," he said, turning and walking back toward his lonely castle.

'Must, you leave me so soon, my love?' A mellifluous voice called, making him stop as arms wrapped around his neck lovingly. 'It's been so long.'

"I know."

'Do you?' she whispered. 'Then why don't you look at me?'

He didn't say anything. She tightened her grip.

'Do you think it's your fault, beloved?' Her voice bittersweet venom before softening as she rested her head on his shoulder. 'But it's not, you know that. It's not your fault.'

"But it is," he said as he looked up at the night sky.

The air was cool and the sky held drifting hazy clouds in a sea of stars covering the moon, blinding the only form of true light. Just like that night.

That terrible unforgettable night.

. . . .

'Please, rethink this!' He shouted as she paced back and forth, her shoes slapping against the hard stone floors.

"And do what?! Wait. While our daughter is out there!"

She snatched a silver dagger from the white jewelry armoire that housed many of her favorite jewelry and weapons. She tested the blade on the edge of the wooden armoire, making a perfect little niche to aid the army of slashes that dressed the side of it.

"While he's out there," she said disgustedly as she rubbed the bright blue stone embedded between the handle and the blade of the dagger with her thumb.

He put his arms on her shoulders. She looked at their reflections, before turning and putting a hand in his hair.

"Your hair is becoming so white," she mused. "Was it always this way? It's white like a sea-shell."

"She'll be okay," he said, taking her hand. "...as long as we do as he asks of us, she'll be home soon."

She leaned her forehead to his, they were so close that their nose touched. "Not soon, enough," she said bitterly, lifting her head as she put down the dagger, wrapping her arms around her torso. "My little songbird."

He hugged her, wrapping his arms around her shoulders; her body was cold.

"I am fine," she said as he released her. She wiped the corners on her eye with the back of the sleeve of her fur lined dress. "You sent the guards, right?"



'Yes, they're circling and waiting as we speak.'

She pursed her lips, a wrinkle bridging her brows. "I don't like this."

'I know you do,' he said gently. 'But we must be wise, my love. For our daughter. This isn't just anyone, this is now a circumstance between kingdoms. Not only will our daughter be in danger, but then our realm.'

"Ugh, how theatrical," she sighed, leaning on the jewelry armoire before looking over at the doorless balcony. The view overlooking the steep snowy terrain that melted into an ocean of forest at the bottom. The wind seemed to be laced with winter and rain. "And we already started a war over that, haven't we."

'You wouldn't have been my queen if, if we didn't,' he replied with a small smile.

"Alright," she said. The sky was cloudy yet no snow fell. "It's late, you should rest. Would you like me to sing to you? Of course you do."

She didn't even wait for him to respond as she started to sing a melodious song. She quickly guided him to the bed full of colorful pillows like some sort of blanket made nest, making him lie down. She sat down beside him as she held his hand, her eyes closed as she sang her sweet song. Her voice sweetly echoing through the room that gentle pulsing like the waves of the sea around them.

Soon his eyes became heavy. He was always weak to her music.

Yet when he felt a draft of icy wind and reached for her hand he only grasped her silence. He quickly opened his eyes, searching the room for her but she was gone. And so was her set of matching silver daggers with deep blue gems.

A gift that he gave her before he made her Queen.

Soon he was running through the forest, blindly searching for her. The forest was broad and cruel. Taking one step in one direction may be one step closer to being lost in oblivion with time as the master. Time plays many games. Even if you knew the forest with your eyes closed, some else might not. One step may be one step away from them and getting lost yourself in time's cruel game that settles dread into your bones as panic fills you to the brim.

The stretching trees that surrounded him in a nasty game of labyrinth where everything looks the same. The blanketed snow was untouched. The wind laughed wicked through the tanglement of ghostly gray branches making them dance.

There was no sound. Not a whisper. Not a breath. Not a single noise to signal the sound of life. Suddenly a voice cried out, bellowing throughout the forest silencing the wind and the trees. The air quickly dropped, and little flurries of snow started to build, getting stronger and stronger each moment. Clouds marched by the moon in chilling white stealing the precious true light of the moon.

'No,' he said, his voice barely a whisper over the drumming of his heart beating that pulsed in his ear. He raced toward the cry. The trees seemed to make way for him as if they lost joy in their wicked game. The wind pushed him forward as snow drifted by in swarms. By the time he found her it was too late.

In a cocoon of intertwining ice crystals forming a large protective dome, stood a woman made of cold white stone and ice. He ran toward the ice, trying to get inside. The ice was hard and unchanging. He could barely reach his arm inside trying desperately with each bit of strength to get to her. He banged his hands against it, but it only made his hands angry with red from the ice cold stubbornness..

Never before had he felt so helpless as he rested his head on the firm ice. His breath fogged it up like glass.

'My King!' Voice shouted from afar. He turned, putting a hand on the ice, as he watched a pair of guards racing toward him with something in their arms. A mane of long curls the shade of the dark ocean before fading to moon gray sway from the movement. He knew who those curls belonged to.

'She-' One of the guards started.

'Hand me, my daughter,'" he interrupted. The guard didn't argue and handed him the girl. 'Leave me.'

'Yes, my King.' They replied quickly before leaving.

'How could I let this happen?' He said softly as he held his daughter closely.

He looked down at her eyes closed, causing long lashes to make shadows along her rosy cheeks from the chilled night. She was like a frail doll. He touched the icy cage where his beloved was held.

'I promise, I'll fix this. I'll bring you back. I promise.'

His daughter shivered, her eyes closed tight as if having a bad dream. He watched her as moonlight washed over them, making the icy glisten sharp. Then he noticed something shine between his daughters' tight fists that she held so close to her chest. A shine of silver. He carefully uncaged her hands, where a heart-shaped locket greeted him. The chain hung brokenly, clinging to its cherished heart. He closed her fist.

'No matter what it takes,' he said, turning. 'No matter how long. You will return to us, my love.'

. . . .

He turned to face her, yet the only thing that faced him was a ghostly reflection of the frozen woman that gleamed of moonlight. He gently reached for her, yet as soon as he touched her his hand ran right through her like an untouchable melody. She sighed, wrapping her arms around her torso as she glanced down to where a shadow chain tethered her to the statue in an unbreakable imprisonment.

He took a step toward her, "I'll bring you back, no matter what."

She smiled, but it was full of beautiful melancholy.

'I know,' she replied, putting a hand on his cheek. Never feeling so real before. Real but not alive. 'But I knew that there would be dangers marrying you.'

"Do you regret it?" he asked softly, leaning into her touch.

'Do you?'

"Never."

She smiled, looking up past the treetops toward the horizon, the sky dimming and the stars winking out.

'Then tell her that when you see her again.'

"What do you mean?" He asked, grabbing her hand as she drew it away but his hands would just go right through her like a shadow.

'Because, I'm just a reflection of her and you know that,' she said as she looked away and touched the statue, bits and pieces of her started to wither away, fading with the shadows as the light took its place.

And just like that she was once again gone.

He looked toward the sky shifting to where cold periwinkle blue-violet took the place of reserved violet and closed his eyes.

"Good-bye, for now my beloved snowflake."

# New Beginnings

Emily Federspiel

I remember the day I told my family I wanted to go to college. No one in my family has ever gone to college. I was and still am a first generation college student. I can remember this day like it was yesterday. That day I was told if I wanted to go to college I had to find the means myself. I walked into our very small living room and my parents were watching tv like they did every night. I remember the queasy feeling in my stomach as I uttered the words. I remember their facial expressions and the shock on their faces.

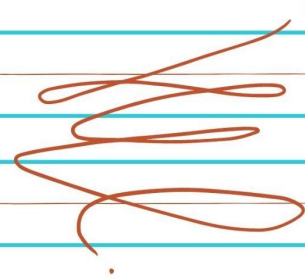
I knew I was alone on this path in life. Even before I could say a word, they said they would not pay for such a thing. Before I knew it turned into more than just shock they got angry. I could not understand why, but I wanted something different for myself and that's when I realized I had to leave. So I started packing and found a studio apartment that was perfect just for me. I never looked back and I wondered what would have happened if things went differently.

I am currently studying to get my psychology degree and I am working three jobs to keep myself afloat. It is definitely stressful. I am currently in the process of writing my first book. I haven't talked to my family in over two years and trust me I wish things were different. I often go back to that day and wonder what if I stayed, but then I remember the fight before I left. I remember being in my old room with its baby blue walls and my little doodles pasted up on my wall. I remember the sun was shining extra bright in my room that day warming my face as I packed. I remember the tear running down my face and I remember the pit feeling in my stomach. I thought to myself it couldn't get worse but I was very wrong. My dad comes strolling into my room and the word he speaks still plays over in my head today.

"I still don't get it, why? Why can't you just be like your mother and realize that your family is more important than a degree? Why is school so important? Men don't find women -" says my dad but I cut him off as I try to hold back my tears.

new

beginnings



Emily Federspiel

"Why can't you just be supportive? So what if I am not like mom I want to do something with my life. I am not going to be a housewife. I want more for myself. I want to get out of this tiny town and make a name for myself. I want more and your messed up views of how women should be aren't going to change that." I didn't realize how much I was yelling till I saw the shock in his eyes

After that he only spoke a few words. "Well leave - see if I care." he utters those last words then turns and leaves

I remember sobbing as I finished packing and I packed everything up in my car. I left that night because I couldn't spend another night in that house.

I have started a new life for myself and I know in reality they will never support me or help me pay for any school. I remind myself of my goals and why I am doing this every morning as I am getting ready. I say to myself in the mirror

"They are the reason you choose psychology."

"You picked writing because you want to empower young girls and remind them of how strong they are."

"You want to inspire others by the power of your words. You will prove to your parents that being educated doesn't make you cocky or snobby."

I often think to myself I know this to be true because my mom has even said it. I remember the day very clearly she was talking to my dad in the kitchen while making dinner.

"Did you hear our niece is going to college?"

"Why? High school is all you need after that all the people I have known have gotten full of themselves." Says my dad

He barely passed high school and my mom was a 4.0 student. She is so smart yet there wasn't any interest to go further. This was the line that hit me hard.

"I hope Finley doesn't want that because I don't know if I or we could support that."

I remember hearing that yet I still told them I wanted to go hoping something would be different. I never asked my mom why she never went on to college. I remember hearing them talk before I left for good and never looked back. My mom says

"You were a little harsh don't you think, honey?"

"Harsh? Please we both know this is what is best for her. I remember you were very similar to her in our young days, yet. You never wanted that," says my dad.

My mom went on to say "I mean I thought about it, but my parents didn't have the money and I didn't either. I much rather be living the life I am than a life in debt."

Dad responds, "Ya ok because that is totally true."

My mom didn't say anything after that. I felt bad for her and that is probably why her view of school is so negative looking back on it. Now that I am a little older. There is a part of me that wants to call her and tell her, but I know how that would end. I want to tell her that I am in my last semester at the community college. I want her to know I am transferring to California State University Monterey Bay in the fall and I could not be more excited. I wanted to tell her that I miss her. I want to tell her so many things, but I feel even though she is my mother she wouldn't understand. I remind myself this is my time and I am hoping this will show my parents that college is not completely worthless. I am sure my parents have seen my name in print. I have written articles for many papers. I know they read the paper yet they still have not tried to reach out.

I know what you are thinking. I could reach out to them, but I want them to come to me. I am the one who always reaches out and I am over it. If they actually want to see me they make the effort. The phone goes both ways and if they cared they would reach out. I am actually writing a chapter about this in my book. I have always been that girl that has been there for everyone. If I need someone, I feel alone and like no one really cares. My heart is my biggest strength, but it is my biggest weakness as well. Recently, I have been focusing on myself and I want to give other girls the power to be able to do the same. I want them to remember how powerful they are because life can be vicious. Life is like a test to see what we can take. It rips away loved one, friends all because it wants to test you or teach you a lesson. You are the one that determines how you grow from what is thrown your way. I am also writing a chapter about this in my book. As well as what it is liked to be the friend that will always be there for others. But the moment they need someone nobody seems to care. I am writing an advice book for young girls or whoever wants to read it.

I am using my psychology major to help with this and use that to help enrich the meaning behind my words. I have only recently started cutting people off and kicking people out who are takers and not givers. Those who only give because they know you will give if they give you enough. This is another reason I chose psychology because I want to try and understand the interworking of others' minds. In a way it has actually helped a lot and helped me be able to understand people, but there's always more to learn. The brain is way too complex and hard to understand. Psychology has helped me understand a lot about people and why they do what they do. I have always done well in school and I know I can do this. It would be nice to have some level of emotional support from my parents .

I recently reconnected with my cousin Jenna. I have Jenna, but I still feel alone on this journey through school. I am working so hard and I am not going to stop no matter what. I need to prove to my parents and honestly to myself that I can do this all by myself. I will have my Bachelor of Science in just two more years. I have to keep this grind going. I applied for scholarships to hopefully not have to work as much. Not having and worrying about money definitely makes things so much harder. I work as a waitress, a yoga teacher, and a virtual assistant. My work days are long hours and many hours. I am currently pulling almost thirty hours a week. I take night classes for the most part, but I have a few morning classes on the night I waitress. My favorite job is being a yoga teacher because it is more relaxing and gives me a little time to breathe. I have always loved yoga and I thought why not make it a job. It is a way I can relax and relieve stress when the stress starts to get overwhelming. I teach yoga on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Friday mornings at the community center. I am teaching yoga today and this is my favorite time of the day.

"Ok everyone let's start today off with some downward dog and I want you guys to remember to never push yourself too hard." I say to my class as I turn on the bluetooth speaker.

My yoga class wouldn't be my yoga class without some music.

"Now I want you to slowly lower yourself into an upward facing dog. Remember to take it easy. I will walk around and make sure your form is correct."

My yoga classes are thirty minutes long and I love it. I try to remember to journal about my day. This was today's entry. "I lead a very busy life, but honestly I like it. I am sure you are wondering if I get a rest day. My weekends are for homework. . I try to find a little time to reset and make time for myself. It is hard but not completely impossible because I need to remind myself that self care is productive as well. I often get too caught up in my work and school work. I need to remember resting is a thing and I need that. Sometimes work and homework can wait because I need to take time for myself. I am going to add this to my book as well because I want to have it as a reminder to myself and to others. I have to remember I can grind, but there needs to be some rest and time for yourself. Work and school do not need to take over life. I need to remember to take a break. It could be something as simple as stepping outside for a few hours. I could be just stretching a little, but breaks are needed because otherwise you will be exhausted. I have to remind myself often that I will burn myself out and cause more problems in the end. So just remember in the end you are what matters more than work or school."

There have been a few times this week when I wish my mom and I did talk. Instead I call my cousin and we talk for hours.

"Hey Jenna, what are you doing tonight?" I say knowing she is in my area for the weekend

"I was actually just about to call you! Do you want to meet for dinner?" She says kinda laughing a little

"Oh cool, where do you want to eat?"

"Ooo can we go to that Thai place we went to last time I visited?"

"O ya, meet at my place first?" I say with some excitement in my voice

"Ya, I will be there in thirty minutes or so. See you soon, bye!"

"Ok, see you soon bye!"

Jenna and I were never really that close as kids. Due to us being in similar boats with school we have become very close. It is nice and I am glad I have someone because I don't really have that many friends. I am just glad we were able to reconnect and be able to build a real relationship. When she finally arrives I head down to meet her.

"Hey, how was the drive?!" I say as I get in the passenger seat

"It wasn't so bad, it was actually a pretty smooth ride."

"That's good! How's school?"

"It is going good, it is definitely stressful."

"I feel you on that one."

"Ooo I love this song!" She says as she turns up the radio

We both jam out to music and just have fun catching up. It was great and the food was great. After our dinner she comes back to my place and we end up watching a movie. We both end up passing out on the couch. I was dreaming that I woke up in my room back at my parents house. My baby blue walls and my little doodles I pasted on the wall. The way the sunshine enters my room warming my face. I missed it so much, even though there were so many bad memories attached here. It was still the place I grew up and it was my little place. The places I would go when I need a break from life or when I just wanted to be alone. I missed the smell of my mother's cooking and her singing as she cooked. It just seemed too real, too much like I was back. I start to hear a ringing noise like a phone. I was confused because I couldn't find my phone at all.

"Where is it?" I say as I look through my sheets and around my room.

As I am looking I slowly slip back into reality and realize that my phone is actually ringing. I check the time on my watch and I realize it is eight o'clock am. Still very confused who could be calling me at this hour. I look around for my phone and find it lodged in between the couch cushions. The moment I lift it to my face to see who it could be as soon as I see the number I shoot straight up.

"Hello?" I say slightly confused

"Hi Honey, it has been a while hasn't it?" Says the voice on the other end

"Ya it has mom. Not to be rude, but why are you calling?"

"Can I not miss my only daughter?"

"I mean yes, but it's been two years. Honestly so I am not going to lie I am kinda confused. What's with the change in heart?"

"Ya, about that unfortunately I don't call barring the best news. It's about your father."

"What's wrong with him?" I say with a level of concern in my voice

"Well honey he has -" She pauses to take a breath

"He what?" I say even more concerned now

"He has been diagnosed with cancer." She says holding back tears

"WHAT?! I will head over to you, right now! Where are you?"



"We are at the hospital and the doctors are performing all sorts of tests to understand what is wrong with him.."

"Ok I will leave now!" I say I quickly get up and throw on some sandals

"What is wrong? Where are you going?" Says Jenna as we starts to stretch

"It's my dad I say." almost breaking into tears

I tell her everything and we both rush down stairs. Get into her car and hurry to the hospital. The drive there was silent, not even music was being played. We both just sat there in our thoughts.

After what seemed like forever, but was probably a little over twenty minutes we arrived at the hospital. We both ran to the front desk. The nurse looks up from her computer and says

"Hi, how can I help you today?"

"My Father is here, his name is Keith Griffins. I am Finley Griffin's, his daughter." those words sounded so weird coming out of my mouth I think to myself as I speak them. She types something into her computer and then looks up at me.

"Ah, yes he is in room 110 B. Go down that hall and to your right. It will be the last door on your right." She says with a very blank expression on her face

"Thank you so much!" I say as I grab Jenna's wrist and practically drag her down the hallway with me.

When we finally get to the door I stop. I feel stiff, sad, and a little uncomfortable. I wonder if I made the right choice even coming here. I start to question everything and why I really came here. All this is interrupted by my mom's face when she opens the door and says

"Finley! Jenna I am glad you could make it here." her voice was excited, but tearful Just seeing her put all those thoughts at ease and I give her a much needed hug. I look at my dad in his bed and his eyes shut in what I hope is just sleep.

"So how is he?" I say hoping it is not terrible

"Well right now he is sleeping while we wait for his test results to come back."

As she is saying this I start to walk over to his bedside. As I am standing there he slowly starts to wake up and he smiles then speaks.

"You came I didn't think you would." He reaches out his hand for mine

"Of course I came." I say as I grab his hand and tears start to fall from my face.

"I am glad you did." just as he finishes his sentence the doctor walks in.

We all turn to look at him eagerly.

"I see we have some new faces in here. I am Doctor Gibbs, nice to meet you all."

"What's the new doctor?" Says my mom as clasps her hands together and pressing them to her mouth

"Well unfortunately he has Lymphoma, which is a highly dangerous form of cancer. Then we think we caught it soon enough to where if we start him on chemo now, he has a higher chance of getting rid of it."

"When will the chemo start?" I say grabbing my dad's hand a little tighter

"We will let him rest tonight, but we will start it first thing tomorrow because I have to make sure everything is ready. You are all more than welcome to spend time with him tonight and come back in the morning around ten o'clock when we will start." says the doctor as he writes on his notepad.

As he finishes he smiles and leaves the room.

Jenna and I stay a little longer then she drives us back to my place. I pack a bag because I will be spending the night with my mom in my old house. She helps me pack and we talk about recent events.

"So how are you feeling about everything?" she finally asks me

"Honestly it's a little confusing because I don't want to lose him, but I don't know if I have let go of the past yet. Like don't get me wrong I am glad my mom called"

"Ya, understandable. Do you think maybe this is your second chance to maybe rebuild your relationship with your parents?"

"I guess time will tell." I say as I zip up my overnight bag.

"Would you want me to stay for dinner with you and your mom as a buffer. You know to make it less awkward?" She says as she packs up her stuff

"No, it's ok I think it just needs to be my mom and I."

"Ok, well can I at least drive you over there?"

"I think I will drive myself. I need a little time to clear my head." I say feeling bad for declining all her friendly and sweet offers.

"Ok, well be safe." she says as well make our way down to the park garage

I tell her thank you for everything and we hug then go our separate ways. Once I load my stuff into my car and get in. I just sit there and take a deep breath.

"Ok, let's get going." I say to myself as I start the car and turn on some music as I slowly hit the road.

On the ride to my old home I think about what this could mean. How Jenna could be right, maybe this is a chance to reconnect. Maybe this is a sign being sent saying it has been far too long that we have been separated. I just sit there in my thoughts for the rest of the drive.

After three hours or so when I finally pulled up to my house I felt weird because there were so many times I told myself I would never come back here. I am now telling myself it is because my mom needs me. I get out of my car, grab my bags and ring the doorbell. She answers with a warm smile, but still a somewhat shocked look on her face.

"Hi Sweetie, come on in. I am making pesto pasta your favorite or I hope it still is your favorite?" She says as she moves out of the doorway

"It is, don't worry." I say with a smile kinda touched that she remembered

I bring my bags into my old room. As I walked in it looked just as I left it plane, The bed was made and my old floral curtain still hung. My few doodles that I left behind stayed on the wall untouched. I was surprised it wasn't different, but it was also nice and gave me a warm feeling in my heart.

"Dinner is ready!" says my mom from the other room

I reply with a simple ok and make my way into the dining room for dinner. It was weird sitting at this table again. Just like my room it hadn't changed as I looked around everything was how I remembered it. For a while we sit in silence and serve ourselves then my mom speaks. The words that come out of her month almost make me choke.

