

# riverrun

UCCS student literary & arts journal

50th Issue

#### All rights reserved.

Upon acceptance, *riverrun* acquires First North American Serial Rights; within 30 days of publication, rights revert back to the authors. We respectfully request acknowledgment in the event that you republish your piece elsewhere.

Portions of this journal are works of nonfiction. Events, people, and places stated in nonfiction works are from the author's memories and perspective. Portions of this journal are works of fiction. Any references to historical events, real people, or real places are used fictitiously. Names, characters, and places are products of the author's imagination.

Printed by Cheetah Printing.

Section Divider Art by Savannah Freyler Cover By Katie Miniter

First printing, 2023.

University of Colorado Colorado Springs 1420 Austin Bluffs Pkway, Colorado Springs, CO, 80918

Email: riverrun@uccs.edu Website: www.riverrunjournal.com



### riverrun Editors

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF Olivia Bishop	OUTREACH TEAM Brianna Jackson Jenna Holbeck
EDITORS Anna Nast Ben Hutchcraft Brianna Jackson Cannon Taylor Ella Barry Iris Kim Jenna Holbeck Katie Miniter	Madelyn Mayer Maya Berns Mickayla Oswald Nolan Dotter Oliver Omari Olivia Bishop Orion Capela Tabitha Richardson Uriah Oxford
Madelyn Mayer Maya Berns Mickayla Oswald Nick Smith Nolan Dotter Oliver Omari	BUDGET TEAM Ben Hutchcraft Ella Barry Nick Smith Uriah Oxford
Olivia Bishop Orion Capela Rick Christian Matocinos Ruby Medina Tabitha Richardson Uriah Oxford  FACULTY ADVISOR Chris Martin	DESIGN TEAM Anna Nast Iris Kim Katie Miniter Mickayla Oswald Orion Capela Oliver Omari Rick Christian Matocinos Ruby Medina

# riverrun is turning 50 years old with this most recent issue.

While some people would say that isn't a big deal, Disney has a major festival for every decade and they haven't been wiped off the map, so I think this is fair game.

You only turn 50 once, and *riverrun* wears that age well. The glossy book sitting in your hand, the smooth spine your finger glides on, the pages you'll be flipping through as paper's corner edge grazes your nail, the work you'll pore over as your eyes make their way through the art, prose, and poetry alike—all of that being bound together is our silent love letter to not only the magazine, or the art of creative publishing, but to you. Our readers. Our students.

With an issue like this, it's such a struggle to pick what gets accepted and what doesn't. Even with such a landmark year for *riverrun*, one with a page count that pushes boundaries previously established by prior issues, we still had to pick and choose.

We didn't just want to make an issue of *riverrun*, we needed to make the 50th issue.

Having said that, the entire production team was hellbent on really getting across the importance of this issue. So many things have changed since this issue's creation, and we wanted to reflect that.

We received more submissions for this issue than we have in years, leaving us flooded with the overwhelming talent and skill of our students. We had new political climates that were reflected in submissions that were as much student creativity as pointed commentaries of the wider world around us. The whole staff had been shuffled around—literally—and left to fill the shoes of the previous production team.

(And honestly? It was hard! Super hard. Whatever you're thinking, it was harder.)

But even with how difficult it was to give this issue the respect and importance it deserved, we can't help but feel pride for what we made. What we were able to give you all.

50 is considered the halfway point, but I think labeling this issue as a 'halfway' point is doing this magazine—everyone who worked on and submitted to it, everyone who picked it up to read this message—a disservice. Nothing this wonderful could be in its half-life. Maybe everywhere else, 50 is considered middle of the road, but here, the river never ends. We got a running start, and there's nowhere to go but forward.

Thank you for everything, and we hope you adore the issue,

Editor-in-Chief Olivia Bishop & The *riverrun* Editorial Team

### **Table of Contents**

~

Poetry	
FEATURE Joseph Bono	
"Clearing Emails//Revisiting Queer Traumas"	16
Abigail Tenney	
"Proxy"	17
"There Is Glitter on the Floor"	18
Abby Aldinger	
"anx·i·e·ty"	19
"The Oceans Beneath Your Feet"	20
Alexisa Markwirth	
"Mother Moon"	21
Amanda Ruiz	
"Our Mountain"	22
Andre Jones Jr.	
"Dear My Opposite"	24
Annabelle Hayse	
"Some Things to Consider"	25
Anonymous	
"Alcoholic Father Projects"	27
Ashlynn Royall	
"People Pleaser"	29
"When He Left"	
Athena Chacon	
"you owe me a pretty memory or a beautiful moment of your life"	31
Bea Colby	
"Perfection"	34
Ben Hutchcraft	
"A Dream About Yesterday"	36
"Window"	
Brian Stewart	
"I'm Just Headed Home (A Philando Castile Tribute)"	39

Brenna Martin
"Stranger Than Dreams"
David Herrera
"A Passing Hello"
Dice Gasper
"Little Monarch"
Dominick de Waal
"Colombia City of Birds"
"Magicians Notes"46
"Manitou Springs"
Emily Crosson
"Everything"48
Jess Wilson
"Bloody Letter"49
Joe Brucker
"See You Next Time"50
Juan Sauceda
"Revelations"52
Julia Stickrod
"over-baked repression"55
"walking poem"56
Kali Ryan
"Apologies To The Veteran"57
Kane Ruiz
"Bill"58
"A Normal Friendship"59
Kate Marlett
"Your Eyes Tell Me"60
Katie Turner
"Zoomies"61
Kristi Raney
"Autumn Owl"62
Mickayla Oswald
"Home Is Where the Food Is"63
"Medicine"64
Nathan Gicho
"late night drive"65
"Family Photo"66
"children of Africa"67

Nolan Dotter
"One Year Wagon"
Olivia Nordyke
"Rabbits"69
Orion Capela
"Queer Who? Queer You!"
Peyton Oswald
"Grey Sheets"
"Light Through the Crack"
Rita Chambers
"Colors of Grief"76
"Hollow Words"77
Sela Siffin
"The Parts of Me You Could Not Love"78
"What Death Is"79
Shannon Fink-Ritchey
"The Trucker's Lament"80
Sophia Kustar
"the half men"82
"trickle"83
Susana Ramirez
"Jig"84
Taylor Adreon-Little
"He Was Ready and Willing"85
"Strawberry Season"
Taylor Plyley
"A Classic" 90
"Day-Dreaming"91
"Midnight Mocha's"
Tessa Schauer
"Movements" 93
"Tiffany's"94
Tyler Hyong
"Fond of Circles"
"Name."96
"Wolves Without Table Manners"

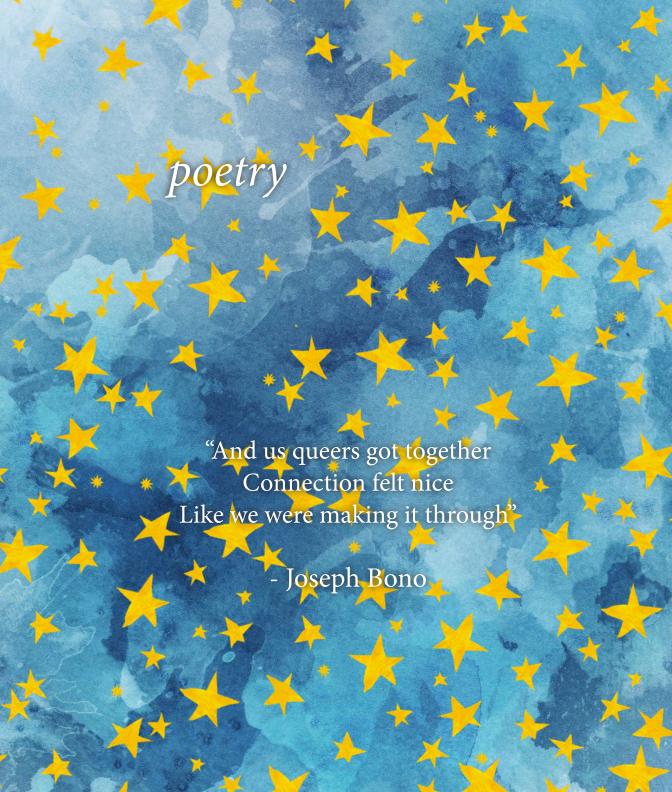
#### **Creative Nonfiction**

FEAT URE Eliana Diaz	
"Greek Heroes Always Die in the End"	102
Joseph Bono	
"Pop-Pop Knew All Along"	104
Iris Kim	
"Grandfather's Little Sprout"	106
Carrie Lovell	
"Xanthophile"	109
Olivia Nordyke	
"I'm Addicted to Nicotine".	117
Dan Sweeney	
"General Delivery"	
"Never Enough"	119
Abigail Tenney	
"Plate Smashing Therapy"	
"My Fool-Proof Fail-Free Four-Step Method to Forgetting Your Fears"	123
Jerri Thomas	
"14:12"	127
<b>X7</b>	
Visual Arts	
FEATURE Macaley Sylvain	122
FEATURE Macaley Sylvain "Curious Wonders"	133
FEATURE Macaley Sylvain  "Curious Wonders"  Molly Boettiger	
FEATURE Macaley Sylvain  "Curious Wonders"  Molly Boettiger  "Garden of Tranquility"	134
FEATURE Macaley Sylvain  "Curious Wonders"  Molly Boettiger  "Garden of Tranquility"  "Pretty in Pink"	134
FEATURE Macaley Sylvain  "Curious Wonders"  Molly Boettiger  "Garden of Tranquility"  "Pretty in Pink"  "Red Reflection: Good v.s. Evil"	134
FEATURE Macaley Sylvain  "Curious Wonders".  Molly Boettiger  "Garden of Tranquility".  "Pretty in Pink".  "Red Reflection: Good v.s. Evil".  Eliana Diaz	134 135 136
FEATURE Macaley Sylvain  "Curious Wonders"  Molly Boettiger  "Garden of Tranquility".  "Pretty in Pink".  "Red Reflection: Good v.s. Evil".  Eliana Diaz  "Start Again".	134 135 136
FEATURE Macaley Sylvain  "Curious Wonders".  Molly Boettiger  "Garden of Tranquility".  "Pretty in Pink".  "Red Reflection: Good v.s. Evil".  Eliana Diaz  "Start Again".  David DuBois	134 135 136
FEATURE Macaley Sylvain  "Curious Wonders".  Molly Boettiger  "Garden of Tranquility".  "Pretty in Pink".  "Red Reflection: Good v.s. Evil".  Eliana Diaz  "Start Again".  David DuBois  "Rocky Mountain Wildflower Walk".	134 135 136
FEATURE Macaley Sylvain  "Curious Wonders".  Molly Boettiger  "Garden of Tranquility".  "Pretty in Pink".  "Red Reflection: Good v.s. Evil"  Eliana Diaz  "Start Again".  David DuBois  "Rocky Mountain Wildflower Walk".  McKenna Argo	134 135 136 137
FEATURE Macaley Sylvain  "Curious Wonders".  Molly Boettiger  "Garden of Tranquility".  "Pretty in Pink"  "Red Reflection: Good v.s. Evil"  Eliana Diaz  "Start Again".  David DuBois  "Rocky Mountain Wildflower Walk".  McKenna Argo  "Flower Petals Preserved in Resin".	134 135 136 137
FEATURE Macaley Sylvain	134 135 136 137 138
FEATURE Macaley Sylvain  "Curious Wonders".  Molly Boettiger  "Garden of Tranquility".  "Pretty in Pink"  "Red Reflection: Good v.s. Evil"  Eliana Diaz  "Start Again".  David DuBois  "Rocky Mountain Wildflower Walk".  McKenna Argo  "Flower Petals Preserved in Resin".	134 135 136 137 138 139

Lisa Kujawa-Levine	
"Polychromatic Petrichor"	142
"Coruscation; When Ceraunophilia Strikes"	143
"Frozen Bubbles"	
Oliver Omari	
"Your Name Engraved Herein"	144
Olivia Mckenna & Maya Berns	
"Decriminalize"	145
Olivia Mckenna	
"Kim"	146
"Consent"	
Annie O'Keefe	
"Ashes to Ashes"	148
"Reach for the Sky"	
Kane Ruiz	
"Things Have Gotten Worse Since We Last Spoke"	150
[Untitled]	151
Larissa Snoddy	
"Happy Chipmunk"	152
"Ladybug's Journey"	
"Lily Pad Reflections"	154
"Still Hummingbird"	155
Cassidy Stiles	
[Untitled]	156
[Untitled]	157
Jamie Villarreal	
"infinite"	
"Perfect as Is"	159
Katie Miniter	
"Niumi"	160

#### **Fiction**

FEATURE Amelia Parr	
"My Friend Mia: The Diaries of Samantha Wallace"	164
McKenna Argo	
"What do I Say?"	168
Ian Beckett	
"The Starspinner"	170
Joe Brucker	
"The College Advisor"	172
Jessica Bussell	
"Midnight at Crow Manor"	177
Emily Crosson	
"And the Night Was Calm"	184
Rachel Davidson	
"First Date"	
"Relapse"	196
Riley Gentsch	
"The Rose of Death"	202
Tyler Hyong	
"Blithe"	211
Drew Johnson	
"Painter"	217
Stephanie Martens	
"Crashing into Crimson Waves"	218
Ashlynn Royall	
"Drowning Above Water"	228
Zechariah Stricklin	
"One Last Adventure"	
"Paper"	248
Joshua Wright	
"Dancing Jets"	253
Hannah Lovelace	
"Oh, to Be a Bee"	261



Letter From the Editors,

There is no other literary art quite like poetry.

Poetry is expression—the key to emotion, impact, and awareness.

Poetry is a unique way for people to share their thoughts, feelings, and experiences through raw emotion.

Poetry is rooted in ancient history, from epics to scripture, and boasts modern popularity present in every song on the radio and quiet movement of the heart put down on the page.

Poetry is a safe space that embraces all walks of life and seeks to connect people through vulnerability.

Poetry is the one thing that does not have any set rules it changes and evolves with each author.

Poetry is a canvas, and anyone can paint however and whatever they want.

Poetry is life.