"So how is school? I read some of the articles you wrote." she says as she stabs some of her pasta with her fork

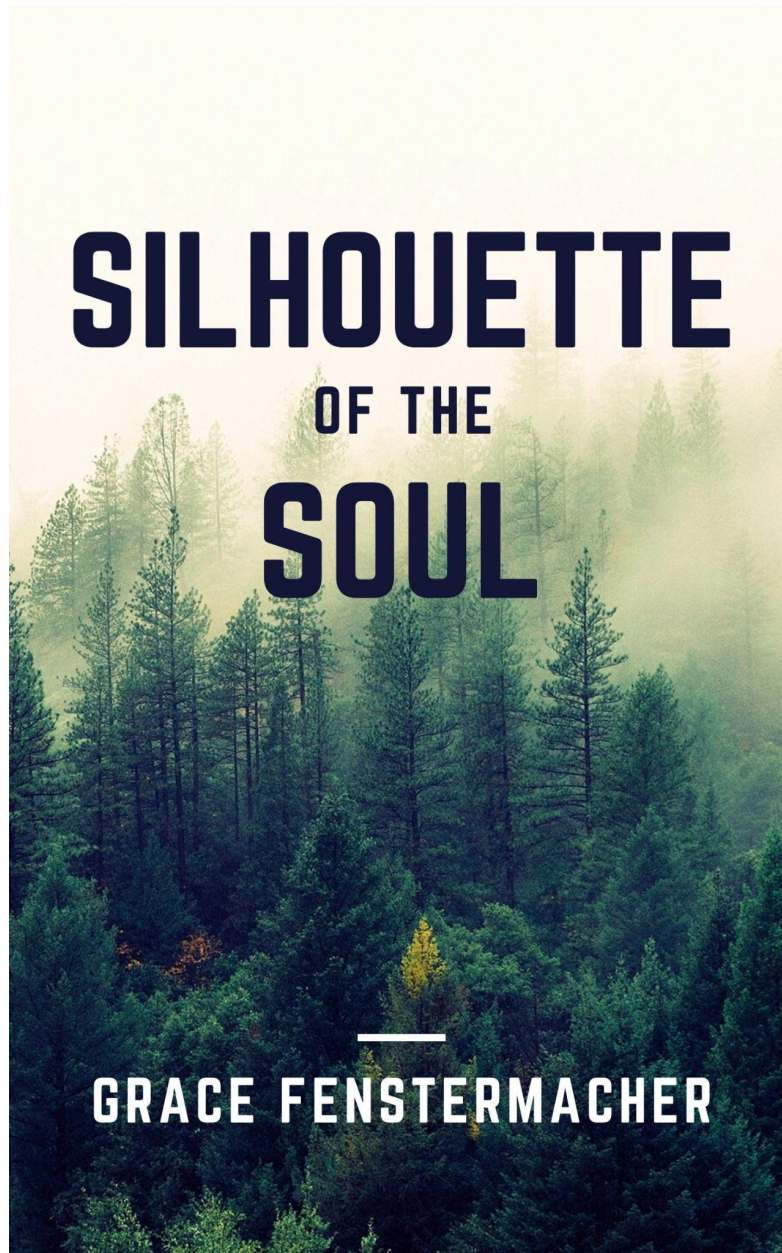
"Oh um I actually like it a lot and I am glad you read them. What did you think?"

"Well I am glad to hear that and I loved them. You were always a good writer."

"Thank you!" I say with a smile

We were both silent again and then she spoke again. Asking more questions about school and my life. She tells me about what her and my dad have been up to and we finally start to catch up. It feels nice, it feels like I never left because of how natural it was. I missed her so much and maybe Jenna is right this could be my chance to fix my relationship with my parents. Maybe this will be a good thing.

Silhouette of the Soul  
Grace Fenstermacher



“Even the darkest night disappears with the smallest light.” This mantra has become a shield for her impending destructive thoughts. Such as a holy man lost in feverish prayer, the girl mumbles these words in quick succession, her eyes wide, transfixed upon the entrance of “The Unknown”.

“The Unknown” forest was a place of wonder and chaos, brimming with life and mystery. Secrets etched themselves into the bodies of mighty trees, whispers chisel into cavernous rock. The enchantment of this place calls to those who seek answers. Answers to life, happiness, death, and love, the great questions of the universe. However, there is a price to be paid for answers. Those who enter the forest never return.

“The Unknown” eventually lures everyone to its forever woods, coaxing one’s curiosity with sweet lullabies. No one is spared from “The Unknown”. It is inevitable.

Two great pines mark an opening to the forest, a dark clearing, hazy with mist. Darkness creeps over her as she inches

closer to the entrance. The girl stares into the void. She sees nothing. A complete stillness surrounds her. The air is stale and hard to breathe. She hears nothing. A silence that swallows any interrupting noise, separates the girl from her voice. Alone with her thoughts, she begins to panic. Doubt and fear blanket over her hope and purpose. The girl can’t breathe, choking on the musty rot in the air, unable to catch a breath. The trees act as walls and begin closing in, trapping her. She steps backwards, an attempt to escape the closing darkness, and trips on a root. Instead of falling, the girl embraces a crooked tree limb, an odd branch stretched away from the rest of its siblings, as if the tree itself reached out to catch her. As she steadies herself and her thoughts, a cool breeze from the forest caresses the girl’s face, enticing her back to The Unknown’s edge. She looks back into the forest and sighs. Somewhere in this black abyss, there

is light. Freeing light. With a renewed sense of courage, the girl begins her mantra and steps into the emerging woods. The looming darkness quickly consumes the girl, masking all signs of her existence, leaving only the echo of her calming lull, "Even the darkest night disappears with the smallest light. Even the darkest night disappears..."

As the girl began to travel deeper into thickening woods, the less she knew where she was going. Growing thickets of fir and spruce took over the marked path, hiding it away with emerald vines and dense undergrowth. Brambles began to claw at the girl's legs, tearing at her clothes, desperately trying to draw her into a painful embrace. The forest seemed to become alive with the girl's presence, attempting to destroy her efforts, leading her into the blackening depths. The girl started to run; away from the thickets, away from the path. Pricks and thorns dug into her legs, covering the girl with vibrant scratches, seeping crimson and rust. *"You'll die here... trapped forever... alone..."* The hushed words filled her ears, consuming her mind. The girl squeezed her eyes shut and tried to focus on the sound of blood pounding in her ears. She wished she could run forever; run away from the voices, the fear, nevering having to touch the ground. Unfortunately, her body had a mind of its own. Panting, lungs on fire, the girl came to a stop and glanced at her surroundings. Everything had grown darker and more strange. Worn out, she sighed and leaned on a nearby tree as her body lost adrenaline and began to ache. It never used to be this hard. Before this place.

High in the sky, the sun shone brightly overhead, enticing people to leave behind their daily routines and gather together in town to celebrate. To celebrate what? Who knows? It didn't really matter to anyone, as long as they could join the festivities. This is what the girl thought about from her secret spot on top of the hill. On the top of the hill, there lay a meadow hidden from the eyes of passersby. A meadow teeming with life and color. A place wild and untamed. Forgotten. This was the girl's secret spot. Such as her meadow went unnoticed, the girl went invisible to her peers. She was unlike the other townsfolk and treasured time alone, away from their prying eyes. Everytime the people gathered, the girl would sneak away to the grassy knoll right outside of town and observe others and their nonsense from afar. At least that's how it used to be.

Before this place. The girl blinks into focus, reminding herself of where she is. *"This is not the time to be lost in thought!"* She silently harangues herself. *"These woods hold large, unexpected dangers when one leaves the path. I can't lose myself to the darkness. Not again."* No one knows for sure what lies in "The Unknown" but it is said that frightening beasts and creatures prey on the weak and hunt the lost, hoping to fill their never ending hunger. These rumors frighten the girl. These rumors fill her entire being with doubt and grief. *"Just rumors and nonsense..."* She sighs out her new song. *"Just rumors and nonsense. These woods are made up of rumors and nonsense!"* A shiver runs through the girl. An icy gust has chilled the air. *"It's time to move."* The girl looks ahead at the overcast glade. As hard as she tries to dispel thoughts of danger and fear, the girl can't help but feel afraid.

As the great trees thinned out of existence, the girl gazed out onto rolling moors covered in purple and green. The thunderous sky brought out a brightness in the dulled colors, leaving the moors vivid and breathtaking. The girl had forgotten about color. She had forgotten its beauty and importance. She had forgotten this feeling. This feeling of light heartedness. A bright flash and earth shattering crack snatched the girl's attention, forcing her back into reality. A light drizzle of rain quickly became a pour. *"The moors are going to flood... The moors are going to flood!"* She was starting to panic. It was at least another few miles to the tree line. The

girl began sprinting toward the horizon, trying to ignore the softening dirt underfoot and gathering puddles. Thunder roared, causing the land to shudder.

Her sprint had been weighed down to a jog. The mud was thick and acted as an anchor to anything that dared trespass. The frigid water began to creep up the girl's legs. She couldn't keep this up for much longer. *"Why not give in... you were never going to make it anyway... just stop struggling for a minute... embrace the darkness."* The temptress voice was persuasive and loud. "Shut up! Shut up!" The girl was louder. The water had become murky and rough. Nevertheless, in her stubbornness, the girl persisted. She began to swim only to be forced under by the waves. The girl fought the water, trying to break its heavy surface. The tired water spit her onto high ground. The tree line. She clawed the ground, inching forward, as she gasped for air. Surrounded by emerging trees and solid ground, the girl's body collapsed, spent. Her eyes grew heavy, a welcomed darkness began to close in. She hadn't always been accustomed to the dark.

High in the sky, the sun shone brightly overhead, attracting beads of sweat to the girl's forehead, and emphasizing her angry flushed cheeks as her father dragged her toward town. Her father wasn't a bad man, he just didn't understand her. The girl understood this, yet hated him for it. They were on their way to the summer festival. Everyone went to the summer festival. The girl couldn't stand this event but her father insisted on her making an effort; to meet new people, to fit in, to be normal. As they approached the town square, the girl stopped breathing. There are too many people and not enough air. Not enough air. Too many people. *"They are looking at you... judging you... run... run now!"* Voices, urgent and pressing, filled her head. The girl couldn't take it. She needed to breathe. She tore out of her father's grasp and disappeared into the crowds.

*"They are looking at you... judging you... run..."* The girl couldn't get out of her head. It had been a few hours since leaving her father in town square and she couldn't stop reliving those moments. She had gone to her secret place. Her place to be alone with her thoughts. "What's wrong with me?! I can't even be around people anymore! Why am I like this?"

"Nothing is wrong with you. Everyone else here is crazy."

"Who's there?" The girl was taken aback and looked around for the owner of the voice.

"You don't recognize the voice inside your own head? I'm a bit offended!"

"Have I gone crazy? Is this some type of trick?"

"Honey, I'm your inner demon. No tricks."

"Why are you just now talking to me? You've never done this before!"

"I thought it was time to tell you why you don't fit in in this world."

"I'm listening..." The girl's demon began to explain how the humans cast out their demons, wanting to create a perfect world, a world without hardship and struggle, a world of sameness. The demon then spoke of their world, a world full of darkness and difference. A world where the girl's inadequacies were normal, a world where she was normal. The girl was

intrigued by this other world, hanging onto every alluring word from the demon. As the conversation continued, light began to fade from existence.

"I wish I could go to this other world, just for a moment, to finally feel normal, just for a moment." The girl had begun to believe this world was better than her own. An almost magical place. A place separate from reality.

"I can take you there. Just for a moment..." The demon spoke coyly, a smile in his voice.

"Yes. Take me there." The girl was sure of her answer.

"My dear, we are already here!" The demon began to cackle, their voice slowly fading.

"What do you mean? Demon?" No response. The girl looked around, unaware of where she was. It was so dark. It was unlike what the demon had described. This world was a vast wasteland, absent of light and warmth. This was no fantasy world. She called out for her demon but was answered with silence. The girl had wandered into the demon world and had become lost.

The moon's glare penetrates the rich canopy of the forest, acting as a guide for lost wanderers. The moonlight shone bright on the girl's face just to mock her. She would never find the light. She laid on the cold ground of stone and dirt, shuddering at the chills washing over her mud caked skin, settling into her bones. Fed up with the insistent light in her eyes, the girl screamed. She cried out, cursing the moon for its natural gift of light, cursing the forest for its depth, cursing the remaining life inside herself that continued her suffering. She is so tired. Tired of this endless journey. Tired of constantly battling her inner demon. Just tired of life. The ground holds the girl closely, in this moment, her protector. The girl's body began to relax against the ground, surrounded in a newly discovered warmth. Confused, she felt around and opened her eyes. A fur coat. The worn coat has been wrapped around her and acted as a blanket with its large size. As she examined the faded patterns and hand stitching of the sleeves, the girl met a pair of golden eyes. Golden eyes hidden behind a veil of scars on a sunken face. A skeletal frame cloaked in pall stands tall, hovering over the girl. The mysterious figure offers a silent hand to her. Unsure, she takes the hand of the dark prince and rises from the ground. "Why are you helping me?"

"You are a lost soul like myself." The dark prince had a steady voice. A voice, warm but tired.

"What's your story?"

The dark prince hesitated briefly but after a moment began to tell his tale. "It is not unlike your own..." The dark prince had searched "The Unknown" for his own light for centuries, unable to find it. He had grown weary of his journey and of being alone. The dark prince had lost his hope, he lost the path and he lost his way.

The girl had only one question. "Are you afraid of the dark too?"

"Yes."

In this moment, the girl and the dark prince understood each other. They both knew the hardships of the forest, the hardships of the demon world, the hardships of the darkness. They were so tired. Tired of their searching. Through their shared journeys, the girl and the dark prince found a sense of refuge in each other and became friends. Unbeknownst to the girl, a small light, one she could not see, sparked deep inside her when she had met the dark prince and began to glow brighter as her relationship with the prince grew stronger. Unfortunately, good things don't seem to last in the dark.

There are few things that can survive in the dark. The absence of light creates a sense of isolation and abandonment. Love cannot survive in the dark and she loved him. The girl needed an anchor, someone to stay. The prince needed an outlet, an energy source. He took and she gave. She lost herself in a blinding love. A blinding love that clings to distraction and illusion.

The more time the girl spent with the dark prince, the more her light grew, the more her love grew. The more time the prince spent with the girl, the more he craved her light and the more his fear grew. His fear of the dark. The dark that grabs at the prince's legs and nips at his arms, hoping to swallow him whole. The foul dark that taunts him with no shame. The dark prince keeps at bay with the lives and souls he has snatched from those who have passed by him. Innocent souls, like the girl, who have strayed too far from the path.

The girl eventually learned the truth. She had grown suspicious of the prince when he stopped confiding in her, stopped looking into her eyes, and began to disappear a few hours a day. One day, the girl decided to follow the dark prince when he snuck off. Her vast curiosity got the better of her conscience. It had been a clear night in the forest. The air was still and the earth was quiet. All very unusual. The girl had been following the prince for a while and lost track of him. She felt stupid for even following him. As she was walking back to camp, The girl heard a noise. What she found broke her heart. It was the dark prince. In the cold light of the moon, the dark prince reaped the soul of a lost traveler.

Once she discovered the truth, the girl left the dark prince; her heart had shattered. This was how the dark prince has survived the forever darkness for so long. For eternity, he has stolen the inner light of defeated travelers who have entered these woods. The dark prince has become so lost on his journey that he turned into a beast. He was so desperate to cast out the dark, to relieve his pain and suffering, he would do anything, no matter what the cost, to save himself. As she walked off, the dark prince filled with dread. He could not face his fear. The dark prince charged at the girl. Their wails filled the night sky.

The moon grieves for the girl, it does not rise, it stays hidden. The forest comforts her, cradling the girl in soft leaves and vines. The sky cries out for her, carrying obscenities with the wind. The void in her chest forms an ache that will not cease. As the girl gasps and takes in cold air, her lungs fill and rest in a state of ease. A fixed weight of gloom traps her in a curled up state. "My light is gone. I have lost my love. I have lost my light to the dark prince." Her loss consumes her very mind. The girl felt like she was beyond recovery. She felt broken. It took the girl time to grieve her losses and it took more time for her to not want to be broken. Healing takes time.

"Healing takes time. It doesn't matter how long it took the girl to recover, it matters what she does next. She is tired of feeling helpless. She is tired of lying on the ground! She is angry! She wants justice! The girl decides to pick herself up and find another way out of the demon



world, no matter what it takes! She will never give up." The volunteer ends her story and looks around the circle, trying to guess the group's reaction.

"What happens next??"

"You can't end a story like that! That's not fair!"

"I hope the girl gets revenge on the dark prince and frees the other taken souls!"

"Does she ever go back to the human world?"

"Hey kids! Settle down! I told you a story to calm you down, not to rile you up! We're doing questions and comments one at a time ok?" A gaggle of adolescents squirm impatiently, waiting for a turn to give their opinion. The volunteer chuckles and can't help but wonder where kids get their neverending curiosity. It's like this every Thursday. Stories are a great way to break the ice at these group therapy sessions, specifically with the younger teens.

"Okay, my turn! Will we ever know what happens at the end of the story? Or is this like one of those cliffhanger ending things?"

"You know..." The volunteer ponders for a moment. "To be honest, I don't know what's going to happen to my main character yet! She's still living her life and has a lot more of life to live. Plus, the point to my cliffhanger is that life isn't simple, there's not always going to be a big happily ever after and that's okay! It's about how we choose to move forward and how we deal with our hardships. We all go into the Unknown at some point. It is inevitable."

Beauty and the Beast  
Cyerra Smith



I was sitting on a metal bench at the cemetery, the sky turning from light blue to a purple- pink sunset. Throughout the cemetery, I could hear the sound of crickets chirping. It all seemed far away and distant. I take a deep breath and shut my eyes.

*"Time to go."*

As I stand up, dusting myself off, I see a brunette woman walking towards me. She was wearing a short red dress with a long, black sweater. The dress she was wearing reminded me of a nightgown. Her skin was a warm beige, it looked soft and healthy. I sit back on the bench, curious about the mysterious woman. Seeing me watch her, she turns my way and waves.

"Hi there." she said.

I could feel my cheeks turning pink, my heart was pounding out of my chest.

"Hey." I respond.

She walks over to me, I could smell her perfume.

"Mmmm, rose water and vanilla." I thought.

"I saw you watching me, why?" she asks bluntly, catching me off guard. "Well... I, uh..." I stammered, not really knowing why I stared at her. "My father always told me that staring is a rude thing." she said.

The way she spoke was quick and feminine.

"I'm sorry for staring at you." I say, avoiding eye contact. "Who are you here for?"

I look at her, my whole body feeling flushed and embarrassed.

"No one. I just come here to unwind and relax. I know that sounds weird but, cemeteries are peaceful."

"They are extremely peaceful. I agree with you on that. I'm here for a friend." "I'm sorry for your loss." I tell her.

"Thank you. I never told you my name, correct?"

"I'm Edgar."

"Anne."

Moving in closer to me, Anne grabs my face, making me look right at her.

"You should be making eye contact," Anne says, "it shows that you're confident."

Before I could say anything, Anne gets up and leaves the cemetery. I could still smell the perfume she was wearing, I could still feel her fingers touching my cheeks. Everything about Anne was just enchanting to me. I was beginning to wonder if I would ever come across Anne again. In my pocket, I could feel my phone vibrating. I read the caller I.D. as I'm pulling it out of my pocket.

"Hey Jennie." I say into the phone.

"Hey Dee! Are we still on for the movie date tonight? I stopped by your apartment and you weren't there?" she said.

"Oh I'm so sorry! I was at the cemetery and never checked the time! Meet me at my place! I'll be there in twenty minutes!" I say quickly, ending the call on her.

Jumping up, I quickly walk out of the cemetery and start my short walk home. The sun set was gone now it's just another summer night. The sky was a dark shade of blue yet, with the moon, it had the sky brightened up. My mind began to wander about Anne.

"Who was she? Has she been at the cemetery before? Why is this my first time seeing her?" I thought.

When I got to my apartment complex, I saw Jennie's car parked right in front of my building. Sighing, I roll my eyes and head to my apartment. Before I could even get to my door, Jennie came running outside, grabbing and hugging me.

"Oh, I've missed you so much Dee!" she chirped happily into my eardrum.

I give her an awkward hug back, "Hey, lovey. I missed you too."

Instantly, Jennie could tell you something was off with me. She gives me a weird look. "What's wrong? Did something happen at the cemetery?" Jennie asks.

My stomach dropped, I felt my forehead beginning to sweat. I started to walk towards my apartment but Jennie stops me.

"What happened?" she asks again.

Rolling my eyes, I tell Jennie about Anne. Every single detail that could come to my mind, I told Jennie.

"So what you're saying is; you befriended a random woman who you've never even seen before?"

I nod my head, "Yeah but, I don't know how to explain it but, there was just something about her. She was mesmerizing."

Jennie gives me a weird look, "I mean maybe you were talking to Medusa. Get it?"

I couldn't laugh at her dumb joke. Anne wasn't anything like Medusa, she was beautiful.

She didn't give off any negative energy that I could feel. "She isn't ugly like Medusa." I say harshly. Jennie's attitude completely changed after I said that. She was no longer smiling or giggling. Instead, she gave me a rude look.

"I'm gonna go home." she said rudely.

Grabbing her purse, Jennie heads out of my apartment. I could already sense that there was going to be an argument with her later tonight. As I entered my apartment, it felt lonely and cold. Turning on my kitchen lights, I saw that Jennie had made dinner for us.

"Salmon and asparagus." I whispered, throwing away the food.

I head to the living room, throwing myself down on the couch. Anne was still on my mind, I was daydreaming about her. I was already thinking of having a future with her, I've only met the woman once. As she was running through my mind, I could feel my eyelids getting heavy.

Sighing heavily, I heave myself off the couch and walk into my bedroom. I was too tired to put on my pajamas so I rip off my work clothes and just pass out on top of my bed.

~~~Anne's Point of View~~~

Sitting on the floor of my room, my hair cushioning my head. I felt my eyes growing wet, my body becoming tense. I couldn't cry, it would show that I'm nothing more than a weakling. I sat up, my cheeks were a bright red.

"I have disappointed you, Father." I whisper.

Standing up, I exit my bedroom. I see everyone staring at me, their faces showing me nothing but twisted smiles. Keeping my eyes on the floor, I see my Father's feet appear in front of me.

"Where have you been, Angel?" he asked.

I kept my eyes glued to the ground, I didn't have the courage to face him in this moment.

"I was at the cemetery, it was peaceful. I just wanted to relax for a few minutes on my own." I whisper, barely looking up at him.

"Why are you lying to me, Angel?" he asks harshly.

He grabs my face, making me look up at him. His eyes were usually full of love but now as I stare into his eyes, all I could see was hatred.

"I'm not lying, Father. I promise." I say.

He grips my face a little more tightly, putting his face against my cheek. I could smell the alcohol on his breath. The cologne he was wearing was making my eyes water.

*"Too much cologne."*

"If I find out that you, my good little girl, decided to lie to me, I'm gonna make you regret it." he says, whispering it in my eardrum.

Letting my face go, Father walks out of my house. Everyone else who was in here also disappeared. I was back to being fully alone in my apartment. My stomach was in knots, my whole body was numb. Soon, I felt vomit rising up in my throat, so I ran into my bathroom. I shove my head into the toilet bowl and start vomiting. I could feel how acidic the vomit is, as it is coming up my throat. My vomit didn't stop, I was soon just throwing up spit. Moving my head up from the toilet, I felt weak. Grabbing the kitchen counter, I stand myself up.

*"What's wrong with me?"* As I face myself in my sink mirror, I don't even know what's going on with me. I was going over my day, from the minute I woke up to me vomiting in a toilet. *"I disappointed my Father."* That was the only thought running through my mind. I never once had ever felt disappointment with my Father. *"How could he be disappointed in me! I haven't done anything wrong!"*

My quiet sadness was turning into a silent rage. My eyes weren't watering anymore, my body was growing warm. *"How dare he threaten me like that! He knows I'd do anything for him."*

My thoughts were becoming dark and spiteful towards Father. I couldn't even believe he had the audacity to speak to me the way he did. I leave my bathroom, not wanting to keep smelling the vomit. *"I got to get out of here."*

I head out of my apartment, it's now completely empty. All the faces were gone, but I still felt as though there was a presence of some type of *evil*. As I stepped out onto the sidewalk, I felt the cold breeze gently blowing my hair back. *"Where am I gonna go? I don't know this area."* Looking around, everything looked the same. I roll my eyes and just start to head to the cemetery again.

*"Maybe I'll run into the man from earlier. What was his name again? Edgar? Eddie? It's one of them."*

I smile at the thought of running into him again. He reminded me if Vincent Van Gogh and Edgar Allen Poe had a child. As I was remembering my encounter at the cemetery, I felt a smile trickle up my face. *"He was a cutie."*

When I reach the cemetery, I see the bench he was sitting on when I arrived. I was starting to wish that I had talked to him longer. He was bringing a curiosity out of me.

*"For someone who's supposed to be a "man" he doesn't seem very masculine." I was trying to remember what Edgar was like when I met him. "He was an extremely impolite little boy... He's not a man at all..."*

I start to get angry at this random man, I start to get infuriated that he doesn't act like a man.

*"I'm going to make him into a man, even if it kills me."*

Angrily, I turn out of the cemetery and head back to my place. On the walk home, I start planning how I'm going to meet with Edgar again.

~~~~~Edgar's POV~~~~~

Waking up the next day, I had a major headache. As I crawled out of bed, I could feel my headache growing worse. My body was sore, like I had just finished playing 4 rounds of football. *"Where are my Advils?"*

I go into my bathroom, snooping through all my drawers until I find my Advil.

*"There you are."*

Finding the Advil in my mirror, I take two capsules out. Swallowing the pills dry, I start to realize that I don't have my phone on me. *"Ah, damn it. Where did I put the fucker?"*

I frantically start looking all over the apartment for my phone. *"Maybe Jenny took it... No, she didn't stay the night with me last night... Maybe it's under the couch."*

It seemed like no matter where I looked, my phone seemed to have disappeared. After an hour passed, I decided that I'd be better off without it for the day. Heading back into my bedroom, I get dressed.

*"I look like a funeral director who loves his job."* I thought sarcastically. As I finish getting ready, I grab my book on my nightstand.

"I can't wait till I can read you," I say to my book, "Maybe, we'll even come across Anne again." Even though she looked like every other brunette woman who lives in this small town, she was still mesmerizing to me. How her eyes were big and doe like, her perfume of rose water and vanilla. I was trying to shake her off my mind but it was a difficult task for me. It was like, whenever I wouldn't think about her, something else would remind me of her. I leave my apartment, heading back to the cemetery. My mind was hoping that I would see Anne but it was a long shot for me. As I was walking to my spot, I was sniffing the air. *"Do I smell rosewater and vanilla?"*

That thought made me shudder, I sounded like a stalker.

*"Eww... I definitely need to not say that out loud if I see her."*

As I get to the cemetery, I don't see her. I give myself a small chuckle, trying to make the awkwardness inside myself disappear. Finding a random bench, I take a seat. The excitement in my body had vanished completely. The time went fast as I was reading my book, I had just finished reading chapter 18 and it was already 7:00 pm.

"What book are you reading this time?" asked a familiar voice.

As I began to look up, I could feel my heart beginning to race with excitement. "Anne?" I whisper.

Right before I could process what is happening, Anne grabs my face. She's staring straight into my eyes, into my subconscious.

"Where have you been?" I ask meekly.

Anne gives me the creepiest smile, her lips curling at the ends. *"I didn't think she was this sinister looking."*

In my eyes, Anne didn't look like her true self. Her eyes were no longer sparkling, they were empty with no feeling. That beautiful smile she had was now a twisted, evil, thorned smirk. *"What had happened to her?"*

"Come with me." Anne whispers into my ear.

"W-where are we going?" I ask.

Her face was now becoming distorted, she no longer looked like her beautiful self. Grabbing my hand, Anne pulls me up from the bench. "I want to take you to my place." she said.

"Uh, what do you mean? W-we barely know each other." I stutter.

She gives me another sneaky smirk, "Come get to know me at my place."

I take her hand and let her lead me out of the cemetery. As she was leading me out, I sensed anger within her. *"I wonder why she is so upset."* I think.

Anne keeps a tight grip around my arm, dragging me around the city. I had no strength to try and push her off. We both stopped walking in the middle of the sidewalk, Anne's eyes locked on a random man.

"Wait here." she says, running towards a stranger. I stand where she left me, watching her. She hugged the man like she knew him. As I looked towards him, I felt nothing but negative energy. He was giving me major creep vibes.

*"Why is Anne even hugging a creep?"* I think angrily.

As I watched them continue their conversation, I felt jealousy entering my body. It was like a new drug for me. Feeling the jealousy rise up, I walk over to Anne and the stranger. I was using every force in my body not to attack them.

~~~~~Anne's POV~~~~~

I see Edgar at the cemetery, he fills me with nothing besides dread. I started hating Edgar after what happened with my Father.

"Anne?" he asks.

I turn and face him, trying to act like I was still interested in him. He starts blabbering on about me, how he missed me. I was hating all of Edgar. Even looking at him made me sick to my stomach. I wanted to make this man feel the pain that I had felt.

While I was having my ear blabbed off by Edgar, I had come up with a plan to get rid of this pest and to please my Father. I quickly invite Edgar over to my house, ignoring his hesitant behavior. As we're both walking out of the cemetery together, I see my Father walking towards us.

"Stay here." I hiss at Edgar.

He looks over at me like I'm the devil but he stays still. I walk over to Father, love and happiness filling my heart.

"Hi, Father." I say, looking up at him.

He gives me an evil smirk, "Is this him?"

Nodding my head, I tell Father the plan. He looks over at me, evil was lurking through his head. I had no idea what he was thinking about but I knew it was something that was pure evil. Before I could say goodbye, from the corner of my eye, I see Edgar walking over to Father and I.

"Who is he, Anne?" Edgar asks harshly.



I ignore him and try to finish my conversation with Father.

"Yes, *Anne*, who is this pathetic person in front of me?" Father asks. "Father, this is Edgar... Edgar, this is Father." I whisper.

Before Edgar is even able to greet him, Father pulls my hair and keeps me close. His hands were wrapped around my neck and hair. "*He can kill me right now, and he wouldn't.*"

"So, Edgar," he rumbles, "I see you and Anne have a little thing going on. It's quite cute." There was no time for Edgar to say anything, Father had broken my neck.

~~~~~Narrator's POV~~~~~

Anne was lying dead on the ground, her hair protecting her fall. Her beauty was no longer real. Edgar was beginning to see her true, ugly nature. She wasn't who she said she was. "She's nothing more than an ungrateful brat." Father whispered. Edgar had no words for what just happened.

*"Maybe she is Medusa." Edgar thought.*

## Silenced

Michael Gomes



It was raining when Durion arrived in the city. He had been invited here by an old associate of his, one he had not heard from in years. He was to meet her in the pub at the far end of town.

The outside of the building had not changed in the twenty years since he first laid his eyes on it. Of course, it had appeared much larger to the seven-year-old elf when his mother had first brought him to the town of Margate.

"Eww!" Durion spoke through his tiny hand, attempting to cover his nose with just the one, his other hand held tightly in his mother's grip. "What is that smell mama? Is something sick?"

His mother paused and looked down at her son with somber eyes, before continuing their way into the port city.

"This is a city my child, far larger than the small villages we've grown accustomed to. Come quickly now, we must get a room before this storm starts," his mother ushered him through the gates of town and towards the pub.

Their stay there had been only temporary, as Durion's mother secured lodging and work at the local apothecary. This was strange to Durion, as his mother had never worked a job before.

They used to live in a small dwelling deep in the forest, miles away from the closest village. For the most part their food was not bought or traded, instead it was caught or grown. Durion helped with the garden and traps for smaller creatures while his mother occasionally hunted larger creatures.

On the rare occasions that they had too much food Durion's mother would package some and they would both visit a local village to trade for few things the forest could not provide for them. On a whole though, the family of two had lived perfectly fine on their own, not needing to join a larger community to survive. Until now.

Durion did not like living in the city. There were rules now, so many more than his mother had for living in the forest. For instance, they were not allowed to hunt the animals in the lands around the city. Not even if they were hungry! The land was apparently owned by different nobles which made the animals their property as well. The concept was foreign to Durion, but he knew not to argue.

This meant that they could not rely on their hunting skills for food anymore, hence his mother's new job. Their time in the forest made them quite familiar with many of the flora containing magical properties, making his mother a suitable aid to the town's potion's master. The little money she made from helping around the shop helped keep the both of them fed.

Over the course of their first year in Margate Durion noticed a change in his mother. She was no longer quick in her movements, as he had remembered her being when she moved between branches in the forests of their home. Her movements had started to slow down, and she began to take more and more breaks in her work. She had once told Durion that the nature of her work allowed for such pauses, though her labored breathing told a different story.

It was around the time that Durion started helping his mother with her assistant duties that he overheard her arguing with the potion's master one night.

"I will not have that boy messing around in my workspace or storeroom," the old man declared, leaving no room for argument.

"Durion is not playing with the ingredients, he only helps in sorting and storing them. He may be young, but his time being raised in the forests have made him familiar with many of these ingredients," his mother defended, calm and patient as if speaking with an unreasonable child.

"The arrangement you've made with Healer Hallewell has been beneficial to me yes, but I will not risk my shop going up in flames due to the careless actions of a child," the old man acknowledged, and then turned his attention to an open journal in front of him. "I will hear no more on this matter. Keep the brat away from the stock and the merchandise or you're both out. Have I made myself clear?"

"Of course sir," Durion's mother conceded with a small dip of her head and left to continue her tasks.

Durion disliked his new restrictions, disagreeing with the reasons the potion's master had given. His mother had spoken the truth, he did know most of the ingredients kept in the apothecary, and he had overheard enough interactions with customers to know the effects of the different potions that lined the shelves in the front room.

Durion took offense to the accusation that he was careless. He wasn't like the other boys in the city his age, swinging sticks at each other and tripping over themselves in wet streets. He had been raised deep in the forests, taught the patience required to hunt animals and the care

needed to grow vegetables. He had even watched his mother brew a simple concoction once or twice, and he knew the importance of keeping ingredients separate from each other, lest they be volatile when combined.

Durion was like other boys his age however, in ignoring rules he did not care for. He continued to help out in the storeroom when his mother was out and the old man was occupied. At first it was a simple act of defiance, disobeying the potion master's arbitrary rule, and Durion enjoyed the feeling of successfully sneaking around with no one's knowledge. Towards the end, Durion's stealthy antics served another purpose.

Over time Durion's mom began to have a hard time finishing all of her tasks in a day. There hadn't been an increase in workload or duties, just a level of tiredness that Durion had never seen in his mother before.

"Never mind that love, it's just been a long day," she would brush off whenever Durion expressed his concern. She had been forgetting things too, Durion noticed, frequently forgetting to take over supplies when she visited the city's clinic.

When it came to the point that his mother was working for hours into the night to compensate for her slowed pace Durion's stealthy antics took on a whole new purpose. On nights when new shipments of ingredients came in, Durion would sneak into the storeroom while the other occupants of the building slept. For hours Durion would work quietly, giving his mother a head start on the day.

Within the first week his mother realized what Durion had been doing. None of the sneaking he had done prior to this had left such a noticeable impact on the workload she bore, and it didn't take her long to identify the root of the change. She never brought it up in the remaining six months that she was alive.

The day Durion's mother left Margate was much like the day they had first arrived to the large city, wet and dark, and she passed in her sleep. Durion's screaming had woken the potions master and he muttered something under his breath on his way out of the shop, returning with the city healer to officially confirm the passing.

The rest of that day happened so quickly Durion sometimes wonders if it had been all just a dream. The healer revealed to him that his mother had been sick and moved them to the city to receive treatment that she could not obtain in the forests where they had been. By the time he had processed that information the potions master had appeared in front of him telling him he had an hour to pack his belongings and leave.

"Wait, what? Why do I have to leave?" Durion wept, tears forming new streaks down his exhausted face.

"You were only here to begin with because your mother was working for the room," the old man grumbled out, moving about his shop like it was a normal Saturday afternoon. "Now that she isn't here to work, the room is no longer yours."

"But I can do what she did! I can sort the ingredients and make the deliveries! Please sir, I have nowhere else to go!" Durion begged the old man, praying he would not kick him to the street.

"HAH! A nine year old left unsupervised in a building of highly volatile potions and ingredients?! I think not. You have an hour to pack your belongings before I start throwing it out myself." With that the old man left the shop, leaving Durion to pick himself up and start packing.

There was only so much Durion could carry at such a young age, so he packed one bag with an assortment of clothes and valuables he might be able to sell and wrapped up their remaining food in a small sack. Durion found the small coin purse that his mother had kept hidden in a crevice of her mattress frame and counted the contents. It was enough to pay for a few nights at the inn at the edge of town, which was the only place Durion could think of in his emotional state.

With nothing else to grab, and little time to spare, Durion started down the road toward the pub, still not fully grasping how he had gotten to that point. His mother had been fine the night before. She had laughed at a funny comment he had made about the local blacksmith, and he had waited for her even breaths of sleep before heading downstairs to work in the storeroom.

Halfway down the road, the slight drizzle began to suddenly become a downpour, and Duion was too distracted trying to make it to the pub to think about anything else.

#

Upon entering, Durion moved straight for the bar counter and ordered two glasses of water, as instructed by the invitation. The man behind the counter nodded to a woman at the corner of the room and she approached.

"Hello Mr. Foli, my lady is ready to see you now."

Durion followed her into a back room and finally down the stairs to a large lounge area where Ruby was starting up a new cigarette.

"Durion, darling, how have you been?"

"Surviving. You said you had a job?"

"Ah, yes, business first as always. I like that about you Durion, it's part of the reason you're here. I've got an offer that you really can't refuse," Ruby stated, ending with a small laugh.

Durion didn't say anything, just raised an eyebrow in acknowledgement.

"You see I have this little problem. And by little, I mean a 6 foot tall brute that's wound himself up in Addersfield prison. I believe you're familiar with the place?"

Durion grunted, unhappy with the reminder of his recent apprehension on a job gone south, and his seven months in prison before finally breaking out.

"My problem's name is Ikvar, and the fool recently got himself caught on a simple job and landed himself behind bars. It was mistake after mistake with him. This'll be his last. I'm afraid my dear Ikvar has become a liability and I'm frankly done wasting the guild's resources bailing him out again. We can't just leave him there; he knows too much about our organization. That's where you come in my dear, I need you to take care of him for me."

Durion laughed and tilted his head to the side in consideration, "Have you forgotten who I am? What I am? I'm a thief, not a murderer. I'm afraid you'll have to find somebody else." And with that, Durion stood up and started to leave.

"I'm afraid you don't have a choice in this matter darling. You might recall that you owe me a certain debt? Well, I'm cashing in on it now."

Durion turned and bared his teeth in distaste at the woman. He knew Ruby had him cornered, giving him no way to refuse the job. He could feel the old magic shift beneath his skin, something he hadn't felt in a long time. As if it had been asleep all this time, resting, waiting for the time he would be called upon to pay his debt. It seemed that time was now. The sensation made him sick to his stomach, and he was reminded of the first time he felt it.

The heat surrounding him had been overwhelming, but all he could feel in that moment was a rush of cold coursing through his veins, circling his heart for a few seconds before settling. He was laying in the street behind the treasury house. The treasury house that had already been emptied prior to their arrival, and was currently set ablaze.

It had been a trap, and they had walked right into it. A kick to his side had drawn his attention from the orange inferno in front of him, the fire having expanded rapidly in the seconds since their departure. He couldn't remember what Ruby had been screaming that night, just the waving of her hands, urging him to move. The same hands that stopped the initial blast from incinerating them.

Ruby had saved his life, and with them both having magical blood, that meant something on a deeper level. A life debt. That could be called in at any time and under any circumstances.

"I'm afraid you'll need to be rather quick about it," Ruby's plummy voice bringing Durion back to the present.

"For now, Ikvar thinks the guild is planning a rescue attempt, so he'll keep his mouth shut. But Ikvar is as patient as he is bright, and he won't sit quietly for long. I can't have him talking, he knows too much. So silence him. I don't care how you do it, poison, blade, choke him out till his pretty blue eyes pop out. I. Don't. Care. Just get it done."

With that, Ruby stood from the red velvet couch over to the cabinet and made herself another vodka martini, dry. When she turned around and saw Durion still sitting there, her lips pursed and her eyebrow raised.

"Well? What are you waiting for? Another invitation? Get on with it!"

#

Durion had allowed himself a day to deny the hold the life debt had on him. Pretend that he could just ignore Ruby's demand and leave. After that he got to work.

Figuring out his plan to infiltrate the prison was easy. He knew the layout already having been there once before. Fate was laughing at him, he was sure. Killing Ikvar was the hard part. Not that the task itself would be hard. After all, Ikvar was locked up in a cell with no way to defend himself.

The Last Rest was the lesser of all evils as far as Durion was concerned. If he had to kill Ikvar, he wouldn't be cutting him down like an animal sent for slaughter. No, a poison would have to do, and the Last Rest would do just the trick. Ikvar would feel no pain as he left this world for the next.

While Durion had all the supplies for a breaking and entering, assassinations were out of his area of expertise, and naturally had no poisons on hand, let alone one as specific as the Last Rest. Durion would have to stop at an alchemist's before heading out to Addersfield.

Durion had no plans to purchase any of the poison, even though the potions master will have his shelves fully stocked with it. You never really know the contents of a bottle unless you were the one to make it yourself. It was one of the many lessons his mother had taught him early on, while teaching him the properties of the flora surrounding their home. Another had been to never take more than you need.

Durion was crouched along the side of the path, his mother up ahead watching a green-spotted deer graze on a bush. Durion suspected it had some kind of fruit on it, but he had not spent more than a few seconds looking at their prey before his attention was turned to something shiny under a nearby oak.

Creeping closer, Durion saw a blue light emitting from beneath the shadow of a stone at the base of the tree. A few steps closer and Durion identified the formation with glee. A candied-shroom! A special kind of mushroom that starts out as a living fungus but can crystallize into a glasslike formation over time. The process did not interest Durion as much as the fact that the end result was a sweet treat that tasted nothing like a typical mushroom.

Durion had just picked the last of the candied shrooms when a shout startled him into dropping them all to the forest floor.

"Durion! What are you doing!" his mother shouted, scaring away all the surrounding wildlife, including the deer they had been tracking.

"Look mama! I found some candied-shrooms, like we saw that one time in the village! I got some so we could eat some and sell the rest!"

"You cannot take from nature so carelessly Durion! Do you know why those mushrooms change hard and blue and glow in the dark?"

"Well, no... To make it sweet?"

"In part, yes. But it is mainly to attract raccoon-bats, which is a species that can be found wherever the candied-shrooms grow. The raccoon-bats can have poor vision, but they can see the candied-shrooms in the night and they take them back to their nests. To stop others from stealing their prizes, they bury the candied-shrooms, unknowingly allowing the fungi to grow again in a new area."

"So? I found it before the raccoon-bats did, finders keepers!"

"Where did you hear that selfish phra- nevermind. It matters because that fungus has died, and the only way for it to live on is for some of those shrooms to be taken and buried so the cycle can renew itself," his mother sighed and gestured for Durion to sit with her. "Those candied-shroom don't just taste good, they're also an important ingredient in a healing salve that treats burns. Imagine if we went around and picked up all of the candied-shrooms for ourselves and didn't allow any to be used to grow the next round of shrooms. Then there would be nothing to produce more mushrooms, and we wouldn't have a tasty treat OR an important medicine. Do you understand?"

"Yes mama, I can't take it all, because I need to leave some for other stuff!"

"Close my love, it's a good start."

#

The Last Rest was a rather pricey potion to make. The ingredient responsible for making the death painless, the midnight lily, was the hardest one to come by, making it also the most expensive to produce. Often times brewers would cut back on the lily to save costs. The victims would still die of course, but any imbalance in the potion could make it quite painful for them.

Durion's target wouldn't be the vials in the front of the store. No, they would be the ingredient bins in the back. And that is exactly where he went after he broke into Alexa's Aromatics that evening. It wouldn't be the first time he had stolen ingredients from a potion's master.

As he was searching through the shop he happened upon the owner's notes, which listed ingredients for a potion he had never come across. He was familiar with many of the ingredients however, and it only took a little time to realize the potion, in theory, could work. Not only in general, but for Durion's killing dilemma as well.

With one solution comes another problem though, as there was one ingredient Durion must go out and acquire on his own. The banshee's wail. And that task would not be easy.

#

The final ingredient, if it could be called that, was not something easily found. In fact, Durion wasn't sure if it had ever been used in a potion before, it had only been obtained a handful of times according to legends.

Most of what he had to go on were rumors and he had very little time to finish his task before his time ran out. He remembered a story that his mother had told him of a town in the southernmost regions of the kingdom and decided to try there.



He asked about the town for any rumors about the nearby cave only to be turned away and told to leave. To many, the reception might have been upsetting, but to Durion it meant that he was on the right track. If the locals were afraid of the cave there was a good chance that it contained exactly what he was looking for.

Durian explored the cave, with an open bottle in one hand and a cork in the other. After exploring for what seems like hours the temperature in the cave dropped drastically and the thief froze.

He slowly turned around to see a pale blue woman staring at him, mouth hanging open. He could also see the wall and the rocks behind her... through her...

Suddenly all he could hear was her wail, and perhaps she had been wailing the entire time, he could not tell through his shock and fear.