Truly there isnit another literary form as available for every writer, orator, and reader than poetry. As the rivverrun poetry editorial team it has been a privilege to be trusted with your works and include them in this 50th anniversary edition of the rivverrun. Thank you for writing, for sharing, for reading, for your vulnerability, and for your contributions to this celebration of creativity within the UCCS community. May the impact of these poems continue to inspire and resonate with readers for many years to come.

Here's to the last fifty years of UCCS poetry, and we look forward to many more.

-The riverum Poetry Editorial Team.

Maya Berns Olivia Bishop Jenna Holbeck Brianna Jackson Tabitha Richardson

Iris Kim Rick Matocinos Ruby Medina Maddy Meyer

# Feature Author: Joseph Bono

Joseph Bono is a graduate student in the Department of Sociology. He works in the Kraemer Family Library at UCCS. He moved to Colorado Springs from Pennsylvania in 2016 to begin college at UCCS. Here, his personal passions for critical sociology, queer resistance, and abolitionism were cultivated more deeply. In his program, he is studying sociology of medicine, media, and culture. Focused interests include LGBTQIA+ and queer studies, representations of HIV risk in media, digital and virtual media, pop culture, and counter/subculture. Additionally, being a part of the DIY-hardcore, punk, and metal community, and enjoying time with his fur-babies are essential parts of his everyday navigations of this world.

# Clearing Emails//Revisiting Queer Traumas Joseph Bono

The semester is over
My inbox is still climbing by the day
Anxiety halted the mission
Now it's time to resume

End of the semester
And us queers got together
Connection felt nice
Like we were making it through

Yet trauma lingers like mist in the air Many of us know it's there I try to get all caught up Can't shake this pain trauma brought

Trauma lingers beyond the air
In messaging about self-care
A façade of pain shared
In emails asking, "Are you ok, are you there?"

I deleted some emails today
Revisiting some reminded me
That caring about queer people only follows tragedy
They deleted us. I deleted some emails today.

#### Proxy Abigail Tenney

Trigger warning: Religious Trauma

12 golden oxen around a chlorine tub, and a perfect metaphor for the sterilization of the peculiar. Like maybe one baptism isn't enough for the kids these days, maybe if they invent a reason to dunk us again, we will learn. Maybe one baptism for each day that Jesus lay in the tomb, for each apostle, for each book of scripture, for each year that the children of Israel dwelt in the wilderness feeding on manna that rained down from Heaven. For and in behalf of. I gathered names of grandparents with too many greats to count. I wonder if they forgive me, if not maybe someday someone else will forgive me for and in behalf of. I dream of shattered statues and flooded floors and forty years. I toss manna into my cart at Costco, but my card is declined at check out. In and out of the water, not a single hair left dry or try again because my filth is not so easily washed away, and the 16-year-old boy baptizing me can't seem to get it right. I'll swim down and the chemically clean water will become a river that sweeps me past the Tree of Life and spills over into nothing. Someday soon a 12-year-old girl will think of me as she is baptized for and in behalf of.

# There is Glitter on the Floor Abigail Tenney

we will spend years scrubbing glitter from our hands it makes its home in our skin and tears and blood we cough it up into puddles that our feet will carry with us like a trail and when we look back glittery red footprints lead us back to that place it is silent and sparkling and far too empty

#### anx∙i∙e∙ty *n* Abby Aldinger

**1a.** A feeling of intense worry or trepidation; **b.** as in, within the quarters of my messy room I am overcome with *anxiety*; **c.** as in, I am not convinced that I have control over my thoughts most days d. as in, I think I locked the door before going to bed last night, but I am not certain; **e.** as in, the spiraling depths of my inner monologue are screaming too loudly tonight, so I have to cancel our date again; **f.** as in, it's all fun and games until I starting panicking over what-ifs.

**2a.** An eagerness to complete a task, typically accompanied with anticipation or unease; **b.** as in, your anxiety to please me was evident the first time you prioritized my happiness over your own; **c.** as in, blue is the warmest color until it isn't; **d.** as in, I've burned enough bridges to demobilize an entire city; **e.** as in, the skeletons in my closet are rattling, and I'm desperate to escape them; **f.** as in, I love you, but I'll always come with baggage; **g.** as in, I've pretended to be someone else in front of you so many times that my Mount Rushmore is covered with 50 different faces, twisting and overlapping like melted wax; **h.** as in, the door is unlocked and I'm letting you in, so please be gentle while I unfurl before your feet.

# "The Oceans Beneath Your Feet" Abby Aldinger

The dandelion glow of our emotions reminds me that warmth exists in anger just as much as it exists in love. They used to say that the red of our vengeful cheeks matched the red of our open hearts, and maybe that's true.

Maybe the sweetness of our *b* o *n* d rots the teeth of all who trespass here, so please, let me come become beside you and prosper—but don't let me *s* n u f f out your flame.

Don't let me diminish the depths of the oceans beneath your feet—allow me to mirror you instead.

The way that our toes float in the water gives me hope that one day, when the warmth gives way to bitter coldness, the fleshy bits of our frost-bitten bodies will reawaken as separate entities.

They say that when worms are sliced in two, they persevere—they become two worms instead of one. Maybe they were always two worms, and maybe we will always be two people who started out as one—but oh how the great divide brought us closer together than we have ever been.

I can't wait until the meteor hits, and we *g r o w* mountains from our fingers, and rivers from our nostrils.

I want to be so d e f o r m e d by you that our differences become our similarities.

The dinosaurs went  $e \times t i n c t$ , and for a while there, so did we. Change can look a lot like d e a t h sometimes—it exists in anger just as much as it exists in love.

#### Mother Moon Alexisa Markwirth

My mother and I have always been more like the moon and tide than mother and child. Our proximity dependent on the phase.

I wonder if I'll get
her full moon or if I'll
have to retreat from her waning glow.
But just like the tide,
I'll probably never have control
over her gravitational pull.

#### Our Mountain Amanda Ruiz

Take me to that place in the Mountains where we first met, where my life started, full of beautiful memories.

We were ourselves together, nobody else to impress, back when everything was simple and free, we'd laugh at the world.

What's happened to us?
When did life become so complicated?
I don't want to miss you,
I want another chance.

A chance to show you who I am now, how I've always felt. These words will mean nothing without a part of you in them.

Our easy way of life has vanished forever.

All you are now is a beautiful memory.

Take me to the edge of the cliff that I'll plummet down. The gap between us has grown immensely, you're only a speck on the other side.

At the canyon's bottom sits our river, with all our memories floating past. The edges are jagged, wrong, the scars of our relationship.

I walk to our place in the Mountain laying on the hard cold ground, its sharpness the only sign that you're still with me.

Our memories flood my mind, the fun and struggles. My whole life flies by. Without you I'm only dust in the wind.

# Dear My Opposite Andre Jones Jr.

Your existence will forever be a daze to me.

Your skin is smooth, rosy, and fair [a pleasant sensation],

While mine is rough, dull, and scarred with pigmentation.

Your eyes are painted with blues and greens;

While mine simulate dirt and feces.

Your silky hair dances when you move,

Yet my stiff kinky curls snow when I do.

You read so well and watch me struggle; Your angelic voice makes me a devil. Your career is set in stone as I feel alone. It's easy for you to love as you love. Yet when I do, your fear's gun.

I see you hug your family the way I wish I could mine, As I think it's strange I wish it was my bed you lie.

You're a perfect blend of masculine and feminine.

Everything about me is an antonym!

Though I have more... My goal's not to bore. Not all that I list may describe you, my dear friend, Even so, being one and jealousy is fed.

But I will no longer be bound to what society sees as right, For my melanin and self love has taught me to fight.

### Some Things to Consider

#### Annabelle Hayse

The dog, three heads, yellow eyes, all unwavering in eye contact with your mouth,

do they know what it is to love inside of pain.

Static image - my head has not yet turned and you are laughing, mouth open,

Hell is not the fire, it is the rift between. The blue holding you in, the clenched jaw,

the gap to be jumped.

Perhaps, only in the repeated face of extermination, did Eurydice understand:

Hope is not an idea, it is a bone. It breaks but grows into itself, again.

And further, perhaps Orpheus did not turn out of fear but pain - whatever

we write about it, we know the first touch of sun is broken.

Through death, we are perennial, wolfsbane always an end, lily, larkspur, hyacinth a greeting. I left you there, in mind, even when you belong to me, you are also everything else.

In the last shuddering moments of the climb, we know

(as much as we know anything)

that Eurydice, aware of the flaw, murmured to Orpheus the hymn of fact -

the increments of our life are marching steadily toward something irregular, but beautiful all the same.

And what was created between them, left somewhere between earth and hell, stays. Is transmuted.
Breathes.

### Alcoholic Father Projects

#### Anonymous

Trigger warning: Alcoholism, Parent-Inflicted Abuse/Neglect, Misgendering, Transphobia

When I came out as non-binary to my dad for the first time, a confession escaped from my trembling lips, the phone in my hand weighing me down like lead

I'm just trying out some
thing new I choked out, and I
should have realized then that my
dad, the most insufferable person
I know, wouldn't hesitate to rip my
heart out from its skin when he
hesitantly agreed that gender is a
social construct,
but that everything is a social construct,
so maybe just play
along, because using
they/them pronouns
is weird.

#### I recall that

most kids in my school got a gentle dad, or a strict dad, or no dad— and I got a nihilistic prick with a drinking problem. The cards dealt me a father who would support me before tearing me down, and I don't know, maybe I would have preferred a dad who just tore me down instead.

Don't be ungrateful, at least your dad never hit you—but also, don't be an idiot, your dad is an emotionally empty shell of a human being: he'll never, ever be full again. He'll never, ever use the correct pronouns. He'll never, ever let you leave—he'll always, always hold on for just a little bit longer.

Dad, I am non-binary, and yes—I'm sure.

### People Pleaser Ashlyn Royall

The reasonable part of me knows
Knows I have nothing to do with the situation
But then why am I so convinced it's all my fault
Is it because
If I cannot fix the problem
Then I must be the reason it all falls apart
If I am not the glue
Then I must be the oil

### When He Left Ashlyn Royall

The sun is rising over the water Waves are crashing on the shore Memories are melting away as it gets hotter Adding to the pile, I've had since I was four

I was the little dancer in pink
He was, dad, who loved me with all his heart,
but he left and spilled black ink,
all over my tiny brain's working parts

Each time I saw the man I adore the gears inside me sparked to life, but they could never work as well as before, because he damaged them when he left his wife

So goodbye, my dad, one last time. I will never see you again; I've cut the line.

# "you owe me a pretty memory or a beautiful moment of your life" Athena Chacon

you are sitting on a plush seat of a tour bus, the rambunctious noises of your classmates rows in front and behind you, but their noises fade.

a friend - no, an acquaintance you stick to for lack of better options and a need to not ruin this opportunity with your truthful opinions - sits next to you but she is on her phone, no distration to you;

you are sitting and staring out the window and watching new jersey pass by, not your home nor your destination just scenery in the meantime.

you try and picture what it must have been like so many years ago as they fought battles of independence and government building across this landscape,

you try and imagine the kind of passion and belief in their cause that must have taken,

you think it is the same kind of devotion that tempts you from right behind your seat,

a boy with angel blonde hair and the interests of your parasocial role models,

you ignore the urge to glance at him again, you don't want to cause his suspicion or distaste;

you sit on a bus in new jersey and silently, contently, empty-mindedly behold the potential of the life that stretches in front of you

you're sitting in math class senior year, gazing at your instructor and trying to control the grin beneath your mask,

you enjoy the subject sure but that's not the cause for your grin;

you gaze at someone you want to know an who you already know too much about,

about his love for birthday cake-flavored treats, his tendency to browse house-purchasing websites to critique others' interior decoration choices,

about his failed dreams of graduate research, about his quiet dissatisfaction and self-deprecation stemming from his discontentment with the life he finds himself in,

you want to know what decisions led him from the path he dreamed to the place you find him in now,

but it feels inappropriate to ask - it /is/ inappropriate to ask - and you've prided your behaviour on not being inappropriate,

on giving him at least a small period of reprieve and home from the disillusion of this life

(he's thanked you for it as well, spoken on how your behaviour has already restored a small amount of his dreams,

he means it in the most innocent way, his gratitude, and that innoecence makes it both mean more and hurt more;

no, you can't say anything or do anything more, your reputation means more to more people than yourself,

you'd keep your thoughts quiet for the sake of the object of those thoughts, evey time,

he doesn't need to know, it wouldn't help him);

you sit in your senior year math class, reviewing your study guide but living in the world you can only hope for your future brings,

trying to manifest a future where your help and your thoughts and your devotion mean something,

results in *something* more than the pained nights spent staring at your ceiling alone and wishing, that which these types of affections had always brought before,

rows behind your desk sits that angel-haired boy again, almost a man,

aren't both of you almost men, almost close enough for your dreams to mean something, but just young enough to prevent any action of those dreams, in his opinion at least, and that opinion is enough;

you look up at your math teacher to avoid looking back at the boy,

others wouldn't make your choices but in the choice of temptations

it is easier on yourself to choose the dreams which will only be destroyed with logic and far-off imaginings

then the dreams that lay dead already,

his words his actions his smile the sword which killed the dream of him in the back of your mind,

vs,

his words his opinions his smiile building blocks to an unrealistic bandage which is enough to hold you together for these few months left until,

eventually, neither will matter,

and the consequences of your choice of thoughts will not be tied to anyone but yourself

these memories are inadvertently connected, both sweet but with different tastes,

you can have them to hold (i have many replicas to spare these), although i cannot promise they will not burden you as well;

does this sacrifice not produce the same essence that echoes from everything else i could create;

the same hands the same perspective the same imaginings that built these descriptions create the same everything else my world adapts.