He ran for the exit, faster than he had ever run before. When he exited the cave, the bottle was corked.

#

It had been a month since that night in Ruby's club, where she called in on his life debt to her and he was finally in the town of Addersfield. He looked up at the prison in distaste.

He was unamused at the irony of having to break into the place that held him captive less than a year ago. It worked to his advantage though, he knew the ins and outs of the place from when he broke out himself.

He had mixed the experimental poison as it had been written in the alchemist's journal, but it had never been brewed before to his knowledge and he hadn't had enough to test it prior to tonight. Nor would he have wanted to.

If it didn't work, he likely wouldn't get a second chance. He didn't want to think about the consequences of failing to satisfy his life debt.

Security had been tightened since his escape, but it was child's play for Durion and he reached the poor lad's cell. The young man was asleep, which made Durion's task all that easier.

Before the lad could fully rise, Durion had poured the poison into his mouth and had covered his mouth and nose. It didn't take long for him to swallow and the effect was instantaneous.

An ear piercing scream tore out of the man's mouth and through Durion's hand.

By the time the guards had reached the cell Durion was nowhere to be seen. The screaming had stopped when they had reached the bottom of the stairs, but there was banging. Loud banging as the Ikar hit the sides of his cage, eyes filled with rage and fear.

"You'll stop this racket if you know what's good for you," the guard shouted, banging against the bars with his club. "What the hell is your problem?"

He stopped his thrashing, but did not answer. He could not answer. His lips were moving frantically, but nothing passed his lips.

He had been silenced.

Permanently.

#

Durion was surprised that the walls were still standing. There were a few new entrances to his old home, likely a courtesy of the local wildlife. He would not mind having a side entrance, leading out to the garden, but he would have to work on the hole in the ceiling.

He wishes he had returned home sooner. The life of a thief and a criminal was not how he had been raised. Life on the streets after his mother's death had been hard, and at first he had no way to get back to the forest safely. By the time he could, he had fallen too far into the habits of being a thief and a pickpocket to consider going back to the forest.

Now that he no longer felt the grip of the life-debt, he knew that his plan had worked, meaning that Ruby would be looking to get back at him for getting around her orders. It was best all-around for him to retire from that life. His mother would have liked that.

## The Flight

Kaitlyn Isola

I have always had trouble distancing myself from the inconsequential details of my surroundings. Distractions flicker from one to the next with little regard for the big picture obtained from maximizing the screen. Rather than attending to the piece of metal that enclosed my current existence, I found myself debating whether there was a flirtatious energy between the flight attendant and the man sitting two seats behind me. She gave all of the subconscious giveaways from blinking to the standard touching of the arm as he acted self-assured and unbothered.

Right then, I realized where I was, in the middle seat of the airplane surging towards Seattle, robbed of individual space and personal air.

The heat emanating from the heater of the plane reminded me of the warm unsteadiness of the woman's voice that transmitted her disbelief of my past situation at six years old. As I looked to my right, the clueless woman traced my eyes towards the cans of Pearl's Olives I

had been living off of for the past few weeks. I realized that becoming privy to someone's eating habits isn't ordinarily an intimate thing, yet I had never felt so close to someone in my life. She asked me why the outlining of my mouth was covered in red and I showed her the stumped lipstick I had devoured after experiencing an olive shortage. I remember wondering if the truth would bring me to a place where olives are consumed as toppings rather than main courses. And then I shoved the thought as deep as I could beneath my bed along with the rocks I had collected with cigarette butts as arms. I thought that mom would be proud of me in all of my secrecy.



My hand finally clenched the seat and I remembered that I was far above sea level. The older woman beside me discontinued my venture away from reality as she obnoxiously tapped my shoulder, unyielding as she waited for a sign of life. I finally allowed my stubbornness to, not subside but take a leisurely walk, as I provided her ego with a glance of acknowledgement.

She said, "Dear, why don't you have your seatbelt on?"

The woman was petite and helpless looking while simultaneously maintaining a glimpse of her former beauty prior to when life had whittled away her youth. While still ancient and fragile, she had an indirect strength that hardened her words before reaching my ears.

I responded, "Come on, don't you think you've lived long enough to see that seatbelts are overrated? I've gone through my entire life without security, so why start now? It would be like suddenly deciding to become a lefty at age fifty, it just seems wrong."

Instantly after speaking these words, I spilled my Dr. Pepper all over my bag on the floor, drenching my world in sugary bubbles.

"Well that's a dumb way to look at life. I mean, why not turn things upside down if you are unhappy?"

How did she know that I was unhappy? I mean, I get the fact that I'm not exactly one of those actors in the Clorox commercials leaping with joy over the banishment of dirty windows, but I put on a good game face. When the whistle blows and the coach calls play, I'm always ready.

I responded, "Why do you think that you know me?"

As I spoke these familiar words, I realized who I had plagiarized them from. At least I'm giving her credit now. I thought back to three years ago, when I was fifteen years old. My mom screamed these words in my ears as I tried to tell her that she could do better with her life than the dedicated worshipping of Kettle One vodka. I had worn a light blue blouse that day, until my attempt at becoming a left-handed soda drinker had caused me to spill my sizzling Dr. Pepper all over myself. Turning things upside down is not the simple duct tape solution you may have previously considered. I closed my eyes and I toppled into a dense sleep.

I regained consciousness at the sound of a father and son speaking, keeping my eyes glued shut relying on the theory that you can learn more about a person without the cruel rip-off messages from first impressions.

The man's voice, who I had assumed was the father's, had a gritty tone to it that suggested he had both seen and been through tough times.

He said, "Danny, do you want the red m&m's or the blue ones?" You want the blue ones. The answer had seemed too obvious to me. Even though they apparently all have the same flavoring, it is, once again, that initial glance that clouds all future judgment.

"Can I actually have the green one's dad?"

Then I remembered sitting on the bench outside my elementary school in second grade waiting for my dad to pick me up. My eyes were squeezed shut for hours trying to guess the kinds of people passing by from the subtle edges to their voices. I guess I just watched too much CSI when I was a kid or something. I then opened my eyes and counted the number of colored cars passing by thinking that it means something. There goes blue, red, red, blue, and finally the unanticipated bright green car my dad had splurged for with the money that we didn't have.

"You pick the color of the next car", he said.

I wanted so badly to turn to the old woman again and ask her if she thought death was meant to be mourned even if they were bad people. And then I wanted to ask what the qualifications are of a "bad person" and whether there are any statutes of limitations on them. But I didn't. I just couldn't. I shoved them far beneath my bed, yet again with my rocks touching the frame. I found myself blankly staring at the old woman directly pupil to pupil when she responded, "I'm sure your parents weren't bad people. Being misguided is common and doesn't make people terrible. It is cowardly when they are granted a guide yet refuse to use it, but not terrible."

Her words soothed me and she looked away not expecting any answer or even recognition of the conversation taking place. It was strange that she knew me so well, yet I didn't feel motivated to question it. I guess to some people my face reads like a book inviting the reader into a chaotic world of endless confusion. It was strange that she knew me so well, yet I didn't feel motivated to question it.

In order to take a break from the laborious task of deciphering the inner-workings of my brain, I returned to the playful banter between the flight attendant and passenger: vol 2- Jealousy Strikes Back. This time the woman was shamelessly talking up another man while casually looking back every seven seconds to gage whether the original man was jealous or not. In my mind: too many games being played here signals an unreliable partner.

My internal flight as a space cadet was aborted and safely returned to terminal three as a boy my age asked if he could sit in the vacant seat across the aisle from me. From a completely biased perspective, he seemed like an every-day guy's guy from the deliberate brightness of his teeth to the sun-born yellow of his hair. Below his teeth he was built, but didn't flaunt it the way most of his stature do with the iconic douchey bro-tank coupled with a protein powder logo across the front. Instead, he wore dark jeans (not pre-ripped acid wash, thank God) with a classic Pink Floyd t-shirt. When he spoke to the man on the opposite aisle, his voice was much deeper than I had anticipated, as if it defended his years of hard labor.

The boy said, "Is this seat taken? There's a new-born back there letting the whole cabin know that this is his first flight. Don't get me wrong, he's adorable, but it's just not my favorite airplane background music."

The man responded, "Well of course. As long as you don't have the same screaming habits as your tiny friend over there.

They both chuckled the way that people do when a mutual respect has been fortified. Catching me by surprise, he looked directly into my eyes as if the action had to be carried out

as the by-product of an electrical circuit. We were close enough to play patty cake across the aisle.

"What's your name?" he requested with tints of intrigue in his voice.

"What's your favorite song?" I demanded, pointing to his Pink Floyd shirt. Now there are many directions he could go here, determining where the conversation might lead next. I could think of several dead-ended answers.

He smiled and admitted, "Wow, why does this feel like a test? Would a fake fan be unworthy of conversation?"

"I wouldn't be condescending enough to say unworthy, but I would be lying if I said that my interest wouldn't halt."

"Well here goes nothing I guess; I'm either adding stepping stones or burning bridges here."

"Maybe not exactly burning bridges, just turning back and hitchhiking to a new bridge. One that doesn't require a secret password to cross."

"Alrighty, 'Fearless' is my favorite Pink Floyd song".

He knew exactly the level of answering that needed to be conveyed, like a super computer cracking an unknown algorithm for sport. This was a great song that is just obscure enough to prove a genuine fandom.

"Your name?" he smugly ordered based on my shocked reaction.

"Bridge secured, my name is Veronica. Now let me ask you something real. What do you think the story is behind this flight attendant and the guy at 5b?"

"Thank God you asked Watson. I've been speculating since I got on this plane. Honestly, I don't know how anyone could ignore this kind of free entertainment."

I couldn't help but blush, especially considering that he assigned me the role of the oblivious sidekick to his Sherlock. When I laughed, I elbowed my off-brand, airplane gifted pretzels all over the floor for people to gradually stomp into tiny pieces of salted dust. He laughed too and when he did it reminded me of the kind of person my dad used to be and the kind of jokes that we used to tell. This took me back to a time when I had never laughed harder. We were running back to the car after innocently feeding the ducks in the lake when an unjustifiable hostile mob of geese threatened to attack us. When we were finally inches from the car, my dad dropped his car keys and as he turned to gather them a goose shredded through the air and bit him in the calf. He yelped, causing me to drop my off-brand bag of pretzels throughout the dirt and leaves, leaving behind a strange mixture of green and salted pretzel dust. We jumped into the car laughing as hard as our bodies would allow us, and then we proceeded to laugh a little bit harder. The song "Fearless" by Pink Floyd came on and we both smiled.

I must have sat there remembering like this for a long time because when I was shoved back into reality, the boy had placed the left earpiece of his headphones into my ear with

"Fearless" playing as the old woman beside me grabbed my shoulder and handed me her unopened bag of off-brand pretzels. When I looked down, the logo had an unclear image of a white goose shredding through the air. I gave her a look of gratitude and returned to my mental wanderings.

When I opened my eyes, the flirtatious flight attendant had taken hostage of a new unwilling subject: the boy sitting across the aisle from me. I studied the scene anticipating his reaction. She asked him what his name was and he responded that it was Tommy, giving both of us new information. He gave me a bewildered look as we both realized that he was now an unenthusiastic member of the cast in the flight attendant series vol 3- A New Hope. She said, "The pilot is letting people into the cockpit for a viewing. Would you like to come?". She implemented a new strategy, transiting from arm touching to eyelash fluttering. At least she wasn't too repetitive.

"We would love to!", Tommy answered as he grabbed my hand.

She followed his arm to my face when she rolled her eyes with merciless disgust misspelling towards my existence. We followed her to the front of the plane watching her feet as her shoes clanked and clacked in protest. When we entered the cockpit, the pilot was eating a jelly-filled donut, clearly separated from the flight attendant's diabolical plans of approaching invasion. He turned around with the bright red jelly occupying the corners of his mouth, breaching the pilot code of professionalism.

He joyously said, "Well what do we have here? A couple of aviation enthusiasts like myself? You have to start somewhere, so it might as well be here."

When he spoke these words, I immediately noticed that storm calculations he appeared to be making on the back of his donut back. The title said, "cumulonimbus", that I remembered from biology as a thunderous cloud giving way to turbulent air currents throughout the sky. Amongst the sprinkles and drizzles of jelly, numbers indicated alternative routes that may need to be taken. How could he be so nonchalant? I convinced myself that this was the kind of thing that happened when you were a pilot, like the fact that stock brokers know that the market naturally crashes and must constantly plan around the imminent conditions. I walked back to my seat feeling like I had become privy to the classified plans of a Napoleonic invasion with the threat of treason keeping me silent. I shoved my dawdling observations far below my mattress, shielded from misguided attention.

As I sat there desperate to redirect my attention, which I had always had no trouble accomplishing through a rolling series of Forest Gump-like flashbacks, my mind turned to static. It was like the end of an old VHS film where the credits pass and all you hear and see is an all-consuming static with freckles of white and black throughout the screen. This fade to black leaves you with three options as a viewer. The first is to change from one motion picture to the next, hoping to avoid recurring themes so that your mind doesn't linger on a central idea for too long. This is dangerous as it forces you to confront personal feelings and the real reasoning behind your need for visual distraction. The remedy is following the shark motto to keep swimming and never look back. Therefore, change the story as soon as possible. The second choice is to turn off the TV and walk away. This is simple enough and requires no further explanation. If you don't get it, well that's one you. Finally, we reach the third selection of continuing the static. You can sit there, couch or armchair, allowing the maddening flurry of static to elicit your deepest struggles. Of course, in this moment option one ruthlessly exerted itself on me as I spotted a childhood friend walking towards the bathroom of the plane. The

channel traveled from the two hundreds to the three hundreds as her critical eyes dug their way towards mine as they passed seemingly full of a purpose that I lacked. I couldn't even remember their coloring as their deliberate intentional sharpness clouded their humanity.

"Do you know her?" Tommy asked. "She just shot you a couple daggers that somehow punctured you and then bounced off and hit me. And let me just say: ouch."

I laughed and explained, "You know those old friends from your past who know all of the stupid things about you? You know, like how you used to eat apple sauce together and pick your nose and eat it as you were watching 'Bob the Builder' in your underpants? Well, her eyes may be deceiving, but we used to be like that."

"Really? Because she just looked at you like you burned her house down or told her she had to get a root canal on her molars. That was some intense girl rage."

I laughed again, but before my queued stream of play-backs could follow suit, my old friend was walking towards me, halting all pending flights of daydreaming. When she finally reached me, after what felt like a public viewing of her debut as a runway model on a catwalk (I swear I saw a guy drooling in 9C before his wife flicked him back to reality), she was about to speak.

She said, "Hey, can we talk? There's an open seat next to mine in the back?"

I looked at Tommy, preying that he would somehow free me from this dreaded conversation, yet he was completely knocked out. The boy had impeccable timing. At least I could draw something funny on his face later.

I finally responded, "Um, sure." As usual, my mumbling led me to lose focus and slam my head into the ceiling from standing up too quickly.

"Gosh you haven't changed one bit have you? Still as embarrassing as ever. You know you have the coordination of a kid after getting off the spinning teacups ride at Disneyland?"

"Oh come on, I make it work. We all know I'll never make it as one of those tight-rope walkers, but at least I can get from point A to B."

"Yeah with an average bruise count of three per yard. I was going to say 'per foot' but I'm not the kind of person to completely crush your moral"

"Oh wow. That means so much. Thanks for your mercy dearest friend."

She moved aside for me to sit down first, initially confusing me with her chivalry as I obliged. I then realized that in this case chivalry was in fact dead because I got caught sitting in the notoriously despised middle seat with a bear-foot woman to my right sticking her dirty feet in the air. She was watching the third Harry Potter movie, by far the worst one because Harry doesn't even face Voldemort. Of course, my friend sat comfortably in the aisle seat with enough arm space to complete a session of jumping jacks and enough leg space for a full-blown picnic. Selfish as usual. At least I wouldn't have to adapt to any new changes.

She then began, "Look, I know we had our past and I know that you stopped talking to me for whatever reason. I promise that I'll leave you alone after this and never make fun of your



crooked walking again, but all I want to know is why you pushed me away when we were best friends.”

I remembered that summer, but I didn't want to. Having the power to recall past events is great, until you aren't holding the remote because it's holding you. I remember coming home from school that day, eager to drain-out the useless collection of facts regarding the intricacies of the human cell. The mitochondria is the powerhouse of the cell, we get it. The more times I learned it the more I wanted to forget it. I then walked into the kitchen and poured myself a bowl of Apple Jacks, you know, before we all stopped seeing them on the shelves at Safeway. I sat down on the couch and turned on the TV, now holding control over the remote, to find a VHS already playing. What do you know, Harry Potter three- an action-less portrayal of JK Rowling's finest work was on. I fast-forwarded the movie to the end, even past the credits, until the room was buzzing with the sounds of static, making me want to rip out my own eardrums in surrender. I decided to go with option two this time, turning off the TV and walking away, not wanting to immerse myself into this moment. It's weird when you hastily rush yourself through moments that are supposed to be crucial to your life, but I didn't know that yet.

When I stood up and walked towards my parent's room, I moved too quickly, slamming my head on the closed door. When I re-stabilized myself and opened the door, I recognized my parents on the floor appearing lifeless, physically countering past claims of sobriety. I knew that they were gone and yet all that I could think about was how angry I felt to have to remember Harry Potter three playing before this moment. I swept it all underneath my bed, leaving it to hug the piles of lint and dust bunnies residing in the vacant corners. That was the summer that I pushed everyone away out of fear of having to pull out the piles upon piles of burrowing memories.

My old friend stared at me and I could see through those eyes that betrayed her intentions of confidentiality, failing to keep her secrets. I knew that she felt my hurt.

“Never mind. I get it. You don't have to talk about that summer or anything about it again.”

For the first time in a very long time, I felt understood. As I looked to my right, I had a friend, despite knowing my past, still cared. When I looked ahead towards the front of the plane, I saw Tommy smiling and eagerly waiting for my return. The old woman next to my seat instantly looked back too and nodded her head as if she knew that I had finally felt complete after meeting a collection of strangers.

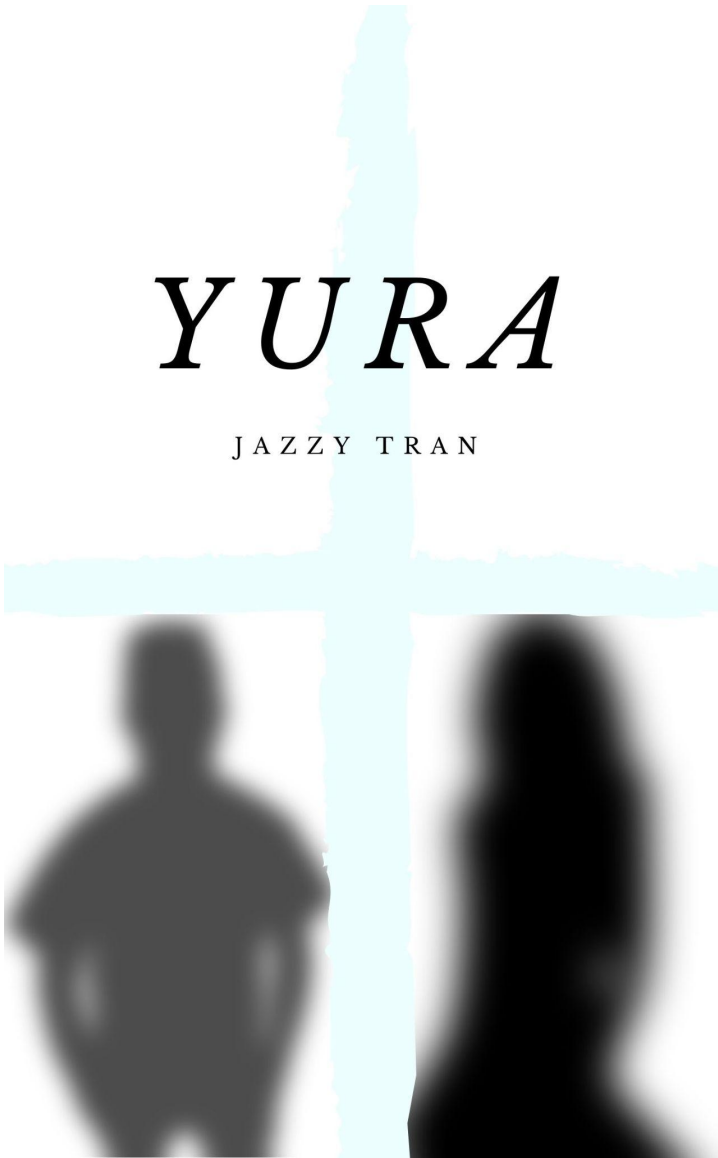
In a matter of seconds, the Alaskan Airlines flight 261 would spin out of control and leave the reader to view a screen of blotchy static.

Yura

Jazzy Tran

# YURA

JAZZY TRAN



She lay her head on the window, watching as every single tree passed her vision. She followed the shapes with my eye. She outlined every point and analyzed every curve of each tree. Once she was bored of that, she started counting every red car that would pass by.

Every mile marker that passed line of vision, she could feel the weight of her eyelids become heavier and heavier. She appears suddenly in a red room; sitting in the middle of the room is a zoetrope. As curious as a cat, she thought about giving it a good spin to see what kind of animation would reveal itself. Looking closely she could see a horrible drawing of a man that was walking with a broken umbrella.

As she watched it spin, she was suddenly sucked into another part of the dream. She sat still in the car but outside of the window, stood a crooked

man with a crooked smile. He had a crooked cane, but taking a closer look it was an umbrella that was bent and twisted into many directions. He wore a suit that was slightly tattered and torn. The pink stripes along the fabric seem to make the man look taller. The hat that sat up top of his head, complemented his suit very well. The vibrant fuchsia made the man stand out even more.

With the many features this man held, there was something that caught her eye even more. In his hand, he held a crimson skull. It was a very odd thing to see, because how often

do you see a red skull that wasn't painted? Just as she was about to lean closer against the window, she could feel her mind being pulled back into reality. Videos of the dream started to lose their quality and then just in a blink of an eye the image of the crooked man and the ruby skull went up in flames.

She awoke to the driver knocking on the window, and announcing that they had arrived. She looked at the magnificent structure in front of her. From the double oak doors to the tiniest carvings on the window frame. After paying for the cab, she watched as the car slowly faded away into the distance. Right before the car left her sight, she felt a chill roll its way up her arms.