#### Perfection Bea Colby

there is a certain kind of kindness that seeps through you after years of, what seems like, endless pain the pain only breaking you down as you put on a smile

you never let anyone know the level of desperation you've reached because perfection runs through your bones

it's not a new concept, but you knew it would be the death of you

what seems like the world on your shoulders, maybe only put there by you

the insurmountable pressure weighing heavy on your chest, sinking down into the core of who you are now

nothing seems to be enough for you, yourself

mom, dad, sister, brother...nobody is putting the pressure on your shoulders as much as you are

then you break

the breakdown being the worst parts of you all coming forth at once

everything you've held in for years or decades of your short life comes screaming out of you sobs turn into pleas

frustration turns into disheartened wails

nothing you've ever felt before settles into the thickness in the air that now surrounds you

breathing hurts, but bleeding feels easier than ever before now as your life eases into a fever dream, you weep with joy

the kindness you've always shown others, you want to receive because you deserve it

wickedness bustles through this miserable world but somehow, you've made this far

take a look at the wild blue of the sky above where you can see the clouds descend into heaven, the crisp breeze the rushes through the leaves, and all of the colors that hold the beauty you've put out into the world...

the flowers bloom inside and out

Nonsense words fill your mind at all hours of the night, but you have to tell yourself how far you've actually come

that perfection is not the only thing to strive for

the light inside of you keeps burning even if your world is crumbling because you are the infinite definition of the perfection you seek

### A Dream About Yesterday Ben Hutcraft

Yesterday was cold and dark:
A walk up a silent street
With Something in her hands.
Skinny legs exposed to a shaming wind.
Her black hood weighs down on her
Like her own strangling hands.
A street light illuminates her sad steps—
Their yellow glow, a poison to her mind.
She puts her Something down
On the ground and walks away with
Teams of towering buildings eying
Her and her Something.
She forces hands into pockets
With a tension that eases
The tenseness in her.

People walk that street everyday. They don't see the blood. They don't see the grime.

I spend time under covers with one ear
Deaf to myself and the other alert to the air.
If I were to step outside and feel the concrete
Under my feet—the hardness on my heel—
I would stop looking at the endless line of cars
That stop me from crossing the street.
Take a few steps and I could be
The blood and grime on the street,
But on the other side is severance and fresh air.

A grown man forgotten by his mother,
Not just forgotten—abandoned.
Deliberate absence acts as a blister on
A blameless baby's face,
That even a smile is seen
As a frown in others' eyes.
He did nothing wrong, but his journey is
Constantly muddied by a blaring shit-stain
Only he can see. He can ignore it,
But he wants to look.

To think I will always be
My mother's son, my father's offspring.
An ocean dividing two islands
Doesn't change their common crust.
Who do I see in the mirror
Except a fear of echoed experiences:
Mise-en-abyme.
A great big dam needs to be built,
But only if the rain comes like I dream of.

Sometimes I have this dream Where it is raining really hard, And the rain washes away All the things that I did yesterday.

### Window Ben Hutrchraft

I lost my sympathy Somewhere between I'm here for you, and, I want to run away.

The words not meant for me Are planted in barren soil Where there is no water Because I drank it all myself.

The threshold was crossed and An outstretched hand Is spitefully pulled away After making eye contact.

Am I wicked?
Am I selfish?

The impression in my chair
Has gotten too hard,
So it's time for me
To change seats—
One that looks out
The window to the sea
Where the white waves
Crash and meet

A snow-covered shore.

### I'm Just Headed Home (A Philando Castile Tribute)

#### Brian Stewart

Trigger warning: Racial Profiling, Police Brutality, Murder, Graphic Death

"This is my favorite song, dad!" Backseat driver, happy meal toy in hand, cold, old fries in the car seat. "Let it Go" has held my car speakers hostage for the past week... "I need to fix that taillight."

Just another hump day over, you see we were celebrating. Little miss sunshine got all A's and a happy meal was the deal we made, pinky promise secured by a little, somehow sticky finger in mine....." Did the tape fall off? I need to fix that taillight."

Co-pilot on side, my ride or die, cracking up as I sing back up to the lead singer of the group, all 4 foot two inches of diva. At the stoplight, the spotlight is on you for your solo, red/blue lights in my rear view sight, I turned the dial so low you could barely hear, "what did I do?"

Was it my speed? Was my black boy joy disturbing the peace? Seatbelt on, heart beat up, hands 10 and 2, turn signal clicking, get out of traffic, and look straight ahead, "I don't know why he stopped me," "I know baby give me a minute, I'll turn it back up", "Yes sir, license and registration," "I was just headed home sir," "Yes it's right here" I know, I've been meaning to fix that light... "I was just....yes I have license for this" "I'm not reaching, I was just .... No I'm not, I was just headed"..."Hold on baby, let me talk to the officer, Sir, I was just"...

7 pops, 5 shots, hot hurts, my white shirt is red, "Sir, what did I do?" I remembered the speed limit, hands 10 and 2, volume so low, I know...I know...I know, I was just headed home.

### Stranger than Dreams Brenna Martin

Dreaming, I see him on the orange couch

— the one we dragged up three flights of stairs. He's waiting for me to arrive; I've returned.

It starts.

We're used to the orchestrated way these things go. All I've ever felt is alive when I'm with him, And yet the gnawing in my stomach doesn't fade.

Life is much harder to ignore in my head.

He's everything I've ever wanted yet that's not enough. Reality grows into something with a funny face.

I'll search my whole life for him.

Grocery store aisles, bookstores, climbing gyms — When does he come in?
Where is our meet cute?

My friends found their him long ago.

They can live the life that I've been waiting for. Waiting — until him.

I can only find him inside of my head.

When will I meet him if I spend days dreaming? Wishing on shooting stars only goes so far.

And suddenly I'm back in the nook, gazing at his filmy face.

Wake up! I want to scream at myself. When will reality become more appealing?
The finely crafted veil must be lifted in the end.

He's not real; he only lives in my dreams.

### A Passing Hello David Herrera

It was good to see you again,
even tho' it was only in passing.
The sun was hot,
almost real hot but not that hot.
After a few rounds of fling arrows
through the air when all of a sudden.
While in deep thought
I saw a small blue car, (I think it was blue)
screaming
down the road.

While trying to focus through blurred vision,

I made out the silhouette
of a woman through the darkened smoked glass
of the speeding automobile.

I wasn't sure who
she was until her head turned,
her hand went up for a wave,
and the smile.
Oh, that smile
confirmed who the woman in the blue car was,
It was you!

And for a fleeting moment a cool breeze made its way through the hot desert air.

### Little Monarch

### Dice Gasper

Come harken to the throne, little monarch.

Come meet the reasons your crown will soon be made scarlet with your own blood.

You will call them siblings, and you will be their guide.

Don't mind the sword like a guillotine hanging just above, swinging to and fro. That's just a reminder of the price of failure.

A reminder to always be polite, and responsible, and smart, and quick, to always keep those you lead in line.

Remember, you are not a poet or soldier. You are a leader, you have no time for silly prose, and fighting is beneath your station.

Let your youngers engage in such things, for responsibility is not their burden to bear.

They have the freedom to be wild and pure and forever free.

Never you mind that your throne stopped growing with you, that now to take to it is to take a thorne in your side,

Never you mind that the sword above your head has rusted over. It still has a point, it still has a deadly edge.

It just kills you slowly from the inside now.

### Columbia: City of Birds Dominick de Waal

I teleported to Colombia; I am not the same anymore— In the hovels of this region, the wood is vibrant with its memories. The caramel rings spell out remembrances, hypnotizing with magic in the sawdust; spun fast enough they become simple portals showing the deep decadence of the ages, the lagging crawl of time like lava, the watchful aureate eyes of the ancient sculptures carved from the fishbone of another age, The same wooden characters come out to the stage of life; Sometimes, I am all memories and remembrances.

The blocky trains come through in a stampede of rust, cycling through different colors the same way the city does.

I stepped on the toes of the Buddha, and the Amanitas nearby yawned; the Azaleas adjusted their radio dishes of enriched violet to follow me and then went about their way; so I went about mine, wandering through gorgeous groves and across bridges.

Daydreaming in the backseat I hallucinate flowers talking to me;

Look how eager the sunlight is to receive us,

The way it glimmers in both of our eyes, that connection
Is a thread of light dangling as it connects our pupilsand the sclera becomes an ocean upon which floats
The illusory objects of the world, white blood cells
and the phantoms of my past selves. They compose nervous poems
at the desk of my sanctum. Sunlight trickles
And tumbles through the heart strings, while the sun
Is turquoise and hexagonal.

There is not much I can give to you, O Earth.

My writing is clunky and falls apart at the joints.

Nor can it tell you how much I love you. These are lost words;

With much effort we basket them out of thin air in exchange for emotions; and stories; and memories long gone, people who have slipped back into the past-- who exist and do not.

Forgive me, forgive me, forgive me.

### Magician's Notes Dominick de Waal

Some internal insight,
The mechanical underpinnings of my character:

My paper dreams about the shape of nebulas, I hear the conversations of the street, in the nest of tailors Whose twigs grow frost.

Where does that painting live? The creases from this ink-sodden paper are the wild breaths of something living, fumigated with drawings and neat little pictographs, among letters whose solidarity produces a pool of images--

My notebook is replete with post-world sketches sometimes threadbare, sometimes filled with intricate fantasia, tempered by the furious brushstrokes of any wrath of color on the spectrum.

The words of others file into my head, a smokestack of clouds to smother the waste land of neurons.

The air diffuses frost, wintertime's lance works to harrow my molecules.

I am a body of summertime, nonetheless.

My head feels empty and full of clouds; I make friends with the cracks running through my walls

"Mi alma es un carrusel vacío en el crepúsculo..."

### Manitou Springs Dominick de Waal

I watch your earrings dazzle in the cupped hands of sunlight; walking through Manitou, the Kachina looks over us happy to see a wooden love pour out in spades, pouring out like the violet rain that began to pelt the artisan shops, the invisible fingers of destiny with crystalline polish pushing us indoors, to conversate in a dry place while I pick up the ancient hymns of witches floating in On the rain-sharpened wind which has no origin. It must have been the spring water.

# Everything Emily Crosson

Silver glinting on his fingers catches my eye
As he cards through his hair
With a pianist's delicate hands
He gives me a smile like it costs him nothing
As if him sitting in the back seat of my car isn't everything
He says my name like it's any other noun
While I breathe his like a promise
Wordlessly begging that one day he'll see me
Before I shatter under the weight of his friendship.

### Bloody Letter

### Jess Wilson

Trigger warning: Homophobia, Mass Murder, Gun Violence, Tragedy

Dear, Anderson Lee Aldrich People preach, be compassionate to your fellow man.

Can you imagine it?

People teach, to understand.

But instead, they reprimand.

You want to make amends?

Ha! Pretend all you want, you're not the hero!

Stifling free love with bullets you pulled it off and here you are!

Well, what did you expect?

With blood on your hands, you pretend to be grand.

So, I'll take a stand and tell you:

I'd rather be a free spirit, than follow a false merit.

Merit achieved through a mindless murder spree.

Oh, I'm sorry are you perturbed?

Well call me a hippie, but those poor souls were not the enemy!

Amidst it all, anxious hearts thumping and breaking!

Taking lives away that tore apart a sanctuary.

Ever heard of Karma?

Just like God's will it doesn't reward a killer but instills cosmic righteousness.

And it's coming for you!

So, get ready to pay your dues!

Just wanted to make it out alive.

Guess we'll just do a deep dive!

Did they deserve to die?

Let's bring the balance back!

When is enough, enough?

### See You Next Time Joe Brucker

Fake smiles all around as the first passenger boards. It's early AF, my coffee is already getting cold. One person says hello, even more disregard,

for the flight attendant, is not human, but a robot to serve.

To battle the aggressive lady in 4D with too many bags.

To make peace with the straight pilots who mock their gay co-workers. To manage the child in 17C, his parents are ignoring him.

They are fighting, it's intense.

I think it's over money. Or a mistress. Or the rent.

Today is one of those days I'd rather not fly;

I didn't want to get out of bed, believe me, I tried.

I considered hurling myself down the stairs (That's not a lie).

What? Sometimes it's easier to deal with broken bones than serving nuts to assholes on their flight home.

Take-off was smooth, nobody stood up.

We hit rough turbulence during beverage service while a woman claimed she needed her sixth Diet Coke. She doesn't want it opened; she waves me away.

Oh No!, I think she's been stuffing them in her bag all day.

My coworker Brenda cries on the jumpseat.

Her boyfriend left her this morning

for her best friend,

the other flight attendant working the additional jumpseat.

This shit needs to end. My feet throb.

When I ask her for a helping hand, she shrieks,

"Today is not a good day. I hate that Justine, she took my man away."

My Fitbit hits 20,000 steps; my exhaustion is palpable. I'm on a treadmill in the sky; I'm running out of water. Up and down the aisle all day--Am I the only one working today? Brenda's tears keep falling. It's painful to watch; she cries like we've lost an engine over the Gulf.

#### I digress.

To be honest; it's not all bad.

Breakfast in Miami. Dinner in DC.

Drinks in Chicago. Bedtime in--I don't even remember what city. Free flights to everywhere.

Anywhere. Day and Night.

We've landed in Detroit. It's time to deplane.

A woman stops as she exits the airplane to compliment my work.

How do you do it?

I have no response. My energy landed hours ago.

Oh shit, here comes the lady in 4D, she looks about ready to kill me.

She's mad about her bags; they had to get checked; she wants my first, middle, and last name to file a complaint. Flight Attendant Joe, I smirk, that's the name.

She crinkles her brow; tries to scribble it down, but I shoo her away. See you next time, lady,
I am officially done for the day.

# Revelations Juan Sauceda

Indecipherable revaluations keep me in the basement

impatient opposite thoughts of my creation

everyone's hiding in the yellow submarine

please don't dirty my blue jeans

I lose feeling when I'm trusting there's lusting in love, but it's okay

take it slow skip a night of intercourse

live without doing harm do good

what abuse goes on in the hood when the hood the head

bad moods frequent but don't last

days going faster
putting pen to paper
I intend to become the master
I am frantic when I'm manic
punching holes in walls
dreadful coping

this mind I'm doping my woman, I'm loping

toking and soaking is how I relax

not thinking about the future or past

respect the establishment peers, colleagues, teachers and friends

treat them all the same calm gratuity

Nobody is hurting me. I am hurting me by thinking, think, feel, think it never stops.

sober it's evident I can't control my mood

real problems I allude these feelings are crude feuding with everyone

it's imperative to fix my narrative

Take care of it don't be scared of it dreading the rage in the cage feeling the muse feeling my choose

feeling the clues feeling the blues

feeling experimental with the incredible legible

sacrificing time to fill pockets with nonsense

the brand is my vanity and slowly but surely

it's killing my sanity

### over-baked repression Julia Stickroad

there's something deep down the caverns of thought. where birds tell me that they aren't free, of themselves or of pain. maybe the night bleeds down the back of the spine. silence never comes easy while tiger tears race. through the town square until crashing. colliding. overripened pineapples crushed. orange leaked streaks of squeezed juice stains. of pulsating terror. nothing can bring me back to life.

### walking poem Julia Stickrod

drip drip

there might be blood on my shirt but that won't matter because it might be strawberry & I will try to find this out but I do not need to because what's in my head is not what's in my heart & I cannot distinguish this fact so like the blood & like the strawberry there will not be an answer because the stench of smoke inside my nose reminds me that sometimes this is what it means to be alive

# Apologies To The Veteran Kali Ryan

We are sorry for calling you names and throwing trash at you, When all you wanted to be was praised when you came back in '67

It was all new

War was not met with wows, but instead just came back as a hated citizen

We are sorry for pushing you under the rug

Just put you in a mental imprisonment

Met with bottles of antidepressant drugs

And all they could do was make a memorial arisen in your pain

We are sorry for making you the enemy

When all you wanted to do was follow in your father's footsteps

You wanted to seek independency

But all you got was a closed doorstep

Once you returned home

This is the much-needed apology due to you

### Bill

### Kane Ruiz

\$7,760 for two years

\$8,610 for two more

A decade later, \$26,920 is added

\$9,180 four years later

At the end of four more, \$57,000 is added

I will write you a check for \$109,470

Then die a happy son

### A Normal Friendship

#### Kane Ruiz

Trigger warning: Emotional Abuse

When a friend ignores you after not allowing them to use your things, that's normal.

When a friend shames you for hanging out with someone else, that's normal.

When a friend slaps your arm after mispronouncing a word, that's normal.

When a friend doesn't defend you from being jumped, that's normal.

When a friend denies your experiences, that's normal.

It's weird when you're abused by a friend. No one is ever handed a pamphlet labeled "How to Escape Abusive Friendships." There are no PSAs that warn teengers the dangers of friends who hit you. A teacher never pulls you aside to ask you if you're okay. Abuse in friendships is normalized.

We are expected to have ups and downs. We are expected to hug it out after loud arguments. We are expected to sleep at each other's houses as if nothing happened.

I am expected to forgive them. So why can't I?

### Your Eyes Tell Me Kate Marlett

Your eyes tell me
the story of one who never wanted to be
who they are
One who looks but never finds,
One who laughs with a sigh
One who looks up
and can't find the stars in the night sky

### Zoomies

#### Katie Turner

energy Energy ENERGY **ENERGY** too much Energy

run run run

grab toy, "shake shake"

from here to there in 5 seconds

Now bounce here

Drop toy here

Bow, leap RUN

look through the window, stop what you are doing

Stare outside for unexplained reasons

run run bark, still full of energy

bump bump stop

Where's your toy?

Bouncing up and down jump on hooman stop, show hooman toy squeak squeak  $\,$ 

go in circles, spring, slide, run

jump Jump JUMP **JUMP** 

in a circle till you get that toy

Bring it here to there in 5 seconds

Now in a new spot a spot a spot

a spot

A spot and drop

bark bark run run energy Energy ENERGY

Zoomies it's the only explanation, zoomies.

### Autumn Owl Kristi Raney

A dwindling canopy creates an auburn rain leaves conceal her with swift abundance Her feathers shiver from fragile showers while the moon wakes to Winter's spell Then colors fade to marbled shade

Silence nestles amongst trembling pine and surrounds shabby burrows Ashen light spirits along the ground while her gaze lingers on fabled steps Then color fades to marbled shade

White washes away from the sky and buries her in soft solitude She favors falling height with wings eager to escape Then color fades to marbled shade

Amber eyes remember a ghost once graceful who now hurries to a deep hollow She whistles a whetted tune as she slips past suffering warmth Then color fades to marbled shade

Reflections grow in pockets of gold that dapple once empty talons A chill swallows her hidden face while faith wavers in the frosted air Then colors fade to marbled shade

# Home Is Where the Food Is Mickayla Oswald

*July's* home is the creaminess of tahini halva and raspberries bursting in a golden nebula, crisp tartness with a punch of nostalgia.

*November's* home is the earthy scent of nutmeg and the flake of pumpkin pastries for which we beg. It's a spiced apple cider and a roast turkey leg.

*December's* home is a hot latke to thaw winter woes and a purple borscht that warms blue toes. It's a matzo ball soup defrosting Chanukah snows.

*March's* home is the quiet fizz of a strawberry phosphate and the crunch of hamantaschen, Haman's defeat reincarnate. It's a Purim challah and sunsets of drunken roseate.

*Home* is the familiarity of a deli's din and the coziness of the Sukkah blessing, seeking solace in a land I've never been.

### Medicine Mickayla Oswald

Hanging on is the worst part of regret But letting go hurts so much more like the taste of cough syrup during flu season metallic bitter sickening sweet: or the pinch of a needle sewing shut the broken skin the scar left behind recalls split pins their blood beading on a white handkerchief: the smudge paints a broken bell, faithful heart withered but healing.

## late night drive

eyes shut to reminisce the evening that befell, West African, in her presence I am graced, rich bosom, beady braids cast me in a spell, I turn left instead of right, no need for haste.

i'm rarely accompanied, it's like a fever dream, deep orange streetlights bounce off her skin, foot easy on the pedal at the green, grip tight on the steering as I spin.

old workplace, a thrift store, our only stop, same depressing gist the reason I left, gleaming royalty beside me, no need to worry, one purchase, on me, no need to barry.

the ride back to hers is short but sweet, Temilade treble tunes matching the streak, her pleasant essence feels so complete, she leaves, door shut, world back to bleak.



### children of Africa Nathan Gicho

offspring of a continent so vast, and land so bountiful, basking in the height of forebearer's love.

offspring of a continent so blessed, smiles beaming as they face the screen, bellies full of a grandmother's meal, hair stitched tight to their scalps.

offspring of a continent so beautiful, they kick ball in the backyard, lush grass they sprint over, hens crowing in annoyance, spirits high and bellowing laughter.

offspring of a continent so far, i watch them over a small screen, before i have to clock in, flights back home are very pricy, hand to mouth is how I'm living, but I'll go back some day

### One Year Wagon Nolan Dotter

Trigger warning: Mentions of Substance Abuse

One year later and I still feel haunted By the choices of my past, a past I never wanted With all of the pain I always carried but never flaunted Thinking of all the faces by whom I was taunted Getting better is hard, I knew that when I started Getting clean and hopped on the wagon to get carted Off to greener pastures, territory I never charted Because of how life and people left me broken hearted Found my solace in substance, helped me numb that pain But I didn't realize that there was nothing to gain From just burying it all deep down in the pouring rain Building up behind the dam made of makeshift novacaine I guess I'm still reeling from carrying all that weight On my shoulders like I was a train full of dead freight But as time goes on those heavy things will go into a crate And get organized into their own spot with everything else ornate That decorates my mind and whispers in my ear Telling me about everything I don't want to hear So I do my best to keep on moving and keep my head clear To push through and make that record another year

### Rabbits Olivia Nordyke

I have a great and dear love for each rabbit that dashes into the bush, or across the lawn

Rather than crossing my path

They have no idea that I have love to share

They know not that I am gentle or kind

The rabbits know that their intuition tells them to run

I have never listened to my intuition

I love those rabbits,

Despite the fact that they have never allowed me to know how soft their fur is

I will never get to stroke a wild hare's long ears

Or look into its eyes, glazed with the need for survival

The rabbit knows better than to let me near

Because the rabbit knows I am a monster

### Queer Who? Queer You! Orion Capela

Trigger warning: Death

I'm queer as in human.

I'm queer as in normal, natural.

I'm queer as in fuck you for thinking otherwise.

I'm queer as in black trans women who were sex workers are the reason the state gave me rights.

I'm queer as in I carry the weight of all those we lost in the Aids Crisis.

I'm queer as in the horror of watching it happen all over again.

I'm queer as I know it is my responsibility to fight for the future queer generations.

I'm queer as in a political identity that protests the white gender binary enforced through erasure, colonization, and genocide.

I'm queer as in liberation, for me and for you.

### Grey Sheets Peyton Oswald

Go to sleep. I tell myself, as I lay in my grey sheets. Things will be better tomorrow is a new day. So, I take two quetiapines, out of a bottle with another girl's name, and wait. I wait for the heavy eyelids to sink upon me, like a pebble into the quietest pond. I wait for my nose to become stuffy and for the comforting unconsciousness to settle my brain. I wait for stillness.

Forty-five minutes pass by me, slowly, quietly. The stillness never comes and I'm left there. My bed becomes a boat adrift in the sea of troubled minds. I can't help but envy the rest of the house, peacefully dreaming. My aunt is in the next room, dreaming of her lost husband- dreaming of not feeling lost herself. The dog at the foot of my bed, dreaming about simpler things, like car rides and ear scratches. Here in my grey sheets, dreams never come to my mind. I lay on my back staring blankly at the dark ceiling, letting my eyes create illusions in the blackness. While my eyes make shapes my mind makes checklists- obligations that fill me like a gutter in a flood.

Tomorrow may be a new day, but I will still be me. All my troubles will still rest in my soul, as dust rests on a long-forgotten shelf. The expectation of sleep is new and fresh, But awakening from sleep is only returning and stale. Awakening is repeating the same patterns, feeling the same way, remembering the same things.

I sit here in my grey sheets as I think these thoughts. I am hopeless at the end of two extremes. Sleeping all the time, because my mind can do nothing. Or staying awake for days, because my mind can't help but do everything. Both extremes are the result of a train of thought that never seems to reach its station. A never-ending labyrinth in which I'm left to wander alone.

As I lay there in my grey sheets, the voice in my head tumbles like a load of laundry in an old dryer. Tumble... tumble...tumble. As my thoughts tumble loudly, the house lies still; soundless. The only noise arises from the bathroom. Where a leaky bathtub sings a sad song. Its tip-tapping harmonizes the voice in my head. Drip- Drop- Plop-. Your-not- enough.

Suddenly, the relaxation of sleep becomes something unbearable. It becomes a weight on my chest, too heavy for anyone to bother lifting. It becomes the turning in my stomach that comes after too many shots of whiskey on summer nights. It becomes the inability to breathe like the atmosphere has placed a vacancy sign where the air should be. I lay there, in my grey sheets, wondering how dreary life will be if something as peaceful as sleep makes me feel so restless.

In the blackness of the room, the slight glow of the moonlight shines in. Faintly illuminating the pictures on the wall. It shines on the black and white of my mother's face, oh how I wish she was here on these sleepless nights. My mind travels back in time. Remembering how she used to twirl my hair in her fingers with my head in her lap. How she used to sing me "Blackbird" when I couldn't sleep in the dead of night. But these are a child's thoughts. "You're all alone now. There is no one there to twirl your hair, to remove the vacancy sign, to lift the weight. Just you, you and the never quieting voice."

I lay there in my grey sheets longing for the daylight. When I'm still me. When checklists are still incomplete. When life is still stale. When thoughts are still tumbling. When I still wish my mom was here. But at least then, there is light. Light to make all these things less scary. When there is at least the bustle of the world to drown out my mind. When there are distractions from the way I feel inside. Oh, if only I never had to think "just go to sleep".

## Light Through the Crack Peyton Oswald

Trigger warning: Substance Abuse

He tries to hide it So you won't see He's not the father he used to be

His teeth are turning yellow His bones seem to show Out his mouth a steady stream Of cigarette smoke would blow

He drives me to a place A place i've never been In an unknown bed He tucks me in

He pretends to sleep Till I close my eyes While I'm dreaming my dreams He's telling his lies

As i arise in a panic The ghost...disappear In his spot are empty sheets From the pit of my stomach arises fear

An hour passes Still no show I slip out the covers And off i go

Tiptoeing quietly
On the carpet dingy white
Going towards the crack in the door

Where In seeps a light A pin could drop The world would hear I sneak out the door watching for someone near

Quit and Still
I walk down the mysterious hall
One hand tracing
Down the tan colored wall

Laughing in a bed room The smell strong Behind the door Something is wrong

A key hole in the knob My eye grasping for a peak What's going on My knees become week

Syringe in the vain On the table is a spoon A bubble crusted over The hollow meth moon

The ghost is there Powder and spoon Syring and lighter "Have to get back soon"

Quietly quickly
I must get back
Close the door
the light through crack

Sit in the bed Hugging my knees to my chest Too traumatized No rest

3:00 oʻclock Foootsteps outside Lay down, close my eyes Fake sleep is where I hide

The ghost enters He thinks you don't know Because he and you alike Don't let things show

## Colors of Grief Rita Chambers

As grief is not one feeling So too is it not one color

It is the bitter blue of sadness,
The sky just after sunset,
And the sharp cold of a frozen morning

It is the vibrant red of anger, Clenched knuckles, And tear-stained cheeks

It is the gray-purple of fear, Icy, trembling fingers, And staticky knees

It is the fleshy pink of regret, Bruised and bitten lips, And light through closed eyelids

It is the tender rosy-purple of love, Fingers tracing picture frames, And kisses pressed to carved marble

It is the acidic green of curiosity, Of questions never answered, And replies never known

It is an endless process
It is a whirling mixture of emotion and color
And it is a living creature you hold every day for the rest of your life

### Hollow Words Rita Chambers

Do you think that when Cavemen first learned to speak They knew we'd tarnish their work?

Do you think that when Wordsmiths first crafted language They knew we'd tarnish their work?

Lies, white and black and omitted and in between, Words missing, words false Words hollow

Some lies we can justify Lies of comfort, lies of kindness

Some lies we can't justify Lies to hurt, lies to conflict

Some lies are just easier than the truth

## The Parts of Me You Could Not Love Sela Siffin

You were the version of you life bent you to be

Words and actions held onto because of love

Or was it fear

Fear of the unloved.