She walked through the front door and stood in the foyer. She took in the setting of the foyer. A grand staircase connected the first floor to the second floor, the stairs made up of white marble with a beige accent carpet that descended from the top of the stairs. The railing was made of very simple barbell poles, the ones you would run your fingertips on when walking down the street.

With a deep sigh, Yura mumbled, "Well this crap isn't going to unpack itself" After what felt like years, Yura finally finished unpacking her things. Feeling drained, she thought it would be a good idea to take a quick cat nap. She found a nice area with a big window and furniture covered in white sheets. As she pulled the cover off one of the couches she could make out a cloud of dust floating in the rays of the light. She slammed her head against one of the throw pillows and allowed the feeling of sleep to consume her body.

As she travelled deeper and deeper into her subconscious, her body began to sink into the soft and squishy feeling of the couch. It felt like she was being tied down by a rope and cement block, in almost a minute Yura was transported into the world of sleep.

There was a faint noise drawing closer to her but she couldn't seem to identify which direction it was coming in. Then suddenly, "Yura!... Yura, get up!" She was suddenly awoken by a strong force, she saw that she had been forced to the floor. She raised her head and was face to face with a man that shared similar features to her. As she tried to familiarize her surroundings, she was pulled from her thoughts by the man in front of her. Suddenly her eye caught the crooked man standing behind her father. This time his body was facing towards her. She could see that his pink hat was pulled down and now covered his eyes. He wore golden spectacles and when he smiled, she expected there to be a row of pearly whites. What she saw made her eyes big, in place of pearly whites were rows of sharp teeth that were chipped and pointed. Instead of being a normal white color, they were a shade of brown.

Yura's attention was drawn back to her father. "Are you even listening to me?" She tried to focus on the screaming man in front of her. With every word that came out of his mouth, they made Yura slip deeper into her clouded thoughts.

Yura was then transported into a different part of her dream. Yura secretly hoped for a silent trip up to the reunion, but once again her father seemed to think otherwise. He began to silently read out all of her failures as if he was reciting Shakespeare. Her mother begged her husband to stop saying the things he was saying and tried to change the subject. Something began to bubble in the pits of her stomach, soon it came out as, "It was just a simple mistake, I won't do it again next time." she said, trying to reassure him.

This seemed to set off a switch inside of her father, he didn't seem too happy with the response she gave to him. As her mother tried to calm her husband down, that seemed to be the final straw. Words began to sprout out of his mouth like an overflowing dam. The things that he was saying made Yura question everything, she couldn't even begin to understand what he was saying. He continued to list things that Yura has failed in, from school, connections, and how he even thinks she is disrespecting him by talking back. At this point, her father's eyes were completely off of the road and only focused on her. She didn't want to see the anger that radiated off of her father's eyes, so she turned her gaze out the window. As soon as she did she was met face to face with the crooked man. He had a chilling smile pasted onto his face. "It's like you are not listening to anything I tell you. I bet it goes through one ear and out the other!"

She could hear her mother's pleas, asking for her husband to turn back around, for the safety of everyone. When he finally did, there was no time to react; he came face to face with the front of an overpass crumbling and the surface of the water.

Yura quickly sat up, trying to catch her breath and wiping the sweat off of her forehead. After catching her breath, she picked her body up off of the couch. She made her way over to the window to see a little boy and a girl. The girl was wearing a collared dark blue dress, she had long white socks and shiny black shoes. The boy's attire was similar to the girls but in place of a dress, he was wearing blue boy shorts and a blue vest to match. The children played with a dirty pink ball that looked like they had put it to good use.

Her focus suddenly drew towards the front door. As Yura made her way to the front she could hear another knock echo off of it. She was hesitant to open the door, but she didn't want to seem rude. Before opening the door she took a deep breath and turned the knob. In front of her stood a woman with short blonde hair. She was wearing a deep green dress, the green that you could get lost in.

"Hello darling, I live in the house next door. And I wanted to just pop on in." The woman spoke in a southern accent and Yura received a whiff of cigarettes leaving her body. The woman pushed past her and strolled into the house as if she were in a park. Yura could get a hint of orange blossom, and sweet spices radiating from her body.

"C-can I help you with something?"

The mysterious woman turned down the right hallway and wandered around the room that was adorned with various pieces of artwork. The women spoke about the history of each

art piece in the room and their current net worth. She spoke as if she has lived here herself. Normally a person would be fine with the sudden history lecture about the estate but Yura could not help but have an unsettling feeling in the pit of her stomach. Her thoughts came to an abrupt stop by the women, "How rude of me, just barging in here. Where are my manners? My name is Rhonda Le Domas, I have lived next to this house for quite some time now. I have seen neighbors come and I have watched them go. Anyways, what is your name dear?"

"U-uh I'm Yura Keikain"

"Oh, Keikain? You must be their daughter."

"You knew my parents?"

"Yes, they would often come over for dinner when they were in town." She kept moving more into the house. They passed by rooms that Yura hadn't looked into yet. She walked very casually in the house, each footstep taken was gentle but firm. Every turn she took, every set of stairs she climbed. Yura followed her, like a mindless duckling.

Throughout the entire trip within the house, a comfortable silence trailed behind them. They walked for a good ten minutes until Rhonda brought up something that Yura wished to not talk about.

Yura had no idea what to say next. The atmosphere in the room was so thick that a knife could cut through it. Out of nowhere, the tension was cut off by a loud CRASH coming from the back door. Yura and Rhonda swiftly made their way to the living room to see the filthy pink ball that was once outside, now in the house. The ball was surrounded by shards of glass. The back door opened and revealed the same boy and girl that were playing in the yard, not too long ago. Seeing them up close, Yura could see that they both shared similar features and they looked to be the age of eight or nine. Soon afterward a man who was covered from head to toe in dirty clothes, burst through the door.

"Rhonda, how many times do I have to tell you. Keep your rotten kids out of my garden."

"You said that last time but look where we are now," she said with a hint of sass

"I mean it this time"

And if things couldn't get worse, the dirty man turned towards Yura. "And who might you be?"

"I-I'm Yura, I was sent here to look after my families house"

"I see, so you are the daughter. Is it true that you were the only survivor?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Oh Wilbur, leave the poor girl alone. It's too soon," Rhonda chirped.

After cleaning the mess inside, Wilbur decided to show us around the garden. We stepped out the door and peered over the terrace to see rows of anemones and snapdragons. All of a sudden the sound of wings flapping and forced wind, brought Yura's attention to a crow at the end of the railing. It perched itself onto a pot of white begonias.

They continued walking through Wilbur's garden. He talked about each plant very passionately even down to the last detail.

At each end of the balcony, Yura could see two small pots planted with white begonias. It was very odd how these flowers were so plain compared to the rest of the garden. Yura wanted to speak up but she soon noticed that everyone slowly began to leave her. As she continued to follow Rhonda and Willy, at this point she tuned out and was not bothering to listen to their conversation.

But a certain object flew past her line of vision, as she stopped and turned she saw four flower beds placed in a row. Two of the flower beds had these bell-shaped flowers; at the tip of the flower, there were various amounts of pink flower buds, giving the plant a tentacle look. In the last two beds of flowers, there was a flower that held the shape of a white tulip. The flower was held onto by a thin stem that looked so frail and could snap at any moment. It danced in the wind very delicately. As Yura was about to reach out and softly touch the white flower, she was suddenly hit with a great force that knocked her over.

As she regained her posture, she heard the sound of feet drawing closer to where she was.

"You should learn how to read before something bad happens to you." Yura turned her head to face one of Rhonda's children.

"I seem to have forgotten your name."

"My name is Juliet and that is my brother Silas. Do you wanna play ball with us?"

"Don't ask her that" Silas mumbled to his twin

"You should *always* look instead of touch."

Yura turned her eyes down to see a sign that said 'Poisonous'. At that moment her heart went straight to her stomach.

"Oh, I guess you are right, heh," Yura said bashfully. She could feel her embarrassment start to bubble.

"That flower is called Convallaria Majalis or is most commonly known as Lily of the Valley." Juliet stated.

"If a large amount was ingested, it could result in irregular/slow pulse, low blood pressure, disorientation, coma, seizures." her brother finished for her.

Yura thought it was kinda weird that the twins were able to finish each other's sentences. She thought that these two resembled the twins from *The Shining*, but she was at ease as long as they didn't start speaking at the same time.

"Do you want to play ball with us?"

Before she could answer, a deep voice kicked in. "No. You kids have ruined my garden enough this week." Wilbur huffed.

The children, saddened by Wilbur's news, began to cry and beg for Willy to continue to let them play in the garden. No amount of promises and pleas would make Wilbur change his mind. While listening to the kid's beg, it made Yura remember something.

"PLEASE dad, it was a mistake and it won't happen again. Please, I promise you!" At this point Yura couldn't hold back her tears, she tried to reason with her father for his forgiveness. But it seemed nothing was working.

"Do you really think that saying 'sorry' can help you? You can't put a price on Apologies. " With that, he left Yura not bothering to take a second look at her. Time passed and everyone had retreated to their own homes to their own families.

Yura got dinner ready, as she was setting up she realized midway that she set up the table for three. It was just a force of habit, but she was slowly missing it. After dinner, she bathed and prepared to settle down and got ready to be transported into the world of dreams. She first had to be sure the house was all locked up when she was sure that the door was locked. She turned around to find a pot of spider lilies with a note attached to it saying 'Take care.'

Once Yura's head made contact with the pillow, she was sucked into the world of dreams and wonder.

In her dream, she saw that she was standing in front of the door. She felt something whisper to her, "Run." After hearing that, she soon felt a cold hand placed on her bare shoulder. Turning around she saw the tall shadow of the crooked man standing behind a dark oak table in the center of the room. On the table sat the red skull that kept reappearing.

She looked back up at the crooked man but he was gone. Yura looked to the left where she could see the crooked man standing in the doorway of one of the hallways, he slowly began to submerge with the darkness of it and soon was gone in a flash. She made

her way down the same hallway where the crooked man once stood and was looking in every open bedroom, and out every window. She carried the red skull along the way, she stuck her pointer and middle finger through the eye sockets while she set her thumb softly on the jaw of the bone.

As she walked she could hear faith giggling echoing throughout the entire house. That gave Yura an eerie feeling in her stomach. She looked out the window to see if she could see Rhonda's set of twins playing outside as usual. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see a faint tiny figure in the reflection of the window. Quickly spinning around to catch this figure, she swas it retreating to a room in the back of the house.

As Yura observed the room where the child ran into, she noticed that there was a source of light pooling out from the cracks of the door. She heard a muffled voice and shuffled back and forth. She couldn't make anything that was going on behind the closed door, so she grabbed a candlestick off a nearby table and mentally prepared for what was on the other side of the door.

When she was ready she took a step back, closed her eyes, and started charging towards the door. When she broke through the entrance she opened her eyes to see an empty library. Yura saw that she didn't need the heavy candlestick anymore, she tossed it aside making a loud thud echo through the house. Her eyes began looking over every square inch of the library from the second floor to the books that sat on the tables in front of her.

Walking closer to the fireplace she looked above the mantle, to see a painting of a woman with the head and legs of a goat, wings of a crow, and a bright yellow torch laid upon her head. Too focused on the portrait, she couldn't feel the cold slithering serpent crawl through her fingertips and up her arm. She took notice once she felt things go past her elbow. Yura turned her gaze toward her arm to see where a red that touched the yellow serpent lay. Panic quickly took over her body and she let go of the red skull and shook her arm to get rid of the textured little creature.

Yura tried everything she could to get rid of the snake on her arm. She didn't pay attention to the room being filled with snakes. Before she knew what was happening, snakes started wrapping all around her legs and crawling up her body and tightly wrapping themselves around her neck. Feeling her slowly begin to lose consciousness due to the lack of air, she fell to the floor and her vision began to blur. Before she completely passed out she saw a figure standing just two feet away from the entrance of the door. She could faintly see the crooked man with his crooked cane and crooked smiling.

Yura was awoken and out of breath, she held her neck as she tried to regain her breathing. Looking out the window she could see that the sun wasn't even out yet. She felt parched but too terrified to leave the bed. Fearing that once she stepped off, something would grab her and drag her to Hell. Soon enough, Yura fell back asleep, but couldn't shake the feeling she was having. She could feel multiple pairs of eyes drilling themselves into her forehead, frozen in fear all she could manage was to pull the covers over her head.



In her dreams, she could see that she was in a room with black and white tiled floors. The feeling in the room was ominous and eerie, she tried to exit the room. As soon as she opened the door she was standing in a room with others. They all wore black and held looks of sadness and anger as soon as she stepped forward. At the front of the room, she could see two photos of her mother and father. As she turned back around to face the crowd, she was bombarded with questions about her family.

The overwhelming pressure she was feeling grew and kept growing so much that she ran out of the building. She didn't know where she was running to, but she just listened to her legs. Coming to a stop, she caught her breath and looked up to see herself in front of a pond.

"Hey Yura!" a girlish scream was heard from a distance.

Looking to the right she noticed Juliet at the other end of the pond. Yura began making her way over to where the two children were.

"What are you guys doing out here?" Yura asked concerned.

"Juliet and I usually come out here, after lectures" Silas chirped in a monotone.

"We usually come here to feed the koi fish" Juliet announced

I walked with the two children around the large, yet small, body of water. Suddenly their eyes caught something a few feet away. A crow as dark as night hovered over a red and white koi fish, the crow shoved its beak into the stomach of the fish.

When it pulled its beak back out it left a small hole in the fish's stomach.

"Oh No!" Juliet screamed

"Get outta here, you dumb animal." Silas started charging toward the bird.

"Aww poor thing...what should we do?" whimpered Juliet.

"How about we dig a small hole for him. How does that sou-" Just as Yura was about to finish her reply, Silas raised his boot high in the air and forcefully brought it down onto the fish. It now lay lifeless on the forest floor.

"What is wrong with you? Couldn't you have done it more humanely?"

"Nothing should have to suffer."

"That may be true but-"

"If the fish were your parents, would you want them to suffer?"

"I don't see how the two go together."

"Just answer the dumb question!" he demanded.

"I don't have to answer to a pesky child!" I hollered.

"Ugh, whatever. I am leaving" Silas huffed.

Yura soon felt guilty for yelling at the small child and followed after him. As she trudged deeper and deeper into the forest, she screamed for Silas. She eventually came to a clearing where she found Silas laying face down in the grass. Yura quickly dashed over to where the small boy was and flipped him over to inspect any injuries. The boy seemed unharmed in any way, putting the boy down gently. After a couple of minutes, Yura began to feel uneasy as anxiety filled her stomach. With the forest settling, she could hear every snap of a twig, birds chirp, and trees rattle. She was pulled from her thoughts when she heard a cough come from the small boy.

She looked over to see if he would finally wake up. But the boy only kept coughing and coughing. Something seemed to be caught in his airway, as she tried to lift the boy up to help him. She was suddenly forced off of him, by jerking his body away from her touch. As he jerked his body away from her, a loud 'CRACK' and 'SNAP' echoed off his body. This sent a large chill to crawl up Yura's body. Frozen in fear, she could only watch as the boy laid flat on his back; his body jerked from left to right and then suddenly the jerks started to make their way up to his body. When it reached his neck, from the outside she could see that there was something there, that was coming out. Yura could only just sit and watch the whole scene unfold. Silas's cheeks puffed up, soon his mouth opened and something began to crawl out. All of a sudden, eight black stick-like legs emerged from the depths of his mouth. As each leg steadied itself on the boy's face, they extended to reveal a tiny hourglass body of a spider.

Before Yura could react, the spider quickly pounced onto her. This was the end of the dream. Yura was sitting in her bed out of breath and shaking to the bone. Too shocked she didn't hear the little footsteps approach her door, the door opened suddenly and revealed little Juliet.

"Did you have a bad dream?" she said innocently

Yura was too scared to answer.

"It's alright, I get bad dreams all the time. I'll stay with you for the night," the little girl said as she invited herself over to the bed, and continued to make herself comfortable in the bed.

Yura didn't know what to do, she held the tiny girl in her arms. She was so scared of letting her go, she believed that if she did then she'd be all alone once again. She tried to fall back asleep. But out of nowhere she was jolted awake by an eerie noise. Staring at the foot of the bed, she could see little Juliet and little Silas standing there. Both of their eyes were pitch black and crawling across Silas's body was the same spider that was from her dream. She then tensed up feeling a presence from above her. She shakingly lifted her head to come face to face with the crooked man. Then for the last time, her vision was surrounded by darkness.

## Over Water

Nicole Pyle

You could say Jane Emery had a subtle fear of the lake. Or you could be honest and say it was a major fear. In fact, she couldn't so much as look at the water without a rushing headache. Anytime she walked past the shore's glassy edges, she kept her head down and tried not to gag. Not from the smell, no— it was deeper than that; her strain came from the heart, an increasing onslaught of blood thumping so hard she felt her brain just might explode.

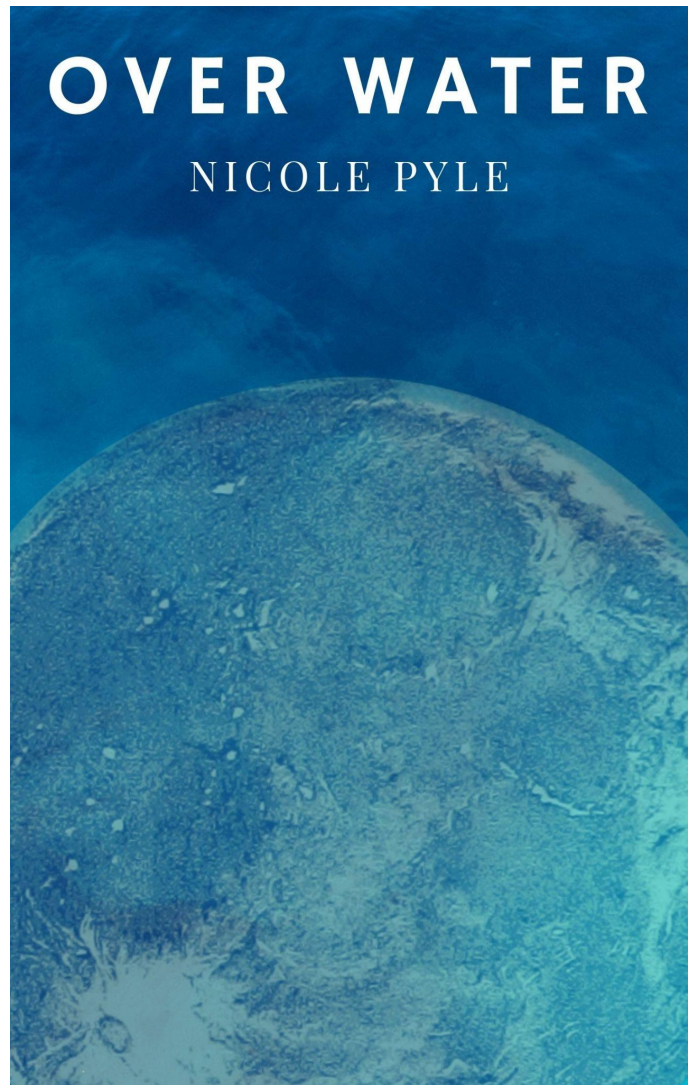
It hadn't always been this way. When she was six, her father would take her out on a modest dinghy, tying bait to the line and teaching her the best tricks to catch the biggest bites. She'd spent most of her free time down by the docks, ankles deep, picking up materials for her precious trinkets. As young as she was, you would never guess how much she fiddled and foddered in her "workshop," tucked away in the back of her parents' store, crafting gadgets. She collected old fish hooks, wires, bottle caps— a whole laundry list of disposable items— and gave them new life. The one with the marble shoot was her dad's favorite, a series of kinetic functions to water the fern in the shop window.

"Rube Goldberg's got nothing on my Janie," her father would say on the matter.

"Ruby," she repeated in superb six-year-old-speak. "Ruby GoalBerg."

The tiny workshop room now stores all of the clever inventions of Jane's youth. They grow older and rustier with time, mirroring their creator. There really is no demand for anything new in Laketown, not since the invention of the microwave; the old ways of doing things were just fine for her fellow residents. Supportive though her mom and dad were of her skills and childhood fantasies, they'd warned her not to let those dreams take her too far. Fill a balloon too much, and it will decisively *pop*. Still, she didn't listen.

She never should have crossed the lake that summer.



\*

A boy had come to town. It's not what you're thinking: instant connection, butterflies in the stomach, forced to say farewell, that kind of thing. Well, maybe the farewell part is true, but with none of those love-at-first-sight dramatics, despite what Jane might have expected after reading her mother's stash of adult novels. At a cynical sixteen years of age, Jane no longer expected anyone to sweep her off her feet. *Old enough to know better*, she thought. And yet, when they met, Henry did actually sweep her off her feet; he literally knocked her over into a store display at the local bookshop. At the very least, one could say the boy knew how to make a memorable first impression.

"Well, excuse me!" Jane huffed, head swirling from being thrown off balance.

"You're excused," Henry replied, quite amused. Jane did not appreciate his good mood, not even as she noticed the subtle dimples forming at the sides of his (what could only be considered sadistic) grin. He looked about her age, lanky limbs not fully proportionate to himself and a mop of sandy blond hair to top it all off. He reached out his hand as if he wasn't the one who had caused her predicament in the first place.

"No thanks," Jane shook her head firmly. She used the bed of rubble underneath her, composed of various books and the toppled display table, to upright herself. Then, after climbing crab-like out of the wreckage, she stooped down to fix the mess. Her cheeks were set aflame despite herself when the boy lowered to join her. She was just embarrassed, that's all.

After a time, she wondered aloud: "I've never seen you around before."

"Never been around before," he shrugged. Something she'd missed earlier now glinted unmistakably in the gentle yellow of the store's light: a nametag.

"So, you work here?"

"Please don't tell my boss I knocked over a pretty girl like yourself on my first day." Of course, there were the dimples again.

"Did I hear a 'please?' I didn't know you had manners."

"Ouch," he played, placing his right hand over his heart. "I resent that."

They finished up the display in a timely fashion— but not too fast. It was only as Jane steadied the last book with meticulous precision on the white metal stand that she began to process where she had fallen. Reading one title, *Gone With The Cowboy*, she realized they had been sorting out the new romance releases. She cleared her throat forcefully in the burgeoning silence. She turned to her side to face the new kid, forcing her eyes to look directly into his.

"Jane," she announced broadly, like she had accomplished a great feat of strength.

Perhaps she had. "My name, that is."

"Jane... It suits you." For some reason, her name sounded foreign on his tongue. Though, not in a bad way, she supposed. He pointed to his upper chest. "You already know mine."