You loved me in ways only you could

And I ached for it

Yearned to be loved in the ways you could give me

Sometimes that was a smaller, quieter, less me, me

But that me felt enough for you

Enough to be loved by you I felt you asked that of me

But you never did

I asked that of me, I made that of me

And I never needed to, because you never needed that from me, I needed from me at that time what I ached from you.

## What Death Is Sela Siffin

Death, while most associated with dark, I would say it's empty, lack of color, void. It's screams held beneath the surface, sobs from your mother as you watch her fall to the ground, while you sit in the center, stuck, or rather ground in fears, half-built explanations of the travesty that occurred.

Death reeks of an assortment of tulips, peace lilies, geraniums, on the kitchen counter. Death smells like your family friends delivered lasagna, your grandma as she hugs you like she can keep you together.

Death is deep sorrow, pertained in the physical pounding in your head, from sobs shed. Death doesn't just cling to you, it fills you with the presence of the person, then it leaves you empty.

Death is prayers for peace, as your parents yell at gods they don't believe in. Death is the week after clarity, the physical pain gone, no longer an answer for the numbness, the void, the deep sadness.

No death takes, then leaves you its pieces left in you, then death tells you to live in it, because death never really leaves, death stays with you, not as any one thing, but in the memory of the person you loved, forever preserved as who they are, forever with you, that is what death leaves you with.

### The Trucker's Lament Shannon Fink-Ritchey

I sing this song, full of sadness,
This song which is myself. I will tell, what I am able,
About what hardships I have faced—since I grew up,
Recently or long ago, never more than now.
Always I suffer my misery of exile.

I am a daughter of Judith, cursed with a wise warrior's heart, slayer of malicious men, first to battle, and last to part.

Toughened by my brothers, seven Saxon kings,
From fierce fighters for glory and treasure, wickedness springs.

Berserkers in battle, they fought against each other,
Oath breakers forgot I came from their mother.

Brother's betrayal, a sword's failure, terribly rested the mind now.
Outcast from home's lovely land, always I suffer my misery of exile.

Then I set out across the asphalt sea, a friendless stranger,
Lonely lord of my wheeled ship, embracing all danger.
Winters wicked winds or heat of summer searing,
Collecting temporary companions, for years I kept steering,
Hall-wretched, seeking a center far or near,
Where they might be found, in some mead-hall, friends to call dear.
Lonesome was I beneath these single veterans, always hostile,
Hardened in heart, always I suffer my misery of exile.

Men are but jewelry, expensive adornments, easily lost,
Hearts heavy payment, not worth the cost.
Conquerors of innocence, vanquishers of dreams,
This devil woman victorious, their pride flows in streams.
Toughened by my brothers, I battled these asphalt seas,
Never will a son of Odin bring me to my knees.
Daughter of Judith jaded, life an extensive trial,
Years of yearning, always I suffer my misery of exile.

Where has the steel horse gone?
Where are my kindred?
Where are all the miles traveled?
Where are my troubled lovers?
Where went my golden years?
No more searching for a home!
All done, chasing a dream!
Defeated by hell's hound!
Lost for good, daughter of Judith—me!

I sing this song, full of sadness,
This song which is myself. I have told what I am able,
About what hardships I have faced—since I grew up,
Recently or long ago, never more than now.
Always I suffer my misery of exile.

### the half men Sophia Kustar

the boys who see characters like tyler durden or patrick bateman as role models, and not red flags violence is not a crime but instead an obsession, a promise

there's a punching bag in the basement and on it he paints the faces of all who have hurt him it swings back and forth, back and forth with the force of his punches his bloody knuckles are a trophy that he has not earned

he even puts a pen to paper and in that chickenscratch script his thoughts crystallize into words knifesharp cuts and inkblack blood carved into his beatup notebook stories of standing up to the sorry girls who ever dared to deny him swearing against the boys that they dared to choose over him and yet, the blood on his knuckles will only ever be his own

### trickle Sophia Kustar

no matter how hard i try he trickles through my fingers

sometimes, i have the good grace to cup my hands and allow him to pool and overflow my boundaries

sometimes, i wrench my hands open to let him wash over me like water, cleansing, and gone too soon

he is often too hot for me to hold, and yet i try, burning my hands into a soft shade of red, blistered and numb

and he is often more of a waterfall than a trickle, and the force of him, frothing, it burns me just the same

he gathers in my open palms and i wonder if i am asking for it by extending my hesitant reach to him

but i can't seem to pull myself away and no matter how hard i try, he trickles through my fingers

### Jig Susana Ramirez

Inspired by Hemmingway

Her opinion is labeled futile "Vanity, inconsiderate!" He yells.
But, no more
He will not mishandle a package signed to her name his hand, his word, him.
A sentence matched to no just crime

There are no such things as things that understand me

There are no such man that understand her

There are no such choices that can be made for her In her eyes are dreams

One's mind travels far in the distance

Why can she not decide for herself

He taunts that in his dream there are choices. Her dreams are in vein To her this blessing he labeled conviction

Let it be said that his fears will never be her fears

That she is illiterate to the Words that scream, "her autonomy"

## He Was Ready and Willing Taylor Adreon-Little





### Strawberry Season Taylor Adreon-Little

I

My father died during strawberry season
It happened on a Tuesday, which I remember because
I could not shake the strangeness of it
That someone as gentle and loving as him could die
On a Tuesday night—
Just like that

In my mind, I see us plucking wild Washington blackberries from the bush
A bright burst of tartness on my tongue, then sweetness
As if we had to earn our keep
Washington was kind to us, green and gentle
And he is still there

We leave on Thursday
Four hours into the car ride I comment on the strawberries
And Mom says, "It's strawberry season."
She is happy I'm eating, and that is why I keep doing it.

I marvel in quiet because
I have just entered the darkest season of my life
And the strawberries are still sweet
In my mind, they crumble like dirt clods the moment they touch my tongue
I eat half the bag mechanically, fingers stained pink

Π

The next day I lie across your body and feel an empty, desolate thing.

I hold your fingers, cold and stiff like a wax figure

And wonder if I should feel disturbed by the body that held me

Kissed me, carried me on its shoulders,

Reduced to a hollow container.

Your tattoos are the same and so are your fingers,
Calloused and scarred from a life of labor.
That is how I know you're real.
I have never heard my grandmother make a noise like the one she did
As we entered that room to find you lying on the table.
At night I hear it in my head as if on loop,

Some terrible symphony of a mother's pain And a father's absence.

III

We leave three days later
Although it does not feel like three days
Time moves sideways, like a crab
And I am suspended as if in amber
Fossilized and motionless

Seven days after your death

Nineteen children are murdered in a school shooting in Texas

I watch the news with dull, dead eyes and try desperately

To summon up some semblance of horror

But there is only grief, only this great missing you

Which I swim through every morning

trying to get my head above water

But cannot ever break the surface of

When I get tired of treading water, trying to reach air
I swim down, instead, looking for bottom
I am determined that if I should be unable to breach the surface
I at least deserve to know where it might end

There is no bottom to be found
Only empty water, murky and dark and stretching out
For miles in all directions
Endless and ugly with the absence of you

My grief for you is greater
Than all the pain and suffering in the world
Every pain I've felt before pales in comparison;
Every old wound was merely playing dress-up, mimicking
This: the undistilled, wailing, world-ending grief
Of a child abandoned for the last time

IV

It is strawberry season, but it feels like a drought
A starvation
A destitute
The earth has dried and split like half baked clay
Turned brown and chapped and barren

My world was green—lush and abundant and Bright with potential, ripe with endless possibilities Thrilling and careless and childish with joy, before Overnight, it became a wasteland

A warzone

A place of desolation and grief so cloying and dark That no light can survive a pilgrimage through Everything starved of the sun

If you are not here, nothing can grow
The world has turned sinister, suffered death in protest
Of the unjustness of your leaving
And I have stopped watering the flowers

Outside it is spring but I have stopped leaving the house
Which is safe and quiet and full of your things
Where it can be just you and I, not a strange world that
Can turn on you any second it sees fit
Which promises nothing but the promise of all coming to pass
The seasons endless, the winter always stalking behind you
Like a wild cat with sharpened teeth

I stop checking the news because the world is barren
The wind carries no echo of your voice
So all the air is dead to me

### A Classic

#### Taylor Plyley

I wish you looked at me the way you gaze at your faded green 2000 outback

"A classic color" you'd state

But my green eyes are dimmed with trauma.

"The bones are good"—yet my bones shiver

"The brakes'll take maybe 2 hours tops"

But I can't stop all of the intrusive thoughts that plague me.

"The spark plugs are an easy fix" you'd say—my brain just doesn't fire that way, my hippocampus started to shrink in 2001.

"Radiators are simple, a couple of bolts out and in"

Dad, what do I do if my bolts are stripped?

They spin endlessly.

"The AWD can't be beat"

I am stuck in the mud because my brain won't get a grip

"A lift would make her perfect"

Perhaps I could uplift my narrative and

pretend that it never really happened.

Why couldn't you have chosen me as meticulously as that outback?

I hope every time you behold that weathered green you see me.

When you stroll amongst the pines I hope you notice my presence

# Day-Dreaming Taylor Plyley

Lips that call my name in a Tongue that I long to know Hands willing to hold me in every form Eyes that pour into my soul

the caress of your Hand down my Back calloused Fingers that Dance delicately on my Hips dripping into my Skin Tingling that remains long after Your Touch fades

but, we only exist in Fantasy Bliss that is just beyond our reach I grip onto the whisper of us

you've become the only thing worth Dreaming of.

## Midnight Mocha's Taylor Plyley

I never knew
the color Brown could be so warm.
Walnuts that rest in the sun
Ambers that glisten
I want to pour
myself into those Hickory halos

I've never been more interested in how bright Brown can be, but Your Brown is endearing. I cling onto every word that Your eyes orate

You let me swim freely in Your Midnight Mochas You enclose me in your Pecan wreaths. I never want to leave.

I can dream in Your Cedar experience I am safe in your Carob windows clean, unblemished, unbroken.

#### Movements

#### Tessa Schauer

People do quite a lot of lying when they talk about themselves
- Margaret Atwood

What great danger it is To be honest.

A parent could hold her daughter's heart
In her maternal hands
Only to shatter the vital organ
With one
Wrong
Flick of the tongue,
Movement of larynx,
escaping of sound.

Words.

The movement of Poor Man's energy. Huh. Poor Man.
How can one be poor,
If he had abilities to
Gather his peers; make them listen.
I say,
Language
Is the movement
Of luck.

## Tiffany's

#### Tessa Schauer

As a girl
I wanted
To stand tall, beautiful
At the foot of Tiffany's.
I wanted
The weight of wealth
To strangle my fingers
And lay so heavy on my neck
I had no chance
But to bow
To vibrant blue boxes
And angelic white ribbons.

I went blind -Staring at Effulgent beams Weeping At the foot of Tiffany's.

### Fond of Circles Tyler Hyong

My body is made of circles, Curves without endings, Plump,

Soft,

Comforting, I think.

The ovals of my face,

Almonds for eyes,

Rich soils harvest my pupils,

Plum seeds. Hard stones, I think. Rigid innards, sharp edges, not seldom lay solid.

Though within them blossom darkness, light swallowed and devoured.

Confined within a seed, surrounded by roots, Curling over masses

Wrapping over and around

A hedge of protection

For within them hides softness,

You could squish it between your fingers, as you would a grape.

Tender

I think I'd like to be fond of circles.

# Name. Tyler Hyong

You stumbled upon me before the daisies bloomed. I had goals in mind, words left unwritten, and some scattered across the state.

I wanted to go beyond the leaves, a dull scent of lead lingering above me.

Yet, somehow, you've managed to stumble upon me.

A crashing storm bursting onto me as a wave would to the salted rock of the ocean. Erode me.

## Wolves Without Table Manners Tyler Hyong

I don't think you're all wolves weaving through the woods.

I would be ashamed to think you are.

I separate you from each other.

Wolves from wolves.

I know plenty of wolves who are lovely at evening dinners.

Their table manners are better than mine.

Pious wolves.

Ones who haven't mixed his words with stew.

But if I were to place you all in a basket of thorns and condemn you all,

Wolves to wolves,

Well, that would be a generalization. Right?

General. Idea.

A general idea, being: all who walk the grass of the forest only do so to hunt prey much smaller than them.

Younger.

..

Generalization.

Some wolves like to make rumors.

*Snickering between the trees;* 

Generalizations about the hares and the rabbits:

Generalization.

They think the rabbits and hares prey.

They think the rabbits and hares like the meat fresh.

Isn't that harsh?

I don't know a rabbit nor a hare who eats meat.

. . .

But I know who does eat meat.

it's the wolves.

The ones who don't have table manners.

The ones who claim to be pious,

But mix his words with blood.

*The same who weave between the trees,* 

Who wait till all that hangs around them is the moon,

Who wait for God to sleep so they may who clench their jaw over younger prey,

They think the meat is fresher in the body of a pup.

...

Ironic. Right?

That the same wolves who prey on young

Have the audacity

To accuse hares and rabbits of exactly what they perform.

...

All you wolves who prey on fresh meat.

We're often the ones who clean up your messes.

Who deal with your aftermath.

I haven't.

I count my blessings everyday.

But I know so many who have.

Who still do.

. . . . .

So to the wolves who make claims,

Falsehoods:

That the hares and rabbits of the woods

Would like to sink their teeth into fresher flesh.

I urge you.

Lick the meat off your bones.

Bury them deep in the ground.

And pray we don't find them.

Because to make generalizations

Of a species who has an apt for digging holes, Would be a very,

Very.

Humiliating thing to do.





Many of us grew up thinking of nonfiction as a dry dusty genre occupied primarily by history textbooks and celebrity memoirs. Some of you may still believe that. The truth is that nonfiction is so much more. Nonfiction is the ability to capture lived experience in writing. It's an exercise in authenticity, the revelation of truth, an investigation of everything from the mundane to the life-changing. Reading nonfiction is an act of learning more about the world around you, each piece teaching you to see with a new pair of

The Nonfiction Editorial Team is proud to present ten pieces that beautifully illuminate the human condition. We have everything this year, from familial relationships to plate smashing to an analysis of the color yellow. We sincerely hope you enjoy the pieces we published this year. We hope that they promote empathy, spark the imagination, and leave you feeling

something new.