"What brings you to Laketown, Henry?"

"I'm not so sure you're ready to hear that." Winking, he picked up his yellow-handled broom and matching dustpan. He left Jane there, brows furrowed, twisting the silver ring on her finger. Henry regretted not saying more. He was right, though, that it was too soon. He couldn't divulge his entire life story to her, or worse yet, the strange circumstances that led him here.

They'd only just met. Even if she was willing, which was unlikely, how would she even be able to help him? No one here would understand. Still, in spite of his experience, he hoped.

He hoped she would be there, like she was before. *Not before*, he corrected himself.

*After.*

*In the future that hasn't happened yet.*

Oh, that's right. The one thing you should know about Henry Day, if anything, is that his dreams always come true. Even when those dreams are nightmares.

\*

"Hold onto this for me, dear," her mother requested. She pressed the cool metal into her daughter's warm hand. Jane grasped it tight. "Your grandmother gave this ring to me, back when I turned thirteen. I hope... I hope it serves you well."

"It's beautiful, momma," she said.

"Wear it on your promise finger, and in times of doubt, think of home. Protect it as best you can, and it will give you strength." Her mother held her in her arms for a long time, both bodies as still as the lake's surface on a calm day. She couldn't remember when they let go of each other— she only knew that they had.

\*

As Jane thinks back on those days, the bell of the town's bookshop jingles hollowly above her. The summer sunlight trickles into the store through the open doorway and lingers at the edges of the threshold until the gap is resealed. Upon entering, Jane is overcome with the familiar scent of bound paper pages. Over time, wear and tear on the outside of the building doubled in scale. The green wooden sign just above the door hovered creakily, and furthermore threatened to fly on especially windy days. The store had branched out a while back, taking on used items (a number of older volumes, novels, picture books, and the like) in order to resell to customers on the cheap. The only reason people didn't use the library anymore was the limited stock and stuffy atmosphere. *Where do our taxes even go?* Some

wondered. The bookshop, on the other hand, still retained some of that vintage, homely charm. The comfy chairs didn't hurt either.

Ownership of *La Petunia Bookshop* passed down recently from Old Lady D to her daughter, Samantha. The Davenports, long-married without children, conceived Sam later on in life. She was born around the time Henry was hired, as Jane recalls. An entire adult's worth of years separated them now.

"Hiya Jane, what can I do you for?"

"Hi Sam. Just browsing." The young woman at the counter sends her the tilted nod she always does, indicating that Jane was free to go. She starts by scanning the aisles, blankly parsing names and titles lettered on the covers before moving on in robotic rhythm. At a time distant to her now, Jane might have roamed with the utmost abundance through the rows of shelves, but this routine had settled in her bones the way a weekly trip to the grocery did, except the bright fluorescents were exchanged for sleepy golden globes of hanging light akin to the bedside lamp at home. Books lined up on shelves became as dreary as the lines of soup cans stacked against one another, their colors blotting together. Jane might buy the soup, but it was all the same to her. Flavor just seemed gray.

Her eyes pass over the poetry section. Names fade in and out of periphery: Shakespeare, Frost, Dickinson, Whitman, Baldwin, Angelou, Hughes. She briefly wonders about the way some names are carried through history and some fall away. What are the requirements for art to persist? Should persisting be the goal? Would those who are not remembered be happier, knowing they will not have to be criticized centuries after the fact? There's no way to measure emotions like happiness; at least, not objectively. Emotions are a push and pull, and no one pulls and pushes on emotions better than artists.

Jane's always believed that art and science, though sometimes at odds, have more to do with each other than most people think. For something to be invented, it has to be designed; for art to be masterful, it must be grounded in technique. Not to say that technique has to be traditional to be good; the best artists, it is said, are those who know the rules well enough to break them, and break them well.

She used to think about all this much more often. She used to consider herself an artist. But to be an artist, one must still have sparks at their fingertips— life behind the eyes. As she journeys farther into the store, moving away from the lithosphere of mostly-dead-poets, she eyes a new section with rare interest.

"Haven't been to this section in a while," she mutters after reading the sign on the bookshelf labeled *Astronomy*. During the short, warm nights of June and July, Jane liked to throw a red, gingham-patterned picnic blanket over the patchy grass of her backyard to just lay out there and watch the dark sky alight with a glow from an unimaginable distance away. It gave her some comfort to know that she was small in the universe— to think that maybe the things that have happened to her were not so heavy.

Her hand dances along the dusty shelf, almost with a mind apart from hers. She doesn't think about stopping herself when she lands on a thin blue volume about the

moon, but does so instinctually. For once, she takes a book from its designated line-up: *Mysteries of the Moon: Cycles and Phases*.

"That's strange... no author."

Jane opens to the table of contents; one area in particular draws her attention. Near the back of the text, she begins to read a chapter on "The Metonic Cycle." Jane leans in close to the pages, her nose intimately invading the space between the covers.

"The Metonic Cycle is a period of 19 years in which there are 235 lunations. In this cycle, the Moon's phases periodically fall on the same days of the solar year. The cycle was discovered by Meton, an Athenian astronomer, around 432 BC. 235 lunations are approximately 6,939 days, and 16.5 hours, which is equivalent to 19 solar years."

At the end of this phrase, Jane wakes out of her trance. Her stomach turns wearily.  
*Why do I feel like this?*

\*

Nineteen solar years is a long time. It's more than the amount of years she had been alive when she met Henry, which explains why she thought they could make it— that is, after she learned the truth.

Back then, she barely knew the world. Holding to that perspective, she knew Henry even less. He didn't seem too bad, though she wasn't entirely sure what to think.

"Find anything good today?" He popped out from behind her.

"How do you do that?!" She marveled.

"A good magician never reveals the trick," he cattily countered.

"Can't you be a nuisance somewhere else? Why is it always when I'm here that you show up?"

"You don't own the lake," Henry motioned to the body of water before them.

"If only," is all she said afterward.

They settled into their usual routine, a strangely comfortable silence that stretched far into the day's still-bright-outside evening. As she scavenged the pebbled beach for lost items to reuse, Henry dove into the water and swam leisurely around in circles. *Doesn't he have anything better to do?* She always thought. No, no he didn't.

She averted her eyes when he came out of the water, shaking off like a thick-coated dog onto the bone-dry dock. He'd reach for his shirt, and she'd pretend as if she hadn't brought it out to the edge for him to find. Sometimes, when he was done swimming and the dusk was breaking, he would sit on the dock's side and watch her work, idly kicking his feet just under the surface, and call out to her every now and then. Those days were calm and



warm, and the memory of them brought the feeling of sunshine back onto her skin; the lake's mossy, organic scent wafted back into her nose.

And then that small happiness burned in her heart with bitter regret.

\*

As for Henry, the past nineteen years had been extremely lonely. He hadn't been able to talk to anyone, not even the person he wanted to see most.

Wait, you didn't think he died, did you? Well, he kind of did— but not permanently. You see, Laketown is a mysterious place, and the Moon is a mysterious celestial object with strange powers of the tide and the spirit realm. Henry was quite stuck.

Now, as he follows Jane around the bookstore, he musters up his energy to guide her hand to a particular volume.

*Please, he thinks. Please let this work.*

"That's strange... no author." Jane thumbs through the golden pages of the little blue book.

He'd picked up much information in the many seasons he'd been away. That is, he was physically away, but tethered here; tethered to Jane. Nineteen solar years have passed. Now is the time.

*I failed you once, Henry's spirit calls out, knowing she won't hear. I won't let it happen again.*

\*

"What are you doing here?" Jane hissed at a whisper. He was obviously messing with her, coming into the store purposefully while she was working the register.

"I'm shopping. What does it look like I'm doing?"

Seriously, he was insufferable.

"Don't act all innocent. You bought enough bubblegum yesterday to last you a lifetime. Now tell me, why are you really here?"

"Okay, you got me. I'm here to annoy you. Looks like it's working," he boasted. "I could get you banned from here."

"I doubt you would, though," Henry called her bluff. Jane could only sigh frustratedly in response. "When are you off?"

"None of your business."

"Okay, I'll be back at seven." With that, Henry slammed a fiver on the counter and practically skipped out of the store.

Jane took her time closing up that evening. On any given night, Jane or her father would close the store at five and be done with clean-up by six, but she lagged behind to give herself something to do while she waited. She wiped down the spotless counter two, three, four times, until it wept with cleanliness. She wouldn't allow herself to expect him, though; she was only curious to see if he would actually show up. Lo and behold, she spied him making a weird face through the display window at her at exactly 7:00 on the dot. After opening the door and stepping out, she locked up the storefront behind her. "Hey, Jane. Care to take a walk with me?"

*Absolutely not.* "Sure," she said.

Without a clear destination in mind, the two ended up drifting towards the lake. That was the usual place, anyway. Neither of them spoke as they walked along, which surprised Jane, but more surprising was the fact that she was comfortable walking in silence with him. He exuded no sense of pressure, and even seemed more somber than she was used to seeing him. When they got to the dock, Henry kept on; Jane followed. They sat side-by-side at the parallel edge at the end, legs hanging off its side.

"I wanted to tell you something," Henry broke the stillness. Jane perked up in acknowledgement, but continued gazing out over the water. "I'm leaving town soon."

"Wait, what? But you just got here," she questioned. She thought about the fact that this could all be a big joke on her, yet again, but the seriousness of his tone held her back from the notion.

"I know. I probably should have said something before, but I always planned on leaving. It's part of why I came here in the first place. There's somewhere I need to be, and I... I have to get back. I'm set on crossing the lake tonight."

"Tonight? That's more than soon." She contemplated a moment longer with the weight of the conversation pressing down on her. "Why... Why on the lake?"

She didn't know where the idea came from, but her question startled Henry. Worry-lines, also new to Jane, started to line his brow. The edges of his mouth turned in a way she thought they could never turn.

"Haven't you ever thought about leaving? Haven't you noticed how no one ever leaves? How the edges of town blur together?"

"What? You're not making any sense." Her head pounded, a sort of confusion-migraine taking over.

"Jane, are you okay? Just... just forget I said anything," he pleaded, placing his hands on her shoulders. "Jane, look at me. What's wrong?"

Her ears were ringing. It was almost like they were trying not to hear anything more. Henry, seeing he was not getting anywhere with words, hugged his arms around her.

*Jane*, he repeated. *Jane*. He sounded like when someone tries to speak underwater, a wetly muffled soundwave reverberating in bubbles of air. He didn't know what else to do except keep holding onto her, anchoring her. He wished for her to come back to herself. *Jane...*

\*

"Jane," her father called. "Jane, where are you?"

"She's not home," her mother replied from the living room, seated by the window. She was positioned as if she were looking through the window, but her glazed eyes belied the fact that her sight drew inward.

"Is it really...?"

"It is."

He sat down next to his wife on their small, red and gold woven sofa. His hand reached for hers, entwining them. She made no move to stop him; she made no movement at all. She only continued to stare past the panes of glass.

\*

Henry knew that a long time had passed, but if you asked him, *how long?* he wouldn't have had an answer for you. As he sat there, rocking Jane lullabistically, the sun touched the water and drowned ever so slowly. Stars fell into view; or, at least, they would have been in view if either of them had their eyes open. Then, Jane reached up to touch Henry's arm. *Yep, this is real*, she thought, just as Henry jolted and dropped his arms from their encompassing position. Electric currency flowed between them as their eyes met. "Jane!" Henry exclaimed, pulling her back in quickly and gently squeezing. She patted his back, and he let go.

"What... what happened?" Jane's confusion dimmed Henry's grateful expression: his brow wrinkled again.

"You don't remember?"

"I remember... I remember that you're leaving. But, there was something else..."

"No... nothing else. But then you looked like you were hurting, and so I—"

"You're lying." This caught him off-guard. How was she so good at that?

"Well, it wasn't anything important, alright?"

"I'm coming with you, then."

"You're *what?*"

"I'm coming too. Just to make sure you don't get into any trouble. I'm crossing with you."

*Well, now what?*

\*

Jane pulled the dusty boat out of her family's shed and Henry helped her lift it down to the water. She'd asked him what he was planning on riding across the water on, and he really said he was just going to swim. She gawked in disbelief, and since then hadn't let him hear the end of it.

"I still can't believe you," she admonished him as they carried the boat above their heads in full summer-camp mode. "Swim across? You're ridiculous."

"So I've been told," he grumbled. When they finally reached the water again, they set the boat on the water with a *plop* and tied it securely on a post.

"After you," he offered, gesturing to the craft like a footman to a carriage.

"How... nice of you," Jane hummed. She lifted one leg and placed it down, wobbly, before balancing out and bringing her other leg along. She lowered herself down carefully into a sitting position. After all that hard work of nimbleness, Henry jumped on and rocked the boat enthusiastically.

"Last chance to back out," he said. His voice was light, but his eyes darkened. The air tensed.

"As if I'd let you leave with *my* boat," she retorted. So, they went.

\*

When Jane returns home from the bookstore, she sits on the worn, red sofa and opens the book again. Sam had given her a quizzical raised eyebrow when she had finally brought a book up to the counter, but thankfully said nothing more. As Jane reads the same passage over again, she feels like something is missing— something important.

Then she gets an idea.

It's honestly not a great idea, all things considered; no sane person would have thought of it. Still, Jane's past the point of caring. She jostles over to the closet, pulls off a dusty shoebox from the top shelf, and unearths the silver jewelry she had long-since removed. She brings it back to the couch with her, resuming the book-in-lap position. With her hand closed around the ring, she suddenly feels a strange tingling everywhere it touches her skin. She slides it onto her right hand, where it used to reside all that time ago, and then...

"Did it work?"

Jane nearly chokes on her own spit. Standing before her, shrouded in an aura of mist, is an impossible sight.

"Henry?!"

\*

Once they were out on the water, the clear sky became spotted with gray. With each star whose light was erased by clouds, Jane's stress level increased.

"This doesn't look good," she thought aloud. "We should turn back."

"If we turn around, I'll drop you off and go myself." Henry didn't meet her eyes; he just kept rowing, oars pushing against the choppy current.

"No, you should stay another night. It's not safe," she protested. A crack of thunder boomed all around them.

"I can't stay!" He snapped. As soon as he did, his face paled. He looked up at her, oars slowing. "I didn't mean to... I'm—"

"I don't want an excuse, Henry. I just want you to be honest with me," she shouted over the wind that now whipped her hair harshly.

"That's not— I can't—" Another clap of thundering sky. The force of it seemed to shake the waves below.

"Why do you have to go?" she cried.

"If I don't go now, I'll never be able to leave!"

He saw the incoming wall of water before she did, and had little time to react. As it hit the boat, Henry leapt towards her. They both fell overboard as the wood tipped under the surface. The last thing Jane remembered was Henry's arms around her, pulling her upwards in the breathless dark.

\*

"How are you... I thought you were—"

"You can see me? That's great!" He bounces. Actually, it's less of a bounce and more of a weightless floating up and down.

"H-How are you doing that?!" "Oh, let me catch you up first."

Even after he explains the fact that he's caught between the spirit world and the physical one, after he attempts to grab her hand and it passes through like liquid, after he tells her how he sent her signals and could somewhat manipulate a small amount of energy

around him, after she realizes that he has aged and there's no reason for a ghost to develop— for some reason, she still can't believe him. What else could he do to convince her? Pull a rabbit from a top hat?

"I don't remember having any alcohol, but I must have had too much." Jane massages her temples with her fingers. "Or maybe I've just finally lost it."

"If you're crazy, what does that make me?" Henry does a weird, ghostly air-backflip.

"Dead, I think."

"I'd hate to be fish-food. Got any better ideas?"

"You turned into a mermaid and currently live at the bottom of the lake?"

"Creative, but no."

Jane scrambles her brain trying to piece everything together. She glances back down at her hands in her lap, and notices the ring.

"I thought," she began, "that my mother made it all up— the stories she told me. After the incident, I thought this ring wouldn't protect me. But now, maybe what she said... it makes more sense."

"Your ring... it's your mother's?"

"Yes, and my grandmother's before her. I think she was trying to tell me that it would bring me home. But my home is here."

"Maybe it isn't," Henry says simply.

*Maybe it isn't.*

"So, Jane... want to try again?"

Untitled  
Keleigh Kuptz



I stood outside and looked at the house up and down. It seemed huge when I was a kid, with long winding hallways, and sun roofs above the stairs. It looked okay on the outside, but if you stood inside long enough, you could see what it was really like. At a certain point, my parents spent money only on the things that couldn't be covered up or hidden when people came in. The dryer was broken, and the corners in the bathrooms had mold growing through them. The floors were stained pretty badly, each room showed signs of us kids, and the rooms we'd had growing up. Most of my siblings were old now, having surpassed puberty at least a decade ago. We'd never minded though, it was easy to look past once we got used to it. I didn't think about the house much, really. Only around the holidays when it stood out. Decorations always made it feel more full for some reason, and contrasted the inside even more than usual.

It was early when I got home Saturday morning. I walked in quietly, trying to avoid my dad or anyone else awake. I spread out across the couch and started flipping through the channels, hoping to find something

good. I landed on *Jerry Maguire* because it was the only movie on that didn't revolve around Christmas or large family gatherings. Millie came out of her room when she heard the TV. We usually didn't say much when we were together, but I never minded. She was a couple years older than me, and we got along rarely.

I heard the doorbell ring, but I didn't think anything of it. We had a long driveway and didn't get a ton of solicitors, but I assumed it was probably a neighbor or something of the like. My dad came to the door before either of us had gotten up, and I saw the outlines of a tall man dressed in black. He had a badge on, but I couldn't make out the name on it. He looked pretty familiar for some reason, but I couldn't imagine I knew him from anywhere personally. Maybe he'd coached Millie's softball team one year. Most parents had other day jobs besides coaching a team of third grade little leaguers, so it was possible. He was standing next to a short round

guy, wearing a similar uniform. My dad blocked most of the doorway, but I could see them pull out a piece of paper and hand it to him. He seemed to stare at it for a while before turning back to them.

He came downstairs and stared at us for a few seconds before saying anything. "We have to leave" he said. I hadn't gotten a good look at him yet.

"What're you talking about? we're only halfway through the movie, we haven't even gotten to the divorcees club yet." Millie didn't really like Tom Cruise, but she usually disagreed with anyone who wanted her to do something she wasn't already doing. When I finally looked up, I saw my dad standing above us and nodding towards the door, now wide open. He didn't expand much, but I could tell he wasn't going to answer any more questions even if we had them.

I got off the couch and followed him up the stairs. I stood in the doorway and looked out to where he'd been standing. There were four cop cars in the driveway, each one lined up neatly behind the other. I finally got a good look at the guy my dad had been talking to and realized where I'd remembered him from. I'd forgotten about that night, but I thought back on it now as I was standing at the door.

It was only a few weeks before that I'd seen him. I was driving home from work that night, getting off the highway when a cop car pulled off behind me. It wasn't that unusual, there were always a lot of cops out around thanksgiving, but it was always unnerving. I continued down the street, being guided by the headlights in front of me. My registration was expired, but I'd already been pulled over twice for it so I figured at some point they'd get the memo. I listened to the radio quietly and heard the hum of the cars beside me. I'd already been off the highway for at least five minutes, but he still followed closely behind me. It was about 10 minutes home from the off ramp intersection so I figured he'd probably veer off soon. I caught a glimpse of him at the next light. He had a rugged face, and broad shoulders. He looked about my dad's age, but the little hair on his head was grey and thinning. I pulled into the neighborhood and watched him pull in beside me. I thought it was a weird coincidence that we seemed to be going to the same place, but as I pulled down the driveway, he stopped and waited for me to turn in.

My mom and dad were sitting across from each other in the kitchen when I got in, and I told them about what had happened. My dad told me it was probably a scare tactic, a way to keep kids from speeding. I didn't question it much further, and I went to bed that night without thinking about it again for a while.

I stared at the man now, and noticed how much older he looked in the daylight. I wondered if my dad had known back then why he'd followed me home, but I figured it probably wasn't the best time to ask. Millie and I brought our dogs out front and pretended we weren't listening to what my dad was saying to the men in badges. I looked up to see my brother walking outside. He smelled like cigarettes and hotel body wash, and didn't seem bothered by everything happening. He always had a way of disappearing long enough to miss most big events, so I was surprised he'd decided to come home this year. He must've come in last night when I was gone. I hadn't seen him in awhile, but he still looked the same as the last time I had. I looked down at the laundry basket of clothes and shoes I'd thrown together, and stood barefoot in the driveway. I walked through the house a couple more times and noticed how chaotic it seemed. Tall men in cargo pants and boots drilled screws into the doors, and changed



locks on the windows. I'm sure it was standard practice to keep away house guests that were no longer welcome. I stood and stared at them, holding a pink bottle of something I found in the garage and picking up things around the house I thought my dogs would want us to bring for them. There were sticker books on the shelves, and plastic bag wreaths hanging on the banisters throughout the house. I liked holidays when I was a kid, but I never liked them as much when I got older. I looked down at my phone and saw my mom calling. I didn't really know what to say so I waited, hoping she'd say something first. She seemed fine on the phone, she usually was.

She was never someone who spent time actively being sad, but I rarely ever saw her very happy either. I went upstairs to pack some of her things, and looked out the window. I could see the backyard from my parents room. I felt tall whenever I was in there.

When I came back outside, I saw my dad talking to a man about the same age as him. He was tall and almost alarmingly muscular. My dad wasn't short but he'd always been very skinny and lanky. They seemed awkward standing together and looked like they were arguing about something at first, but ended up seemingly working it out. I wondered what they were talking about but was interrupted by Millie talking loudly to her boyfriend on the phone.

The room they put us up in was small, but seemed to fit us all comfortably. None of us talked much after we'd finally left the house, and it was late when we'd settled into the motel. It was hot for a winter night and I laid in bed listening to the air blow through the vents, and my parents talking in the room one over. I couldn't hear much of what my mom was saying, but she was usually pretty quiet, so I made out most of their conversation from what my dad was saying to her.

"I didn't know it was that serious... I only talked to him for a little and I think he was saying in May is when he bought it.. I don't know, he was average looking for a middle aged bodybuilder." I think he was talking about the guy we'd seen earlier. "No, I'd never talked to him before today." It was usually hard to tell when he was lying, but my mom was better at knowing those kinds of things than most people. She used to tell me she had a sixth sense for liars, and that's why we never got away with much when we were younger. That and the fact that Millie was a snitch when we were little.

"I didn't do anything with the letter, I wasn't hiding it I just didn't want anyone to worry about it." He seemed annoyed that my mom kept asking questions, but I could tell he was probably tired.

"Of course I didn't think this was going to happen, I wouldn't have let it happen if I'd known." They seemed pretty quiet after that.

I fell asleep thinking about what my dad was like when we were little kids. My mom would sometimes say that he popped out of the womb as an adult, so he was never a huge fan of little kid things we used to do. Most of the memories I had were with my mom when we were really young, but I had a few memories here and there of him being around.

When I woke up the next morning, I laid in bed for a while taking in the lightness of the room. It was pretty monotone, with a lot of brown and dark green around the window frames. I think most motels banked on the reality the average person staying there was going to spend a lot more money on what they were doing outside of the motel, then what they were doing in it.

I thought about the house and what each of our rooms said about us. Millie's room was very loud and bright. She'd painted the walls orange and pink and the ceiling green, and the randomness of it represented her well. My brother never put up many decorations. The ones he did have though were mostly rock band posters he'd picked up over the years, and Sports Illustrated magazine covers. I'd shared a room with Millie most of my life growing up, so the room we'd slept in always felt really crowded in a lot of ways. Once Millie moved into her own room, there were leftover boxes and giveaway things that she didn't want to deal with spread out across the room.

There was an old green clock that hadn't worked for years, and bright pink bed sheets that'd originally matched Millie's room, but had decided she no longer wanted. My parents' room reminded me of a colonial woman's bedroom. It was pretty big, and was filled with second hand decorations. My mom had a weird love for antique items so her favorite places were garage sales and flea markets, even when we didn't have much money leftover. My dad usually took a backseat on interior design so their room represented my mom more than anyone else.

I didn't spend much time in the motel after that night. I'd heard my parents talking, and there was only one time when we were all there together. I spent most of my time at Millie's apartment after everything happened.

Millie and I were pretty close when we were younger, but over time she became more of a parent than a little kid. She'd always stay up really late at night when we were all still pretty little, and I think it was because she liked to listen to our mom and dad talking when they thought we were all asleep. She used to tell us it was because she was making her rounds, checking to see if everyone had gotten to bed okay, but more often than not I'd wake up to her sitting on her bed with her ear against the wall between our room and our parents. She'd deny it when I'd asked, but she stopped doing it after a while. After a while, she seemed to wake up pretty restless and unsettled in the mornings, so my parents eventually moved her into her own room when my brother left for college. I never asked her what she heard them say when they were talking, but it seemed to be enough to make her grow up pretty quickly.

We went back a few times to the house again and it felt more full than it used too. The man who'd bought it, Steve was his name, wasn't planning on doing renovations for a few months so he didn't mind us coming by. There were things everywhere around the house, things we needed to go through and get rid of. Millie went there the most out of all of us, but spent most nights coming back empty handed. Every few trips she'd bring back a lamp or one of our brother's old baseball helmets; all things she knowingly had no use for. There weren't many places for her to hide them, so each time she came in with something new she'd start to say things like "I've been needing an extra reading light, especially if you're going to be here for awhile..", or "one of the girls I babysit mentioned she might want to look into playing softball..". I couldn't imagine how big their heads must be to fit into it, but I kept quiet mostly.

My mom texted me each day to check in and see how things were. She sent me pictures of a little blue house and dogs she saw on her way home to work.

The blue house was more grey in person and each side hugged tightly to the neighbors next door. It had rained the day before we moved in, and the pavement on the driveway was still wet when we pulled in. There were kids outside playing in rain boots and throwing sticks at each other, each taking turns poking one another other with them. They held the sticks out in

their hands and waved them around, yelling loudly and laughing between each word. Kids hands were so small and reminded me of overly ripe raisins.

I walked through the house and dodged bed frames in the hallway, half emptied boxes of silverware, and rows of candles placed throughout the house. The walls were lined with 70's street art, and there was a single red sofa in the living room connected to the kitchen. I followed my mom up the stairs, and she pointed to a room directly down the hall from her and my dad's. The room was decorated with brown boxes, lined up lazily on top of each other. "Millies 8th grade promotion", "wine glasses", "Ornaments". It had a window that looked over the street beside our house, and a small desk with a green chair attached to it. I wondered if a little kid had lived in the room before me because there were half scratched off stickers on the mirrors and drawings carved into the desk. The blue house was smaller than the old one, but it had a warm feeling to it and reminded me to start fresh.

I walked with my mom that night, each holding our dogs leashes in hand. I was thinking about everything that had happened over the past few weeks and I waited to see if my mom would say anything first. I don't think either of us really wanted to talk about any of it, but I knew that it'd probably be better for us if we did. I looked at my mom for a second before I said anything.

"Are you mad at dad?" A lot of the time, the way that I felt about my dad was based on the way my mom was feeling about him.

"I don't get mad, and I don't think getting angry would really do much for me even if I was..." I didn't really know what to say to that so I was quiet for a second before she continued on. "... There's no good reason for me to spend time feeling bad for myself, besides there are worse things to feel bad about in the world than this." It wasn't the first time I'd hear my mom say something like that, but I was surprised to hear her say it about this. I'd always found it pretty annoying that my mom was very shut off to most emotions, but it made me more angry at my dad than at her. I can't necessarily blame him for the way she responds to things, but she's always had a tendency to minimize her reactions in an effort to make him feel better. My dad was always a very zero to a hundred kind of person in the sense that he didn't really have a real middle ground in the way he responded to things. He either had no feelings at all, or an unhealthy amount of them. I think my mom eventually started to approach things in a very neutral or positive manner to counteract the way he was. I can never stay mad at my mom for too long, but it felt like I could stay mad at my dad forever.

We both stayed pretty quiet for a while before talking about what we thought of the neighborhood and what the rest of our weeks looked like. The remainder of our walk was mostly silent and neither of us said much after that.

We got back that night and I walked up and down the hallway a few times before settling in. I took out the Christmas lights leftover from when we'd packed everything up, and I hung them up for the first night. I listened to the cars going by, and the conversations of everyone outside. I heard a woman talking on the phone as she walked her dog. She'd been at a bar earlier, but left after some guy spilled his drink on her. She didn't seem to mind though, early in the morning she said. I listened to a lady talking to her son. She talked most of the time so I thought she was alone until I poked my head out the window. He was quiet, a little guy with a big yellow backpack. He held his head down, watching each step he took before he took them. I listened to a couple laughing together. They were older, wearing layered jackets and holding hands, talking about a movie they'd been wanting to see.

I did this for what seemed like hours at a time those first few nights. I laid in my bed and waited for the world to happen around me. Each person left as quickly as they came, and I heard only bits of who they were in passing. Whenever I had a hard time sleeping I imagined each person passing was telling me a story, giving me a sign to hold onto.

My brother called me a few nights later as I was laying in bed listening to the sound of cars passing by, and the various noises echoing out through each house. He would call me every once in a while, but most of the time I didn't pick up. Sometimes it was because I was busy and distracted, but most of the time I just thought it was easier not to. I'd already been trying to fall asleep now for a while without any luck, so I figured it was the universe's way of telling me to answer. When I picked up the phone, it sounded like he was in a bar or at some kind of party. He asked how things were going at home, and how the new house had been. We'd only been in the house for a week now, and it was still taking some time to settle in, but it was nice here. I asked him how work had been and what kind of things he'd been doing since he left a couple weeks ago. He'd never been much for small talk, so he told me about what kind of music he listened to on the radio during his drive to work and the people he'd seen recently. Some of them were people he knew, but most of them were people he didn't. He told me about a festival he'd snuck into last week and a waterpark he'd heard about on TV. He was visiting a friend that night, and told me about a tradition his town had to get together on each full moon and meet up by the beach to see who could swim out the farthest. I listened to him vaguely while I thought about what I'd done the past few weeks. I thought about the people that came in while I was at work, and the people I'd seen in the neighborhood. We talked for a few minutes longer, but by the time we'd signed off, I was thinking about how different we were from each other.

My brother was always getting in trouble when we were growing up. He was easily the loudest and most talkative, and bugged my parents the most. He was definitely the most problematic, but he was easily the most fun person out of all of us. Millie and I used to fight over who got to spend the most time with him, and who would get to sit next to him in the car. As we got older, he spent less time getting in trouble at school or with our parents, and more time getting in trouble with the law. He always had a way of getting himself stuck in places or situations he usually wasn't supposed to be in, but he never missed out on things.

I always admired my brother for it. He had a way of moving through life easily and never minded much of what went on around him. I fell asleep that night dreaming about the ocean and our blue house standing beside it. I dreamed about my mom and sister, and I floated out and listened to the sea waves move us along. I slept better than I had in weeks.



A Rather Large Collection of  
Files Collected by  
a Doctor Constantine Kewick



SCOTT SLATER





## *Reanimation Attempt 1,014: A trade of "Equal Value"*

### *Log 1:*

*It occurred to me the other day that I am trying to bring back souls but I'm doing so only by trying to bring back life to a prison that the soul is in, but not the soul itself in order to work on this theory safely I'm using death row inmates for my tests. In order to keep the soul stable long enough to do any work however I need to sustain the agent to work with. Thus I shall sacrifice one soul, to power the process for another. Equal trade. No consequences.*

### *Log 2:*

*Well the initial process seemed to have worked better than expected, a complication occurred in the midst of the experiment. In short the two souls started to merge, and the only thing I could do to contain the reaction was to refile them using previous log notes. Which means I am sacrificing the very thing I am writing. I don't think that this should work however I have to try or else something a lot worse could happen very shortly.*

*Note: I have done a lot of very stupid stupid things. This was the dumbest. With nothing else to buy in the soul to: I also had to sacrifice my own lab notes on the project. I doubt I'm ever going to need them again though. not going to touch that pot ever again.*

*File Number: 238 Name: Rosa Wihach Date: April, 5, 1947*

Dearest Mother of Mine,

I am writing to you not because I want to, but because my partner, Constantine, the same guy who got me to run away with him, said I should write to you. So to make him happy here I am. I can imagine the all of the flowers in the house dying from your wrath, it feels good to write, but I suppose I do get a very small amount of relief from writing to you.

California is nice. You guys would probably like it. There are a lot of people here, and all of them hate the world just as much as you do Constantine likes it here because it helps with his work, although I am pretty sure that an Author can write just about anywhere. If you get a chance you should pick up some of his work sometime, I am sure that you would love his work in how marine biology affects the zodiac as much as I do. I have been keeping busy working as an assistant for a florist. Like I always wanted to.

Anyways I hope that you this letter finds you in good health and all that Oh and tell Daddy I say hello.

-Rosa Smith (August 18th 1946)

*Dear My One and Only Child,*

*I am speaking on behalf of your father and I.*

*Hello, I hope you are okay. I also hope that you know that you hurt us very badly, and we do not understand what we could of possibly done to get treatment like this I mean for godssakes why on earth would you think it okay to run of fwith some stranger in the middle of the night and never call again were were really that bad of parents what did wedo?*

*Anyways, good to hear that you are happy. Please write again soon.  
-Mom and Dad (Decemeber 3rd 1946)*

Dear Mother,

I wanted to send you an update on how things are going, because that is what daughters should do, and as daughter I shall. In good news, the flower shop is doing exceeding well. The business has "grown", quite a bit since I started and it only continues to flourish. In other news, I am no longer with Constantine. There were somethings about him that, he would refuse to tell me and he was no longer aloud to be in my life.

If I wind up dead or go missing he did it. He has been stalking my apartment, although every time I call him out on it he gives me some excuse about how he is aligning himself with the moon or something. I can only imagine the glee you get from this news. Please don't relish in it too long and no I am not coming home.

Your Daughter,

-Rosa Smith (March 30th, 1947)

My One and Only Child,

I am not sure whether I am happy or sad for you. Your father pretended to be furious, although he was elated to hear about the news. I hope that you will not regret the life you have chosen for yourself.

And the key to getting rid of a man is get him to move on. Introduce him to one of your friends that you don't like. Thank you for continuing to write, but I would like to hear from you more often. How does sending a letter each way once a month sound?

-Lola Smith (July 3rd, 1947)

Our Dearest Daughter,

Your mother is extremely distraught that you refuse to write back. She was so concerned that she sent the same letter 5 times, keeping the master copying. It really has not been good for her

health. Please for my sake, we would love to hear from. Something, anything. just to know that our little girl is alright in the big city.

Your father,

Kenny Smith ( July 17th, 1948)

*Note: I told myself I was done, and I would just be writing. I think for a moment, I was, I think that 37 years is not bad for being relaspa free, but in a small way, it feels pretty good to be back.*



*File Number: 3 Name: Skinner Kewick Date: April, 12, 1103*

Dearest Diary,

I met the most mysterious man today at Father's Gala.

He wore a very fine suit the likes of which were the envy of the crowd. He kept mostly to himself, and

talked to a couple old farts about something until they started to get upset. He just laughed, and that's when I made my move. Now you know more than anyone how I feel about men, but this was different I promise. He had an odd maturity about him, although he was young (and good looking). Much better than any of the suitors Father has put at the chopping block before me. We only talked for a bit, and we started to have a good time, although just when things were starting to get fun he got really sad and left. I found out from one of Father's advisers that his name is Constantine, which I find rather charming. I also found out his address, and apparently he is quite wealthy as well! I sent a letter to him, and I shall await his response.

**TO-DO LIST:**

1. Prep the Make out bed in the garden
2. Pickup lunch from the kitchen
3. Clean up and make sure that we are presentable 4.  
Double check that we are presentable
5. DATE WITH CONSTANTINE
6. Blow off suitor

Dear Diary,

It has been a while hasn't it? I found you neglected after a very long time, and I thought that you deserved a little bit of love, at least for nostalgias sake. There is a lot to tell you I suppose, and I honestly do not know where to start.. Well I moved out of the Castle! So that is exciting I suppose. I got married to that old fool in the suit. He is quite the charmer still to this day, although he still gets sad sometimes, just like he did the first night, remember that? Anyways I hope that you are taking care of yourself as well as a book can. Know that I am happy, we both are.

Dear Daughter,

I am sorry to hear that you are under the weather and I am writing to you personally to tell you to get well soon. I am very grateful for the letter you have sent while you have been away, although it pains me that we cannot a painting of you and your husband in our castle, but wizards have their superstisions of course. Your father, THE KING,  
-Robert II

*Note: What I am doing is right. If anything I am just building motivation to complete my work. But no more distractions.*

Case 106: The Immortal

Name: Constantine -----

Age: Unknown

Urgency: Immediate

Sex: Male

Relevant Known Information:

- Has lived a very long time
- Does not leave a trail
- Everywhere he goes people seem to disappear, and they become completely untraceable
- Has several safe houses that I have not been able to penetrate

Case summary: A client payed a premium to have me investigate a man who current goes by Constantine Kliek. After some preliminary investigation, I never heard from the client again. The more I looked into this "Constantine", the more and more interesting he became. I am starting a whole new case on the man, and I am calling him the immortal, because he sure thinks himself to be one.

Weaknesses: Very methodical and a bit OCD. Not very observant.

Strengths: Extremely intelligent; Extremely rich

Entry 3:

I was in my usual spot watching him come home. He was thinking about something, and then looked right at me. He squinted, sighed and then started walking towards me until he was right in front of me. He starred at me for a long time, and I tried to say hello, but he just kept watching, not reacting, inches away. After a moment I gave, and he smiled stating, "how does it feel?", and then continued his walk without a second glance. I cannot tell if he is crazy, or just eccentric, but my interest is peaked. In the 2 months I have been following him, there have been zero disappearances related to him.

Entry 6:

I hate being forced to make my move before I am ready. Unfortunately, today is not my day. Mr. Constantine invited himself over, and when I woke up in the morning he was in my apartment, sipping coffee in his usual suit. He wanted to "talk." Although after that he did not say anything until I started asking questions. He was evasive about everything I asked, although when I finally asked about the disappearances he looked at me, nodded his head, and walked out of the room, slamming the door, and then coming back and apologizing for slamming, and then walked out.

Entry 9:

I had a cold realization this morning. Something that I feel is my end, and I am unsure on what I should do. It occurred to me, that since my watchings, there have been zero disappearances. I thought that he knew I was watching and he did not want to get caught. It now occurs to me, that he takes the people closest to him. Of all of the people he talks to the most... I am number one. I don'



*Note: It was fun playing with "Sherlock Holmes" for a while, and it was a nice change of pace. However, he was about to do something drastic, and as much fun as I was having messing him. Always nice to save another mind I suppose.*

File Number: 487 Name: Ryan Reid Date: December 12th, 1999

**Dear Ryan,**

**We all hope that you get well soon**

**and can come back to class with**

**us! We all love you and miss you!**

**-Your Class**

*insert signatures here*

Doctor: Dr. Kevin Xunahn

Patient: Ryan Reid

Stay: Indefinite

Age: 12

Reason for stay: lung cancer

Status: Declining

Doctors Note:

Patient is unusually optimistic for someone in his situation. Please tell the nurses to stop letting in the tv crew for filming this kid.

*Note: My work is to save those who are worth saving. This child was going to die to the ineptitude of doctors, but now he is safe...  
I don't know why I am justifying this to myself.*

A series of excerpt From James Irvine's book: "I have lived a very long time"

"The secret of Immortality is a simple one really. Hidden within the code of the Universe there many equations to live indefinitely. But, like a ticket to a show, once the ticket is punched, one must acquire another ticket to get in."

-Irvine, 1898 (A Very Long Time), p. 4

"We immortals are not in some big club, instead we sometimes visit each other on holiday. No one really knows how many of us there are, although there could only be so many. If there were more than five or say, someone might come out and say something about it.. Therefore, there must be at least five of us. Although, assuming we do live forever, you would think that we might accumulate over time. I wonder if there is a club and I just was not invited."

-Irvine, 1898 (A Very Long Time), p. 145

"In conclusion, it is not that great to live forever. Especially because no one has figured out how to stop once you start.. If any of you guys ever figure out let me know."

-Irvine, 1898 (A Very Long Time), p. 487

Dear Constantine,

I do not know if you have read my book yet. (If you haven't you a terrible friend, we have all the time in the world.) But, I was thinking about my chapter about how we are not part of the illuminate and how the real illuminate are a bunch of hacks.... Well anyways I was thinking, what if we actually did start our own secret club? We could wear funny hats, and rule the world, and find more people like us. It could be a good time! Anyways I just thought I would throw the idea your way and see what you thought of it.

Hope you are doing well you sneaky serial killer you ;),

Your (only) friend,

-James Irvine (1894)

*HJ CONSTANTINE!! IT IS ME JAMES. YOU NEVER WRITE BACK. I DO NOT KNOW WHY YOU STOPPED. I AM NOT SURE WHERE I AM.  
-JAMES*

*Note: James was a good friend of mine for many years. He is also much much older than I am, and when I him, he was not even sure of his age. Let him be a warning that while the body can live forever, the mind is not so lucky... I was not sure if my process would work on his soul, but I will not know for sure until I bring him back.*

*Hey Neighbor! Just wanted to say hi. I am new in town, and I don't really know anybody... Your suit is cool... Do you want to be friends? If you want to, I am right across the street, if not, well I guess its going to be pretty awkward until one of us dies.*

Text Convesation:

*Hey man, I just wanted to follow up and let you know that I had a great time last night, dinner was awesome!*

*We should hang out again sometime*

*Yeah, we should.*

*Are you free next weekend?*

*Yeah I should be, I'll see you then, "Constantine"*

*Note: Funny story. Turns out, this guy is a serial killer. Kind of reminds me of James, although more stabby.*

*In hindsight, I cannot remember why exactly I saved him, but I must of had a pretty good reason... He was pretty handsome.*

---



*A Town from a foot to a door framed*

*So sits the wizard atop his tower looking down at the world as it passes him by*

*What does he do up there as he watches us all?*

*Does he know all the answers but keeps them to himself knowing that learning is more important than hearing?*

*Does he know nothing but is afraid to allow himself to be the fool?*

*Does he know the answer?*

*Could he know the answer?*

*Yours Truly*

*Rutherford Lavern*

*Note:*

*Why can I not control myself! Every time I try to get on track I get side stopped by the world of fools who know how to find my heart every time! I learned the secrets of how to discard my mortality. I learned the secrets on how to bypass the very rules that govern mortality. I learned how to put a soul in my own hands so that I can never let it go.*

*However, I cannot seem to put it back. I cannot bring back those I have saved. The only pieces I have are that which saves them...*

*I bypassed the rules, but now I can no longer win the game. After 100 years I am no closer to completing my work, and I wonder if it may take another 100 to get anywhere closer. It is no longer about just bringing her back. It is no longer about bringing both of them back. It is now about the fourteen mortal souls I have forever trapped to this plane of existence, and it has become clear that I cannot stop myself.*

*All it takes is a little bit of paper to keep a soul in purgatory for the rest of eternity. I have been so focused on keeping that which I believe is owed to me, that I never thought about what happens to the soul itself?*

*I can only hope that I will one day learn.*

*Every time I meet someone now I get distracted. Rutherford was no different, but it seems like I myself am a curse. How many more will I ensnare? Do I even care? How do they fare? Do they mind that I keep them in my lair? Keep them by my chair? Keep them with strands of their hair(s)?*

*I shall miss you Rutherford. Hopefully I shall get to see you again soon.*

*Please do not hate me.*

## *HOPE YOU ENJOY YOUR COFFEE!*

*Note: I wanted to get to 1,000 okay? Finding good people is hard nowadays...*

*File Number: 1000 Name: Dr. Constantine Komich Date: January 1st*

*What it takes to bind a soul is much more simple than one might imagine. All it takes is a couple writings about someone. Written information detailing the individual to universe, and... well the soul itself. Really, its a shame how easy it is, and how few people take advantage of this.*

*Hello, My name is Constantine, you if you are reading this. Congratulations on breaking into my estate! A little bit about me if you do not already know. I like suits, I am one of the last wizards, (me and Oprah), and I accidentally cursed myself with immortality. I spent the majority of my life preserving souls who were close to death, but I deemed worthy to keep living. Ronald Reagan, Martin Luther King Jr., and Gandhi, to name a few.*

*Which brings me to your part. My research was unfortunately never completed, but now you can save us all! Yay you! And if not... well, you may of been able to get in, but have fun getting out. If you can't figure it out, please use the proper systems to preserve yourself. There is not an afterlife. Probably. Really Probably. Anyways, I am really bored of living, sooooo.*

*You should be able to find everything you need within the manor, every spell book I have collected is at your finger tips. Now get working, everyone lives' are at stake!*

*Note: There is no greater curse than to live forever, and to pretend like you can take everyone with you. Sucks to Suck loser.*



# The War to Conquer Earth: The Start of Something New

Janani Mangai Srinivasan

The Prophets of Chaos. The Pseudo-Creators. That One Weird Cult from the Gigas Species That's ALWAYS RIGHT HOW!? They go by many names. And their powers of precognition are second only to the Creators Unknown. And they are the start of this tale that has captured the Souls of Gazillions across the Universe.