- Enjoy!

Ella Barry
Oltvia Bishop
Orion Capela
Nolan Dotter
Ben Hutchcraft
Maddy Mayer
Ruby Medina
Nick Smith
Cannon Taylor

## Feature Author: Eliana Diaz

Eliana Diaz is an English and art double-major. Not a legend, just a poet with a passed-down love for mythology. Hopefully graduating in the next two years, but only the fates can decide that. She is hoping to reread the Illiad before the next great epic poem comes out.

## Greek Heroes Always Die in the End

#### Eliana Diaz

Trigger warning: Death

You used to hate Percy Jackson.

I don't think you had even read it, you just didn't like that it was the only way people knew about certain myths. Not to mention it was absurd to you because "Greek heroes always die in the end."

"It's a children's book," I would argue, "Do you really think they're going to kill of the title character?"

"If they're not cowards, then yes."

You had a weird way of showing your love of mythology. I heard you once refer to myths as jokes passed down for centuries, and jokes passed down that long must be good. You weren't an academic scholar, weaving through old, historic books of mythology; you were a college dropout, weaving through mythology books from Ebay. I could never really tell what you thought about Greek heroes. I think you loved the strong, god-like gladiators. The men who tore through armies as if they were paper. I believed you were one of those heroes. You seemed to have the world wrapped around your fingers simply because you wanted it. You refused to live in a tragedy, everything to you was a comedy. You truly believe you could move a mountain by telling it to scram, as this was your land, and the mountain was just living in it. You were Achilles.

But you always liked Theseus more.

The other heroes, the ones who did everything right, defeated evil, and still fell into the sea. Some flew too close to the sun; others were simply sailing along until the waves claimed them. You liked the latter. Which I never understood. You were a comedy through and through, but you liked seeing the fall; the brutal shove out of Olympus that would come from the one fatal flaw.

Hubris.

You had more of that than any Greek hero did. The man who believed he was a modern gladiator, that the people around you would love you or be defeated by your successes, you were the man who did not believe in the gods but believed you could defeat them with ease. You were meant to be doomed by hubris, but somehow, the pride did not come before your fall. Your flaw was not cast upon you by any god or prophetic curse; It came from a doctor on a fall afternoon.

#### Cancer.

I cried. I wept like Niobe. You had the audacity to laugh.

"They knew I was too powerful," you said.

"Who?"

"The gods."

I could've sworn your hubris would be your downfall if I hadn't be crying. But you laughed. You spent this golden opportunity to invent jokes about something that may take your life. You impatiently sat through the doctor's appointment as if it was an inconvenience to you. You took the poison in your body greater than Hercules did. Maybe you weren't strong. Maybe you were convincing. Either way, I didn't see the fall coming. A part of me believed I jinxed it somehow. I looked back into the mouth of Hades to check on you, and you were dragged back down. Now I am left with my sad songs.

And hero, you knew your death was foretold, didn't you? You took down an army, only to be the first to fall yourself. With your attitude and hubris, we truly believed nothing was a match for you. Perhaps you were human. When you laid there, weak yet stronger than I'll ever be, barely spoke.

"I'll defeat the gods. Take the throne for myself."

You seemed to be asking if you were a good comedy. I remember your jokes, your myths that will be passed down for centuries to come. We're just two English majors who take too much enjoyment in stories, but you had always known how it ends in your myths. "The hero always dies." I used to wonder why you would bother reading if you knew how it ended. It's clear to me now. Even if some oracle had foretold your death, even if it was sealed by fate, the gods had made their judgment, I would've rooted for you every step of the way. I would have truly believed you were the hero that could defeat anything, defeat death. You defeated life. And you've moved onto Olympus to defeat them as well.

So good luck, Protesilaus. Your legend lives on. Godhood will be yours soon.

The writers were not cowards.

## Pop-Pop Knew All Along

Joseph Bono

Trigger warning: Death

Shortly before my grandfather passed, I remember calling him one day to check in. When I moved to Colorado, I promised to check in regularly. Wishing I had done so more often, I hurriedly picked up the phone and called on a whim. Anxiety hit me because I wasn't calling as much as I should have, so I dialed without a clue that this would be the last time I would speak with Pop-Pop. At this time, he had already been diagnosed with colon cancer, but his health took a swift downward turn after this call. This wasn't the only time I phoned him from Colorado. In fact, I remember clearly how each time I spoke with Pop-Pop on the phone a nervousness to come out to my grandfather loomed over me.

I spoke with my father about this on multiple occasions. Dad never told me that I had to tell Pop-Pop, but questions about when the time was going to come were just plentiful enough to make me feel as if I owed my grandfather this. Reflecting on this now, it seems silly because I don't believe sexuality disclosure is automatically owed to families of origin. Though I feel this way now, during the last call with Pop-Pop, I felt compelled to say that I'm gay.

Before I left Pennsylvania, Pop-Pop met my boyfriend, Stevie. They met several times, but each time, Stevie was introduced as my "friend" to dodge the nerves of coming out. I met Stevie at a restaurant we worked at together near my house, and my grandfather began to frequent the spot weekly around the time he met Stevie. Pop-Pop would get a cheeseburger and a hotdog every time because he liked both and was indecisive. My grandmother, who we called by her first name, Noreen, would chat while Pop-Pop wolfed both entrees down. I blinked twice, summer was over, and then it wasn't me serving my grandparents anymore.

Pop-Pop told me on this particular call that he continued to go to the restaurant after I moved, all the while unaware that Stevie had already told me that my grandfather visited the store weekly. I'm not sure if Pop-Pop knew that he had also told me this nearly every other phone call we had prior to the last one. Regardless, it was nice to hear about my boyfriend through my grandparents, and vice versa. Joy underpinned the texts where Stevie would tell me that Noreen was spilling the tea, and Pop-Pop's mentions that he saw Stevie. I was especially excited when I would learn about times that Stevie was their server.

Though these moments brought me joy, I simultaneously felt more pressure to tell Pop-Pop that I was gay, and Stevie was my boyfriend. Maybe some of the regret about not calling Pop-Pop as much as I said I would fueled this, but I decided that this call was the time. Shakily, I followed Pop-Pop telling me that he went to get his weekly burger and hotdog fix with a question:

"Hey Pop-Pop, you remember my friend Stevie who works there?"

Pop-Pop assured me that he did, and I tried to tell him clearly that Stevie was my boyfriend. I stumbled quite a bit, and before I could finish, Pop-Pop saved me from the trembling in my voice:

Me: "Well... Stevie... he's my..."

Pop-Pop: "Joe, I know."

Me: "No, I mean..."

Pop-Pop: "I know what you mean. I always knew."

Pop-Pop let me know that he was visiting the restaurant because he was aware that Stevie was my partner. I was shocked. I'm not that bad of a liar, am I? Maybe. But I knew this whole time the food wasn't that great! I just overlooked my grandfather's compacity of compassion and love. My grandfather never said, "I love you," even when I initiated it, so I wasn't expecting of it now.

The weekly visits were to see Stevie and to visit a space he could connect to me. He was actively cultivating a relationship with Stevie, and continuing what we were missing from not being able to see each other every week. I couldn't believe this because I was warned by my father about my Pop-Pop's conservative values which might make the process of coming out tougher. Expectations that my grandfather would take the news worse than my father consumed me. My father didn't take me coming out well, and it wasn't a comforting experience at all. So, to be warned by him about my grandfather's potential reactions had me worried.

The one scenario I didn't consider was the possibility that Pop-Pop would be understanding, let alone be interested in pursuing getting to know Stevie. I grasp onto this memory of my Pop-Pop tightly, as it brings me great joy to know that he got to know Stevie and how much Stevie means to me before he passed.

### Grandfather's Little Sprout

Iris Kim

Trigger warning: Child Death

My grandfather and I didn't speak a lot. How could a man in his late 60s relate and converse with an elementary child? He could ask how my day went, but what else? I was surely related to him, but silence ran thicker than our blood. I had no friends and didn't talk much in general, so what could be said *but* silence? My parents were always busy with work because of the financial strain within the family and he had to take care of a quiet child for half the day. If I was ever in the position of my grandfather, to take care of a young girl with an unenthusiastic personality and quiet nature, I think I would've done the same thing; view her from a distance.

I was an enigma.

"My mom is busy. My dad is busy. My grandfather is always occupied watching the news, golf, or baduk. I have one friend that I like but she isn't at school all that much."

No one talked to me when I was at my grandfather's place. I could just sit in front of the TV exposing myself to the news I did not have to worry about. I could watch golf with my grandfather and see them shoot a good shot into the nicely colored zones. Sometimes I watched baduk (中气), also known as Go, because I could. The game was like chess with black and white pieces, but was more strategic because there was almost no limit to where the pieces could be placed on the board. I didn't know the rules at the time, but as a child, I didn't need to. I would be mesmerized watching the game for hours.

I don't remember him speaking much even during our long sessions between shows. But when he did talk his voice was always slightly above a whisper. The mix of gray, white, and black hair was neat and clean. His figure was skinny but stronger than he looked. His calmness was contagious and I am sure this is where I learned it from. He was on the taller side for an older Asian man; nearly 5'9. His eyes held the biggest charm as they smiled the same as mine.

Even though we never mixed many conversations, we were still highly aware of each other's actions. He would remain calm and spend his time doing his activities while I would normally wander around the house or do other things like going out to find bugs and worms to play with. My actions reflected a normal curious child that loved to venture out, but I dared not to move a muscle.

Days would pass- no weeks would pass and I was slowly molding into the couch. As I became one with the couch, my eyes would strand no further than to each corner of the television. My grandfather was aware and probably worried about me and my well-being.

I would be too.

A lifeless lump of meat that should be bubbling with energy was hit by a boulder of reality and could absolutely do nothing other than exist in the grayscale world. That one friend I had passed away through sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) and I, at the time, was unable to comprehend the concept of what death was. All I could do was drown in an unexplainable sorrow that led to enigmatic tears.

He started to take me outside and I followed along with no fuss because I had nothing better to do. I no longer felt feelings and decided that maybe activities would help me feel anything at all.

One of my first memories of these small trips was in the garden. Turning off the TV, he would change his attire to something more comfortable and lose. He would grab his gloves and hat and go out to the backyard. The sweltering summers of Tennessee were never a treat, but the juxtaposing cool Earth was worth the risk of taking off my shoes to enjoy the cool soil. I didn't like the idea and possibility of stepping on any bugs but I still loved walking around and enjoying the grass and soft earth on my bare feet.

My grandfather enjoyed gardening, and you can definitely tell by his demeanor. He would regularly plant, depending on the season, and would water the plants often. He would plant fruits like tomatoes (unless you consider them vegetables), dates, and pomegranate trees. Vegetables such as lettuce, peppers, and perilla leaves were always plentiful. He also took care of aloe plants, orchids, and cacti that had flowers that were somehow always in bloom. He had a green thumb, and dare I say, a green hand. He would bring dying plants from the store or from other people and bring them back to life within a week's time.

I think I hoped that he could work his magic on me as well.

Along with gardening that could be done at home, I learned how to obtain other foods that were harder to grow. There would be specific farms that specialized in flowering other trees and plants. The first of these farms I visited as a child was a blueberry farm. The strange trees were weirdly tall or as tall as me and had little blue orbs hanging from them. I was only used to seeing blueberries at stores in small plastic boxes where they were cold and sweet when placed in the mouth. This was a new insight into where the orbs came from. The biggest labor was to pick the orbs one by one under the unmerciful sun, but the irresistible new taste of warm blueberries left a joyful memory in my mind. The blueberries were the most joyful trip but the fondest memory I had was the longest trip I've gone on.

At the time, I didn't think the trip would be one of the longer ones based on the clues listed. My grandfather never told me where we were going when he took me to places. I can pick up small indications from the items that he takes with him. When he puts his golf clubs in the trunk he would take us golfing. If he made me put on a lot of sunscreen and put on a hat we would go out to do an outdoor activity. If he doesn't pack anything we might just go for a quick grocery store stop.

Now for this trip, there was no sign of what we were doing other than plastic bags. We drove, and drove, and drove, for what seemed like hours into the countryside. But as I am weak to the rocking of the car, I soon fell sound asleep. I was eventually awoken by the sudden pause of the car and the car doors opening and closing. Rubbing my still sleepy eyes, I was greeted by a gargantuan tree. I remember a strong urge to climb the tree even though I knew fully that even getting both feet off the ground would be impossible. I got out of the car with a bounce in my step and suddenly realized that the floor was lava. Well, not lava, it was boobytrapped. There were spikey balls just waiting to stab me in the foot. I got in the car again in fear.

"Why are you still in the car?"

"Um. The ground seemed dangerous."

"Come out. Let me show you something."

To my surprise, my grandfather stepped on one side of the spikey ball and with the other foot, he ripped the outer shell to open and expose...chestnuts? I had always seen my grandfather roasting chestnuts, and I quite enjoyed eating them. I would have never guessed that this was where they came from. I was confused and shocked, but boy oh boy, was I sure ready to start getting my hand on golden goodies.

I was quick to get out of the car and pick up the skill of how to pry open the traps to gain the treasure. I followed along the tree's shadow to follow in my grandfather's footsteps. I was shaded under the trees unlike when we were blueberry picking. The shade did help the heat to a degree but one huge tree couldn't stop all the waves of heat from the wind. The place was thankfully full of other trees and blocked a lot of the unwanted warm wind. But, of course, I'm not focused on the weather. I was looking at the ground playing 'I spy with my tiny little eye... something that will be roasted and soon be in my belly.'

We diligently picked as many as we could and slowly filled up the chestnuts all the way up in the plastic bags. We ended up collecting chestnuts until the sun was on the cusp of setting. By the time we got back to my grandfather's place, the moon was high and my mom showed up at my grandfather's house to take me home. I was excited for her to listen to my story about big trees and my experience picking my own chestnuts. In the end, I was exhausted from the heat, the physical labor, and the toil and fell asleep with little fuss.