And it all starts with a small announcement. One hidden among the thousands sent out by the Prophets of Chaos during their scheduled release of new Prophecies.

It took a while for the message to spread. The researchers were the first to jump on the information, their private sifting technology allowing them to lay first claim. Like hungry Manicranks tearing into an asteroid, The Universal Research of Planets Commission soon began overanalyzing every word in the First Prophecy of Planet Blue Green. And like Tree Cake at a Flora Party, the news spread uncontrollably from there. Soon enough, even the dullest Informatics had figured out which planet was The One.

The One that would contain the greatest amount of species to ever exist on a singular planet in the History of Time. The One that would incite excitement and fear and everything in between inside the souls of all within the bounds of the Universe.

While the discourse of uncertainty around the effect of all these species on the wider Flow of Space and Time exploded, certain members and groups of the Knowledge Collector Species began to brave the journey to actually go and see the planet in question. They made their way to the small system in which Planet



#1314365332 resided. Purples and Pinks swirled violently on a rock that looked like so many others in the Universe as their made excited comments about the baby star and the various celestial objects (including #1314365332) it had pulled towards it. A gaggle of TeleVee soon approached the already infamous Planet Blue Green, forming many crystals of memories that would be gathered and presented as a singular Collection Crystal by one of their Queens in the near future.

But this had not yet happened. And the short snippets of the planet that would become Blue Green flew across Space at lightspeeds. Fears reached new heights, and rumors of a planned destruction of the planet that had the potential to upheave the power balance grew in number and complexity.

But then something rather anticlimactic happened.

The Prophets of Chaos made a special announcement. A follow up to their First Prophecy of Planet Blue Green, a First Part 2 if you will. And they said this not in as many words- that some of the strongest of these species' will be moderately intelligent at best, and would not have the perception required to sense life beyond their own without external help.

Fears assuaged, many began to slowly lose interest, but not all. Researchers, especially the higher ups at the Universal Research of Planets Commission, began to formulate a set of rules to follow in regard to Planet #1314365332, setting up wards around the planet's system to enforce them.

Others began setting up more casual discourse about the development and evolution of the planet. It is one of these groups that we will follow in this following section- The Amazing Planet #1314365332 Fan Club!

## The War to Conquer Earth

### *1st Meeting of The Amazing Planet #1314365332 Fan Club Partial Transcript*

Rental Meeting Hall Appointed Moderator (assigned for every new group's first 10 meetings as per the policy of this Meeting Hall): The souls gathered here today are part of the first meeting of The Amazing Planet #1314365332 Fan Club. The Club's goals is to create an exiting and intellectually inspiring ongoing conversation about the Planet Blue Green mentioned in the latest most popular Prophecy by the Prophets of Chaos. In this meeting, all members will introduce themselves. Following this, we will all sense the Collection Crystal of the first encounter with Planet Blue Green. Then, we will create an agenda to be followed in future meetings. Please proceed with the introductions.

The rather small Gigas sitting in the back of the hall ([img embedded](#)): \*in a deep rumbling voice\* Hello Everybody. You may call me Bort. My cousin Tort has a friend who is distantly related to a member of the Prophets of Chaos.

Everyone else: Oooooo. Aaaaaa.

Bort: I am here because of that personal connection fueling my desire to learn more about this planet.

Moderator: Thank you. Next.

A dwarf TreeBrain ([img embedded](#)): Hello. I am Inshæjñ'xkh porljk. Please call me Porji. I like learning and theorizing about lower-level planets and their evolutions. \*nods to their right\*

A young Bishbush ([img embedded](#)): Hello. Am called Krelkrel. Make big technology cloth on home planet Brushbush. Friend say my back color is blue and green like Blue Green. Became obsessed. \*twitches ears in Bishbush mannerism for 'excited to meet you'\*

Moderator: Right. Next.

A rather fat Globberuli ([img embedded](#)): \*in a sound made of bubbles\* I am Jeabb. I manage waste in the bwksgirski sector at Fureson.

A Rock Wurm ([img embedded](#)): \*hissing\* Staldo. Like Prophets of Chaos news. This new thing very interesting.

A Travelon ([img embedded](#)): \*chittering\* I am Bees. I see many new species during work and want to study the ones on this new planet.

A Shellding in an orb of liquid ([img embedded](#)): Greetings. Please call me Roin. I aid researchers by collecting material in the field.

Moderator: Excellent. We will now move onto the Collection Crystal.

(A bright light envelops the center of the room. Images and sounds and waves depicting a small-ish planet covered in bright pink and violet rotates and moves through space. A faint chittering is heard in the background. The souls in the hall watch enraptured. The light soon fades.)

Moderator: All right. You may now begin discussion.

Staldo: You Bort. We have inside information from you.

Bort: Not so much. I hear much of this inside information through the grapevine. Hardly anything revolutionary.

Roin: Well, at least I can provide some gossip from the researchers I work with.

Porji: Yeah, that's really cool Roin.

Roin: Thanks.

Jeabb: I would like to figure out this agenda.

Krelkrel: Talk about new research.

Staldo: Good idea.

Roin: Yes. We should discuss that next time.

Moderator: Excellent. Let's build on that and fill out the forms so I can go home.

*(End of Partial Transcript)*

\*

*(Short Bio of all Members of The Amazing Planet #1314365332 Fan Club)*



Name: *Bees*

Species: *Travelon*

Pronouns: *Zie/Zim*



Name: *Bort*

Species: *Gigas*

Pronouns: *He/Him*

Cousin: *Tort (She/Her)*



Name: *Porji*

Species: *TreeBrain*

Pronouns: *They/Them*

Name: *Krelkrel*

Species: *Bishbush*

Pronouns: *Xe/Xir*





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Name: Jeabb      Species: Globeruli  
Pronouns: He/Him

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---

Name: Staldo      Species: Rock Wurm  
Pronouns: They/Them

---



---

Name: Roin      Species: Shellding  
Pronouns: Xe/Xir

---

*(End of Bio)*

\*



*58<sup>th</sup> Meeting of The Amazing Planet #1314365332 Fan Club Partial Transcript*

Bort: Everyone, this is my cousin Tort.

\*excited sound waves\*

Tort: Hello. Wanna hear about this rumor I heard from my friend. There was a lot of drama surrounding it.

\*shouts of assent\* Jeabb: I live for drama.

Krelkrel: Know this.

Tort: \*snorts\* Anyways, there was this massive explosion in one of the Pseudo-Creator Meeting Halls. That one near Gerbwiq, you know the one. Somehow, they botched up the containment of the site and a bunch of TeleVee got into the Hall. No one's heard from them since. My other sibling says its cuz they found out something about one of the systems near Blue Green's system. Apparently, they were discussing it at that meeting and "interviewing" a witness. And the witness blew themselves up! Everyone back home is worked into a tizzy about it. Only a few people know outside Gigasin.

Staldo: Hey. I heard about that from my ChaosPro Group. We had this really interesting theory that a Prophet member violated the Research Commission's Wards and blew up the Hall to escape capture. It's based on that file that was leaked a few weeks ago.

Roin: Yeah. I heard rumors about a violation of rules too. Although, I heard it was a research one, not a Prophet.

Porji: Maybe the Prophets prophesied the violation and tried to prevent it by holding those responsible and they blew up the hall to escape...

Jeabb: A colleague at the nearby plant said they got the remains of the Hall at their Reduction Unit. The walls were no longer usable. What kind of researcher or whoever could cause an explosion like that? The Gigas have amazing walls.

Bort: That we do. Then again, I heard there was this weird volatile substance found. Perhaps the location of the finding is near Blue Green.

Tort: You guys are the best. I have so much more to talk about with my friends when I get back now!

*(End of Partial Transcript)*

*[Event Discussed in Transcript is the Gerbwiq Hall 2 Bombing. Now known to be a concentrated attack by a Pseudo-Creator hate group led by*

*a researcher known only as Yed who was obsessed with explosions. It is still unknown how Yed got this new volatile substance for her bombs and its definite point of origin due to information seals by the Research Commission. Her true identity is also under lock and key. There are many other conspiracies and theories that tie this incident to Planet Blue Green. One popular theory suggests that Yed created a base on a comet meant to strike Earth. Yed would place a bomb with the volatile substance in it. However, the Prophets caught Yed, who had the bomb on her person, and the bomb accidentally detonated before Commission Officers arrived to question Yed and hand her over to the Universal Regulation Department. Yed is thought to be dead, but odd discrepancies in forms hint that she is actually MIA and could be out there somewhere. Many posit that this is the one of the best almost- successful attempts to destroy Planet Blue Green.]*

\*

It is soon after this meeting that the first signs of living souls began to appear on Planet Blue Green. Their small size and stature did nothing to douse the flames of excitement amongst the scientific community. Hundreds of requests for "closer examinations" of the development of these new life forms began to flood the Universal Research of Planets Commission's Approval Department. One account from a public diary of Virindia, a form manager at the Department, talks of the manic fervor of the researchers who swarmed their offices in their haste to be the first ones on scene.

It is usually during the Creation Festival Season that I feel like quitting and working somewhere more soothing. Even if I have to part with my ardent perusal of unrefined research ideas. That season is the time in which the most mundane and idiotic proposals seek the honor of being viewed by my eyes. But you already know that from my usual rant when that time comes around. The flow of requests at this moment is greater than Creation Festival Season, if you can believe it. I know everyone who is anyone is trying to learn more about that Planet Blue Green, and I fully expected to see the stupidity of those who follow the bandwagon to shine the brightest. And I am pleasantly surprised to say I was wrong. I don't know what it is about Blue Green that has everyone going gaga, but I can't say I'm not enjoying tagging along for the ride. I highly suggest anyone interested in the evolution of that planet look carefully at the

research compilations soon to be released. Almost all of the ideas I've seen are spectacular and are sure to blow you away!

And Virindia certainly was right. There were so many theoretical research papers released soon after this diary post. And other compilations studying the new species on the planet soon followed after. Some of the all-time favorite theories are the ones surrounding the direction of evolution of new species' and which one might rise to be the most intelligent. One of them, a paper by the ever eccentric Billdu Be Boor, even correctly predicted that later life forms on the planet would have trillions of the early types banding together to create a bigger being with a sort of hive mind. However, many even claim the parallels between the paper's theory and the real evolutionary results were simply coincidence. It makes sense considering the odd wording in the paper, but after navigating that and understanding the real message, one can't simply discard the theory as a fluke. A prime example is this section of the paper:

All of my fellow researchers will agree that these new life forms may be miniscule, yet contain ginormous potential for new Creation. The pathways they take to ensure survival are not unique, but the combination of said pathways are something I have never seen before in all my years of travel and theory. Perhaps this unparagoned early rendition of life on this rock of blue and green is the first example of their future fulfillment of the teaching of the Prophets of the Great Beings. I posit that these small creatures (who my fellow scientists will teach you more of than I ever could) will soon band together. Some will retain their individual souls and persist in those groups unrivalled. But others will lose their sense of being, letting themselves become a necessary sacrifice to create a new, bigger whole. One with greater purpose than the last. And until they finally realize it, they will continue to persist, just as they are now.

Some of the topics for these research articles, however, are absolute drivel. Their titles, however, made them rise of fame almost instantly due to the amusement they generated in those that read them.

"Crystals of Destruction: How later, more intelligent, forms of life on Planet Blue Green will try to destroy themselves for pleasure using crystals of consumption."

"Why We Think the System of Planet Blue Green Will Crash Before the Prophecy is Fulfilled; a Guide to Why Gigas are Inept."

"Controlling planets around Blue Green will allow a soul to influence those on Blue Green."



“The species on Blue Green will always be Blue Green in appearance, hence reducing their Universal Perception to Nil.”

Compilations like those shown above have incited a good laugh amongst several communities across Space and Time. Even retrospect has not dimmed its hilarity. And it is these early articles, especially the failed but amusing ones that our beloved Fan Club was discussing during their 198<sup>th</sup> Meeting when it happened.

The start of the War.

It sounds ominous, but truthfully, the reality is rather innocent and wholesome. The transcript for the meeting and those that followed it are quite muddled, with several members shouting over each other, so here’s a quick summary of what happened for clarity’s sake.

1: Jeabb shows poll of ‘Funniest Research Compilation Titles’ while the group discusses the new surge of research related to Blue Green. Krelkrel then mentions a poll xe saw about popular theories of what dominant Blue Green species will look like.

2: Several meetings pass in which the prevlant discussion is the characteristics of possible Blue Green species. Bees, Roin, and Porji get into an intense discussion of new theories surrounding possible Planet Blue Green species and which one will attain the greatest intelligence possible.

3: Bort jokingly suggests they bet on it. The rest, to his surprise, agree.

4: More meetings are spent trying to figure out how they would go about measuring the winners.

The last point is extremely important to understand the following sequence of events. After each member decided to back one species that would “dominate” the planet, they had to figure out how to know when someone won.

\*

*201<sup>st</sup> Meeting of The Amazing Planet #1314365332 Fan Club Partial Transcript*

Roin: So, now that we’ve figured out who is betting on which species, I have a concern.

Krelkrel: Yes?

Roin: How do we measure who ‘dominates’ the planet?

Jeabb: Excellent question. We must remove bias from the definition to prevent any one of us from gaining an unfair advantage.

Bort: Yeah. Should we maybe call in that moderator dude from that first meeting to figure it out?

Staldo: Approve!

Bees: I shall call for them. Hopefully, they are in the nearby offices.

*(End of Partial Transcript)*

\*

*Contract Detailing Terms of Bet created between members of The Amazing Planet #1314365332 Fan Club (Final Edited Edition)*

Bet: If a member's chosen species dominates the planet, that member wins the bet.

Winner's Prize: Bragging Rights

Terms & Conditions:

\*All members must follow the guidelines for any terms used.

\*'Dominate the planet' means 'the chosen species has control over their evolutionary pathways, can subdue other species, has their presence felt across the planet, and has attained enough intelligence to promote their power further'.

\*Members must follow the Universal Research of Planets Commission's Guidelines Regarding Planet Blue Green.

\*If a chosen member's species goes extinct, they may choose the species most closely related to their previous choice.

\*Members may bring forward any evidence they believe portrays their species achieving the winning conditions

Member's Chosen Species:

| Member   | Species      |
|----------|--------------|
| Bees     | Fungi        |
| Bort     | Large Trees  |
| Jeabb    | Birds        |
| Krelkrel | Small Plants |
| Porji    | Bacteria     |
| Roin     | Homo         |
| Staldo   | Insects      |

Rules for Collection of Information:

\*All information must be public and freely accessible.

If not public and/or freely accessible, means of access must be provided to all other members of the fan club and recorded in meeting notes.  
If information is private, it must be verified via the Universal Laws of Truth before being presented as evidence.

\* Collection of information must not violate Universal Research of Planets Commission's

Guidelines Regarding Planet Blue Green.

*(End of Contract)*

\*

Before getting into the actual details of the war, one aspect of the contract must be explored for posterity. Because the circumstances behind the sudden widespread use of the Universal Laws of Truth are sure to be lost to time, leaving only this odd requirement behind. Because it is widely known that the Universal Laws of Truth are so strict and stringent, most would prefer to just tell the truth than be forced to submit to it and have everything else dragged out. And that led to a culture of honesty that prevailed for many eons. But a few centuries ago, a lone Ranger from network of stars in one corner of the Universe caused so much chaos amongst the Collectors (the largest union of Collector Species Workers) that its use became a requirement. It is unknown if this expectation will change as Time flows, and the Prophets of Chaos refuse to comment, perhaps due to the rare Censorship Laws enforced by the Universal Office of Public Information.

*(Excerpt from Essay by Porji titled "Why I think Bacteria will rule Planet Blue Green")*

They may be small. They may be unable to do much other than survive. But that is their greatest strength. That they can survive. No matter where they are. No matter what they are exposed to, they can survive. And they have created so many types of themselves that explaining why they dominate the planet is not required for those who can think. It is self-explanatory. But, for the sake of those who are too narrow-minded to see what I see, I shall explain this simple thing.

*(End of Excerpt)*

*\*Excerpt from 'Analysis of Fungi', a post on Bees' public forum dedicated to zir hobby of 'New Species Study'*

Fungi are ubiquitous in the environment created on Planet Blue Green. They can grow off beings that have perished and on plants. They make themselves useful to other lifeforms, while being benefited from the relationship themselves. Unlike other lifeforms on the planet, they pursue a different method to stay alive and propagate. Fungi were even instrumental in turning the planet into a place where other species could thrive, showcasing their power to manipulate their surroundings over time, slowly but surely. Due to their early arrival on the scene that is Planet Blue Green, their intelligence matured slowly, but it is possible they can evolve

explosively given the right circumstances. One of the reasons for this assertion is the sheer number of types of fungi that currently exist.

*(End of Excerpt)*

*\*(Post by Roin on the 'Crazy Wager Tales' Forum)*

*ID438759023: @rointhecollector*

Me and a couple of friends made a bet on which species would dominate Planet Blue Green, and the ones I choose keep dying. Like, they keep going extinct. We have a clause in the contract of the wager that says I can choose the closest species if the one we chose dies. But it's getting kinda annoying. Like, this isn't what I signed up for! And the latest ones keep killing each other. Like, you both came from the same place. Stop killing each other just cuz you have opposable thumbs. U aint special. ur cousins have tgat too!

#yes we have a contract #we're that extra #dont judge ive read the stories posted on here #you're all as crazy as I am #dont deny it #and dtop talking abt my splling like any of u are any better >:[

\*

*331<sup>st</sup> Meeting of The Amazing Planet #1314365332 Fan Club Partial Transcript*

Staldo: Sad to say, Roin maybe winning...

Porji: I still have hope for my beloved bacteria. Did you see how they decimate the other species at times. Brutal, but efficient!

Jeabb: I'm starting to believe I may not win as well Staldo, my friend. I'm trying to figure out who to root for now.

Bees: You're just saying that to salvage some pride Jeabb.

Jeabb: Oh Hush!

Krelkrel: Want win. May not. Unsure....

Bort: I'm pretty sure Roin should be gloating, but...

Porji: Roin, are you doing well? Those humans are coming along great are the not?

Bort: Damn Porji set aside their competitive streak for Roin.

Everyone: oooh

Roin: Yeah, I was excited, but I heard something from a friend from work.

Staldo: What?

Roin: They mentioned something about Blue Green going downhill because it has so many species. That one scientist, that one from the Wibri  
Ans-

Bees: The so called 'Most Intelligent Species in the Universe'?

Roin: Yeah. A Professor Vewubi-something

Jeabb: Vibowuni Sazart?

Bort: Oh, that dude's a certified genius. What did she say?

Roin: I'm not sure but the stuff my friend said isn't making me happy. I'll find the source and show you guys in the next meeting.

Krelkrel: Good.

*(End of Partial Transcript)*

\*

*(Excerpt from Professor Vibowuni Sazart's paper titled "High Species Saturation and Planet Life: a comparative study)*

## **Abstract**

Most planets with high species saturation have been put under the spotlight due to the variety of species found on them. However, few studies focus on the life of those planets themselves. How are they created? How do they sustain themselves? Are

there common factors in their creation and general existence? How long do they last? These are just a few questions this study will look at and attempt to answer.

## **Conclusion**

We can thus say that the cause of early devolution of these planets, be it of the planet or its ability to cater to life, is the saturation rate itself. The number of species per planet area is inversely proportional to planet life. Thus, planets with more species are more likely to succumb to destruction via the actions of those species itself.

*(End of Excerpt)*

\*

*(Partial Transcript of the 237<sup>th</sup> All-Space Science Conference 'The Evolution of Species' Panel Discussion Q&A session)*

Audience member 1: This question is directed at Professor Vibowuni Sazart. Is it true that your latest research compilation study was inspired by your desire to know the fate of Planet Blue Green? If not, what was your inspiration to study that specific topic?

Professor Vibowuni Sazart: You're spot on! I had this discussion with a colleague about Planet Life and they mentioned the demise of this other planet highly saturated with species, though not as saturated as Blue Green. I began to wonder whether that was a coincidence and did some light research and found a concerning number of coincidences. I started studying it because I wanted to know if it was correlation or causation.

Audience Member 2: Following up on that, when do you think Planet Blue Green will end up being uninhabitable?

Professor Vibowuni Sazart: Unless Planet Blue Green blows our expectations out of the water just like its unprecedented saturation rate, I would say few more centuries.

*(End of Partial Transcript)*

\*

*332<sup>st</sup> Meeting of The Amazing Planet #1314365332 Fan Club Partial Transcript*

Roin: Did you guys check out the paper and video I sent you on the group chat yesterday?

Jeabb: Yes, it was quite a downer.

Krelkrel: Am sad. No want Blue Green die.

Staldo: Agree.

Bort: It's not like we can do anything about it. What with those pesky laws and all.

Porji: True. It's making me lose the will to compete. Shocker, I know.

Everyone: \*Sad hums followed by several minutes of silence\*

Roin: I was so close to winning, but I kinda don't care anymore, you know?

Bees: I get it. How about we just set the bet aside and enjoy the good stuff while it lasts?

Bort: That doesn't sound so bad. You know what they say about hating things before you lose them.

Jeabb: I shall call in an office worker to nullify the contract.

Porji: I'll set up a video this friend made. It has a bunch of close ups of different Blue Green species!

Bort: And Tort's coming by in a little while with leftover Tree Cake!

\*happy soundwaves\*

*(End of Partial Transcript)*

\*

And so it was that the War to Conquer Earth ended. But the escapades of The Amazing Planet #1314365332 Fan Club didn't end there. In fact, they were one of the major forces that started the 'Blue Green Forever' Movement detailed in the next subsection. They also were frontline volunteer workers at the Gas Planet System Crash caused by technology lost by Blue Green's human species and advocated for the survivors in the nearby systems. Their contribution to Planet Blue Green's place in Universal Culture is phenomenal. One could even argue that the community following Blue Green's life would not be what it was without them. Whether the members realized it or not, The Amazing Planet #1314365332 Fan Club was truly an agent of change!

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*Excerpts from New Book by Schl'pragkhon QsAéöjlm istar "Our Beloved Blue Green" and subsection "The War to Conquer Earth". New Knowledge Compilation of Planet #1314365332 with additional analysis of universal culture. Written in Human Cultural Language Style. English Ver. Other popular Earth Language Versions Available at your nearest WormStore. Translation Orb Not Included in Purchase.*

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