"Maybe I do have at least one person caring about my happiness. I think that's good enough."

By the time I went into middle school, I was old enough to stay home by myself. There was no longer a need for me to go to my grandfather's house daily. The decision was sudden after I was given my first phone and was old enough to take care of myself. I had way more time to myself since I had no one to drag me out to do activities under the blazing summer sun. But I most definitely miss when I stayed with my grandfather. The trips he would take me were therapeutic and they kept my mind off of things that were harmful to a young child. I even enjoyed just watching television with him and arguing over which channels to watch. He offered me his concern, albeit in silence, and made sure that I was able to heal and deal with my inner monologue of issues. I don't talk to him as often anymore now that I moved states away. I never did in the first place... but I think I'll go make a phone call.

# Xanthopile Carrie Lovell

I was yellow when I was born. Jaundice.

Maybe that's why I have so many little fears. I'm a yellow-bellied coward, but I'm usually too reckless to pay attention to the little voice inside of my head telling me everything that could go wrong and why anything in any given scenario could possibly kill me.

Maybe that's why I have such a cheerful disposition. An unrelenting optimism. Even when I'm grieving no one can tell because my naturally happy attitude hides it from the public eye. Just me and my grief, hiding in a curtain of thin yellow cloth.

My yellow couldn't be contained in my tiny little soul, recently given a new body. The yellow seeped out of my soul and onto my skin.

\*\*\*

I've noticed that I've become more loving of the color yellow. People always tell me yellow is a good color for me when I wear my yellow sweater. The sleeves cuff at the bottom. Thick. I always wear it with my favorite earrings: little golden bees. I like how it looks contrasted with my hair. I admire it when I see its color in the little yellow flowers that seem to grow everywhere. I love when I see its hues in the sunset. I find myself more appreciative of the sun, enjoying the warmth of it when I feel it on my skin rather than worrying that my skin will burn when the sun gives me the slightest glance. I feel more like myself when I wear yellow.

The freckles on my skin remind me that I am a child of the sun. The sun itself kissed my hands and cheeks, bespattering me with these little dots. I wonder if they look like constellations. I've never connected them, but I always wonder if someone would ever try. I find myself going out into the sun more often, begging for more chaste kisses.

I have been to Florida for summer vacation more times than I could count, even though it is one of the most dangerous places for someone who is burned easily. Someone like me. Everyone knows that they have to protect me from the sun the moment they see me. They knew the sun would stare at me as long as it was allowed. Despite my consistent efforts of SPF 100 sunscreen and being strategically placed under the shade of the only palm tree at the resort, the sun still stared. Its stare turned my shoulder bright pink. Raw. I could not help but stare back. I was rewarded with deep freckles on my shoulders and light little dots on my kneecaps.

\*\*>

Popcorn. Warm, crunchy, yet almost exclusively associated with movie theaters. The bucket warms my hands as I hold it. My tongue darts out to grab a kernel from the side of the bucket. I look up at him as he speaks to the boy taking tickets. He looks down at me and half-smiles. I've been caught. He grabs a handful from the top and clumsily shoves it in his mouth, both of us embarrassing ourselves in

the presence of at least fifty strangers. He takes the bucket from me, and my hands grow cold in its absence. I slip my little hands into the crook of his elbow and laugh. I can't wait to sit down in the leather chairs of the auditorium so I can get more of the misshapen yet addicting balls of yellow.

Years later, he bought me my own old-fashioned popcorn maker. It was red and white striped with a metal pot in the middle. I was fascinated at how the popcorn would spill over and into the rest of the glass container. He always made the best popcorn.

What I wouldn't give to be able to taste it just one more time.

\*\*

I was the kid who always drew the sun in the corner of her papers, regardless of whether it was a drawing, a page on a worksheet, or a test. Some teachers said nothing of it. Others demanded I stop, as they believed it hindered my learning. Imagine that: an innocent, smiling sun maliciously intruding on a child's learning of their multiplication tables. How asinine.

I remember my fifth-grade teacher, with her white-blonde hair and her glass eye, pulling me aside during class to scold me for drawing in my notebook. Just a simple little sun had gotten her so worked up. After she finished yelling at me, I fled to the bathroom to cry. I never drew a sun in my notebook again. Obedient to a fault.

\*\*>

He doesn't know that maroon is His best color. The color of wine. Sensual, in its own way. Burgundy seems to cascade out of his soul. His dark hair almost seems tinted with the overwhelming color. I always found an excuse to talk to him. Him and His darkness.

"Do you know where this book is supposed to go?" Can you take me there?

"I need a new book to read." What is your favorite?

"I made cake pops for the staff today." I made them with you in mind.

He prefers to wear violet.

I always wondered how he'd look in yellow.

\*\*\*

I walked through the oak trees on my adventure to the car, my small feet protected by light-up velcro shoes, my steps heavy and clumsy as I fought to control them. Sweat was already collecting at the back of my neck, dampening my hair. As my expedition came to an end, honeybees began swarming me. I froze. Scared half to death. I called for my mom. Her panic was masked, trying not to startle me as she stepped towards me. My grandfather stopped her in her tracks. Gently, with the raise of a single hand. He smiled as he looked at me.

"You know, bees are always attracted to beauty and sweet things. And you're probably the sweetest thing they've ever seen!"

A small giggle escaped my lungs, and I became entranced by the honeybees. Little yellow sentient balls of fuzz that only wanted to help the flowers in the world. Only wanted to be able to create their sweet honey in peace. I am still flattered that they took a moment to admire me.

\*\*\*

I held the tall, skinny candle before me in the dark chapel, as did everyone else. The beginning of three-hour church service began solemnly and quietly. Everyone's flame stood straight and tall out of respect for the priest walking by.

Mine, however, sporadically moved. I looked at people in the surrounding pews, staring at their flames, unmoving, displaying utmost respect for the service. I knew there was some spiritual significance to a candle flickering, but I couldn't remember what it was. Was it a spirit trying to communicate? Was it trying to show me something? Was it simply that I was somehow breathing on my candle much heavier and faster than every other person standing in the pews? Maybe it was just that the air conditioner was specifically pointing down at me and nobody else.

Regardless, my flame continued to disobey. To draw attention to itself.

The part of me that was entranced by the flame took over, and I smiled softly at it, trying to listen to see if it had anything to say. My hand cupped the air around it, embracing the small sphere of heat it gave me.

\*\*\*

His yellow cowboy boots were garish, but he loved them. Sometimes he wore them on simple outings, like dinner or a short trip to the movie theater. He would also wear them to formal events. A bright yellow shoe that loved attention and begged to be worn everywhere.

He wore them in the picture we used for his memorial. He gave them to his friend as a parting gift. A see-you-later. Seeing another man wearing the cowboy boots that I exclusively associated with my father infuriated me, adding yet another emotion into the mixing bowl of a dubious concoction.

He didn't cry. I did.

In fact, I cried in front of everybody. Everyone, watching his only blood relative stand at the front of the room, watching a recently turned eighteen-year-old girl only get through half of a fragment of a sentence before being completely overtaken by hot tears running down her face, her neck, clouding her vision until she couldn't see anymore. Until she couldn't breathe anymore. Until the only thing pulling her out of this pit she had sunk into was the touch of her mother's hand on her shoulder, guiding her back to her seat in the front row.

I will never forgive them for that. I will never forgive them for making a child give a speech at the memorial of a man she lost twice. Once when she was eight and once again at eighteen.

\*\*\*

Little yellow flowers always catch my attention. They emerge from the pine and rock covering the dirt. I've even seen one growing out of a crack between pavement and concrete. Although little and fragile, they are quite resilient. I like to take pictures of them, so everyone can see their strength.

I wonder how they'd feel, knowing that I've shown others the message they can only speak to those observant enough to listen. Would they be glad that their voice is being heard? Or would they be upset with me for sharing their secret?

\*\*\*

I wore a yellow hair tie to work. It had long ribbons almost longer than my hair itself. It perfectly matched my sweater, the one with the thick cuffs. A part of me felt insecure. I never wear my hair any other way than down, and today that tradition was broken.

The hair tie screamed for attention, constantly causing a fuss. Sliding down my scalp until it rested at the base of my neck. Slipping out of my hair entirely. I was irritated. Why can't it just stay where I put it? Why can't it just listen? Why can't it just do what it's told?

By the time I left work that day, I could only assume that my hair had become a mess, much more resembling a rat's nest than the cutesy half-up half-down style I desperately wanted it to be. I should just give up, I thought. Just let my hair be tangled and wild and free if that's what it wants. I wore a jean jacket to hide my yellow. This fiasco with the hair tie had me feeling like I didn't know who I was anymore. Just hide me away, I pleaded, in the denim.

"Hey," I heard from behind me. "That hair tie looks cute on you."

I didn't have to turn around to know who it was. Who else could it be? Who else would have a keen enough eye to see it? To see the transition from confidence to discomfort over the course of my four-and-a-half-hour shift.

Laughter burst out of me, feeling validation. My yellow is finally being seen. Being appreciated.

\*\*\*

Each of the four elements has a color associated with it. Air equates to yellow. I immediately question why it isn't blue, like the sky. My inner voice answers with a snide remark, "Well, that's the color of water too. And then what color would water be?"

I guess it does make sense for Air to be yellow, like the sun. Although I would argue that grey would be better, at least practically. Like tornados and thunderstorms.

It depends on what mood she's in. Peaceful or Vengeful?

When I was six, I experienced the windiest day of my life. The wind was so strong that I swore I was being lifted off the pavement. My mom and I ran to the car as fast as we could, her hand tightly holding onto mine. We got to the car, and she guided me inside to the back seat as the wind whipped around us. My long hair was hitting our cheeks and wrapping itself around my head. It was in my mouth. Covering my eyes. Everywhere. I firmly planted my feet onto the ground, spreading my arms wide as I screamed into the street.

"Stop, Wind!"

It did as I commanded. Almost immediately, my hair fell back into place, seemingly finished throwing its tantrum. Everything was still and silent. The lady walking by glanced at me before hurriedly continuing her journey. Even she had to admit that her scarf was behaving now that the wind had listened to this child.

"Thank you!" I softly said before happily jumping in the car. My mom was stunned, standing next to the car for a short moment before closing the door and taking her seat behind the wheel.

To think I could control the wind was naïve of me. To this day, I feel like I have a sort of understanding with her. A kinship with the wind that listened.

\*\*\*

My mom wore a yellow blouse on the day my first-grade class celebrated Mother's Day with what they called the Mother's Day Tea. Although, I don't remember tea actually being involved. All the students' parents were invited. My mom was especially excited: she always helped with Friday Folders, classroom parties, and field trips. She would never miss a single event, no matter how small.

The class sang *You are my Sunshine* for the parents. Typical sentimental elementary school performances. While we were singing, I started to cry. This song made me irrationally upset. I was fine during our choir practices, when all of the students in Mrs. O's class would stand, sorted by height, singing whatever song we were told to learn.

When the song finally ended, I ran to my mom. We both cried.

A few years ago, I reminded my mom of this eventful Mother's Day, now wondering why I cried during the song.

"I was a weird kid, so maybe that's it!" I said with a laugh on my breath. I remember the shake of her head to this day, the look she gave me when she told me the truth. The look she has when she's about to cry.

My mom would sing that song to me when she was pregnant with me, begging God to let her keep her sunshine this time. She lost it before, eight years prior, and she couldn't bear to lose it again.

+\*\*

My favorite short story is *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Every time I read it, I notice something new. I often think about the figurative woman trapped in the yellow wallpaper and wonder if a similar phenomenon could occur in anything. Could students figuratively trap themselves in the off-white walls of their most dreaded classroom? Could a patient be trapped in the wallpaper of a hospital room, lost in the forest of stick-figure trees? Could a dying man be trapped in the walls of the very room he died in, both loving that he gets to stay and hating his confinement?

The truth is that anyone can be entrapped in anything if they're susceptible to it. I could be trapped in this book, on these white pages adorned with black text, swimming between the words, praying that the reader will see me and set me free.

I haven't truly been able to admire the yellow of autumn leaves in a long time. People like to die when nature does. I loved the crunch of the dead leaves underneath my feet. One day I'd like to feel the leaves caressing the soles of my bare feet, as the first humans felt. As worshipers of old gods felt. As mankind has not truly felt in centuries.

It's hard to find a spot to go to in the mountains that isn't just pine trees in Colorado. The evergreen is beautiful, but the gold of the leaves is what I crave. The last time I remember appreciating the golden leaves was many autumns ago. My hair was short. I was awkward. I didn't feel like my appearance warranted the privilege of being seen by the beauty of the ridge. My father-by-proxy thought otherwise. His photographer's eye kicked in, knowing exactly how to set up the shot, how to factor in the sunlight that could sabotage any good photo, but most importantly, how to make me realize that I wasn't disgusting or awkward. That I deserved to be admired. I endured reluctantly, and what was produced was one of the best pictures of me from that time of my life. The yellow leaves encouraged me, bestowed bravery upon me.

\*\*\*

I get overwhelmingly excited when I see yellow scrunchies in the store. Yellow graphic tees are my weakness. I always joked about my mental state being that of an old lady with three cats and no husband. This newfound love of yellow makes me wonder if that is truer than I originally thought, or perhaps I've accidentally subjected myself to a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Yellow, I've heard, is the least favorite color. A color abandoned by society when it is needed the most. It is simply overshadowed by the bolder pigments of blue, green, red, orange, brown, and purple. Yellow is left in the dust.

By the same token, I also hear that yellow is the favorite color of serial killers and the insane. Maybe that's why no one wants to admit it as their favorite? Those who love yellow are lumped into this untouchable category just because it was Jeffery Dahmer's favorite color.

Did you also know that it was Albert Einstein's favorite color? That people whose favorite color is yellow are happier and have a love for learning?

\*\*\*

I feel like I've just found my Yellow after twenty-two years of missing it. Now I want nothing else. Yellow stains my hands, leaving its impression on the white, lined paper of my notebook. Yellow coats my nails. Yellow beads hang around my wrists, hiding the blue blood in my veins. Yellow passes through my lips in its various, sweet forms.

The yellow cannot escape.

It must stay with me.

Envelope me.

I even feel abandoned by it during the night hours. I used to love the moon. I found her beautiful despite her craters. But now I live for the sun. The next time he will touch my skin, warming me. The next time he shines so brightly that even the golden sunflowers must turn their heads to look at him. I curse the clouds as they blanket him in their cruel grey.

The cloud weeps in the absence of him.

\*\*\*

I've been selfishly hoarding my yellow from the masses.

My selfishness when it comes to yellow is not in the sense that no one else has the privilege of liking the color or wearing the color. It's that I am the only person who knows it best. I know what it colors it is best paired with. I know when it wants to be the center of attention and when it wants to be hidden by other colors. I know it sometimes wishes that it could be a winter color, appreciated by all seasons.

\*\*\*

If I were a character in a novel, the absence and presence of yellow during a large chunk of my life would be seen as symbolic by the many critics and analysts who picked up my novel and hyper-focused on every little detail down to how the very sentences are structured. They'd probably say that the yellow symbolized my happiness and love, maybe even childhood. That the absence of it equates to my inner turmoil of self-hatred and loathing. The disdain for the color itself would be equated to my desire to push away childhood and love. The acceptance of yellow? But of course, this would be my rejection of societal norms telling me that I cannot be who I was always meant to, finally finding myself. It's a cosmic, celestial marriage as I rejoin Yellow. My soul reaching nirvana. My atoms finally colliding with the stars. An allusion to Romeo and Juliet's star-crossed love affair.

Did you agree with anything said here? If you did, you're wrong.

This is not a novel, and I am not a storybook character to be gawked at by scholars who think they understand me and by students who pretend to.

\*\*\*

Yellow was never meant to be worn solely to captivate the attention of people I walk by on the street, the attention of my peers, and the attention of those who I wanted desperately to *look at me*. It was meant to be appreciated. To be worn. To bring light to the otherwise dreary colors of this world of this overwhelmingly grey world.

Grey buildings, grey hair, grey sweatshirts, grey pencils, grey fur, grey clouds, grey smoke.

Grey faces.

But being Yellow is to rebel.

Yellow sweaters, yellow flowers, yellow shoes, yellow stars, yellow ribbons, yellow leaves. Yellow skin.

Rebellion is a way to feel alive. My small rebellion stems from the many people who told me I shouldn't wear Yellow. That Yellow is not my color. It doesn't complement my complexion. It would look better if I wasn't so pale. The people who said the color was too loud for me.

They were wrong. I was born to scream.

### I'm Addicted to Nicotine

# Olivia Nordyke

Trigger warning: Addiction

On my first date with a boyfriend I would end up spending three years with, I noticed a blinking light in his shirt pocket. I asked, "what's in your pocket?"

He, embarrassed, told me that he vaped, and it was his Juul.

After our first kiss, on the ride home in his car, he offered me a hit of his mint Juul pod.

I felt so cool seeing my lipstick on the mouthpiece. It was very romantic.

We would share cigarettes while looking at the stars. I would get dizzy from the nicotine, but when he was there. I felt like he centered me. Grounded me.

It was something that we bonded over.

When I lived in New York for just a few months, I spent what little money I had to come visit him in Colorado. Before I left him at security, he put a disposable vape we had shared over the weekend in my hand. It was grapefruit flavored.

I got on the plane, feeling silly about how much closer a nicotine device made me feel to the person who would soon be a thousand miles away.

I decided to stick by him after he got a DUI.

We now spent more time together in the car, me driving him to most places, including the vape store for him to buy a new disposable vape.

There was a funny feeling in my stomach when I saw he had a new vape, one I hadn't taken him to buy.

There was a funny feeling when there were lipstick stains in a shade I never wear.

I found out he had been cheating on me New Year's Day of 2023.

My resolution had been to stop vaping, but now it's to learn how to be by myself.

People will tell you all the same things if you're trying to quit nicotine, or if you've just decided to break up with your boyfriend:

"There's never a good time."

"You'll find something better to replace it with."

"Replace it with exercise."

"You'll feel so much better without it."

It is not lost on me, the irony, that my nicotine addiction has outlasted my relationship.

But now I'm aware how bad both were for my health.

# General Delivery

Dan Sweeney
Trigger warning: Death

Hovering over my keyboard, I notice three boxes waiting in the corner of my office. They speak silently to me. Their anxiety entwines in mine. I pretend I can't hear them as my chattering fingers create the disguise. The boxes' loud whisper asks, "what is general delivery; where is Fallon, Nevada, Chelan, Washington, and Baker City, Oregon; will you be there for us?" I can ignore them no longer. I stop writing. I leave the worlds of illusions and thoughtless ramblings and pointless words behind, for a while. I face my boxes. I tell them not to worry, that they are going home, and that I will meet them there.

A week later, the months of planning are mailed away. With the map laid out, the loaded bike knows its way. A hundred miles from dawn, fifty-nine hundred to go, I slowly work the switchbacks and crest the snow-covered pass. Leaving the front range behind, I pedal towards high mountains, deep canyons, dry deserts, sleepy volcanoes, and a thundering coast. I pedal towards silent camps and newfound friends. I pedal towards wild mustangs galloping free. They have blue eyes. I'll reach the coast in a few weeks then turn east, towards you.

Day six. Voice mail. No. Not possible. At mile eight hundred, I'm pedaling through a national park. Towering spirals carry me up every hill. That voice mail – it has no place here among the living. Yesterday, it's a hundred degrees when a random motorist gives me a soda. By chance, I know him.

What are the odds, seven hundred miles from home? It starts to rain, rain hard. It's mixed with snow and ice and grey and a voice mail. I take refuge from the shivering dampness in a gas station that cannot keep me from falling. More phone calls, arrangements, plans. I put on my raincoat, but it is not enough. Pedaling into the pelting rain I can't tell if the water on my face is from the rain.

I make it back in time for the service where I tell him that I am sorry for his loss. Words cannot express my sorrow. Words are pointless.

I call the Fallon, Chelan, and Baker City post offices and ask them to return the general delivery. The boxes retrace their steps, knowing something has changed. I face them again, this time questioning rather than answering. I wonder if home is still out there, somewhere. And I look into your wild-blue eyes and see it and know it. It is always there, waiting in you.

# Never Enough

### Dan Sweeney

The mid-winter winds calm. In this far north land, daybreak pinks linger while a sleepy sun slowly wakes. Low on the horizon, it selfishly holds its warmth. Yet, the temperature still lifts to twenty below. The ice clinging to my eyelashes softens and sweat trickles down my back. I stop to clear the melting tears. Spirits speak to me, softly. They tell me that moisture control is critical. *Unzip your jacket*, they whisper, while demons shout, *stop wasting time*. Twenty feet of snow lies between me and the earth. A hundred more miles of it stretches ahead. The day blends back to the last and into the next, but my long westward shadow assures that day two has begun.

My tires squeak and crunch against frozen fields; they squeak and crunch. If I stop, the frightening sound of silence will ambush me. These quiet deafening spaces of thought have no place out here; that is not why I do this. But I have stopped and stopping carries me back to the dark pre-race dinner where I hide behind my shadow witnessing the others greet one another in knowing smiles. In a flash, one remembers me from last year, then another, but I'm not in that circle. They laugh and reminisce in the icebound distances of Alaska, Minnesota, Canada. My résumé is not lined with stories of drowning in forty-below blizzards. Last year's finish was a fluke, chance, luck. The weather stayed fair, and the snow held firm. Anyone could have ridden two-hundred miles in those conditions – unlike the race two years ago, when a winter storm prevented all but one from finishing.

Perchance the storm returns this year: would I be the one? I'm fit. I'm prepared. I've gone through my gear multiple times. Bike. Check. Sleeping bag. Got it. Don't you wish for that. Stove, pot, fuel, lights, and food are all packed. You can't be that one. I have extra gloves, thermals, and bike tubes. You are not good enough. I have everything I need to survive three winter days. You are not one of them. I'm obsessed with packing. I pack and repack, then pack again, and again, until I memorize the location of each item. I can't search at forty below.

The dinner meeting ends. I escape to my room and fall into a fitful sleep. Anxiety rips me out of bed far earlier than the noon start. I use the extra time to ride to the start, hoping it will settle my fears. Jokes ease nerves as riders gather at the start to discuss the forecasted snow. A shot rings out across the northern sky and nineteen riders begin their quest. The first twenty miles cross powdery ski trails. Mistake one is made just minutes into the race – my tires have too much air. Soft snow requires softer tires. I'm pushing my bike while the others are riding. Deflating my tires wastes time. You will fail. They know you don't belong. Squishy tires help, but my pace is a slow, frustrating mixture of riding and pushing. The others gain time. I'm losing. I panic and start to run, wasting valuable energy. Then the spirits remind me, slow down, the race is not a sprint. Yes, it's a long way, so I listen, and walk.

It's late afternoon when I reach mile forty at the bottom of a canyon. The half-mile descent to the canyon's floor is an off-the-saddle rollercoaster. I'm riding too fast; I should slow down. The front tire pulls hard left, then right. I fight the handlebars and hope not to crash. The rear tire falls into cracks and crevices. I counterbalance with my hips, keeping the bike upright through the descent. At

the bottom of the canyon, a frozen three-hundred-foot waterfall is suspended until spring. The beauty captures me alone in silence. For a moment, the silence isn't tormenting; but the moment fades and the demons scream *stop wasting time*.

Checkpoint one is outdoors at mile eighty-eight. It's just past midnight. It's cold. It's dark. The thermometer reads negative twenty-seven. This checkpoint requires a water-boil before continuing. Therefore, I set up my stove under my headlamp's narrow beam. Lighting it is a struggle. Removing my gloves, my hands freeze. They are too stiff to work the lighter's wheel. The demons possess one of the other racers, who tells me that my stove type won't work in this cold. Ignoring him, I put my gloves back on to thaw my fingers. I repeat and try again without luck. On the third attempt, the wheel catches, the stove lights, and the water boils. A race official clears me to proceed. At 2:00 a.m., exhausted, I stop. Setting up camp is a frustratingly slow process. Off the groomed trail, the powdery snow is waist deep. I build my tent above the snow. I leave my feet out while I take off my boots, doing my best to keep the snow out. Then I crawl inside my sleeping bag to rest, but the headlamps of passing riders taunt me. Their tires are squeaking and crunching, and I can't sleep.

Two sleepless hours pass. I'm riding again after eating a cold breakfast when the sun slowly rises on day two in shades of pink and melts my eyelash icicles. I've been awake now for twenty hours. My heavy legs look forward to the next checkpoint at mile one-twenty. It takes another four hours to reach the tiny winter village, where the second checkpoint is in a house. I wander through a dozen snow-packed streets, lost and wasting time. I'm not a winter racer. I'm going to lose. I breathe and take out the race packet's directions. I orient myself with the map and find the checkpoint. Once inside the house, my wet clothes dry while I eat lunch and notice two of the others getting ready to depart. I end my rest break too quickly. But I leave and ride with the two veteran racers with my tires crunching again forty-five minutes later. Could I be one of them?

The sun yields to the night. Darkness begins with a long ascent to the course's highest point. Two miles into the climb, the snow softens. You can't ride in this. I push my bike again. As predicted, it started snowing. On a midnight plateau, I consider my options. The next part of the course is exposed to extreme winds. If the weather degrades further, difficult route finding could put me in a deadly situation. I take a risk and stop to rest. It could snow more than the predicted two to four inches while I'm stopped. If it does, I may not be able to ride at all. What I didn't know then was that the two-to-four-inch forecast had changed to a winter storm warning with one to two feet predicted. I sleep for about thirty minutes, but the snow building on my tent makes me nervous. During my three hour stop, more than two feet of new snow fell. *Stupid! Why did you stop? You are not a winter racer.* I imagine the other racers already on the far side of the pass at the warming hut. They are resting and drinking coffee. *I will fail.* 

As I'm breaking camp, I notice someone leaning against a nearby tree. I wonder if he slept here as well. I yell out to him over the howling wind, "Did you sleep here too?"

"What? Uh . . . no, I must have fallen asleep against this tree," he replies.

Hypothermia sets in quickly under these conditions. It's a good way to die, hypothermia. The

victim simply falls asleep and never wakes up. I don't know if this rider against the tree would have died had I not been there, but I'm glad I woke him. He's ready to go and it will be safer having help to cross the rest of the pass.

Pushing again, our headlamps shine twenty-five feet into a blizzard that is now in full force. The beams glow on sideways, blowing snow. It's all we see. The trail disappears, making it difficult to stay on course. We mark the trail by the depth of the snow. Waist-deep means off route. Knee-deep snow is the trail. Our headlamps sporadically reflect on marker poles that are spaced at five-hundred-foot intervals. We are blind for four-hundred, seventy-five feet between reflections. We get off course over and over again. At one point, we briefly consider setting up camp and waiting out the storm. But seeing the markers offers hope, and we push forward.

Dawn breaks. The sun doesn't seem so sleepy today as it illuminates feet of fresh snow. The pole markers disappear once we are on the far side of the pass. No signs of the trail exist. Therefore, we must rely solely on satellite navigation. In front of me is an endless field of mature pines completely blanketed in snow. I'm in a winter's desert of covered trees like sand dunes. I'm not sure how I got here nor if I'll ever be one of the others, but I have no doubts about the rarity of this moment. I begin to go and embrace the silence that is no longer deafening among this untouched beauty. The land crawls into me, fills me, and frees me of my demons.

Somewhere ahead is the warming hut. With only thirty minutes of sleep in the past fifty-eight hours, I see the hut multiple times as illusion and reality mix. Late morning, day three, a race volunteer on a snowmobile checks our condition. He tells us that we were the last two to make it over the pass. Seven riders are ahead of us; ten have abandoned the race. When we arrive at the hut two hours later, we dry our clothes and eat and think we can finish.

Checkpoint three has a 6:00 p.m. cut-off time. The conditions improve for a while after leaving the hut. We finally ride again between the deeper banks. But in the final mile before the checkpoint, we need to push uphill in waist-deep drifts. We are exhausted and rest after every twenty feet. We're stuck in the drift for an hour. Making almost no progress and knowing the cutoff is getting too close, I think this is the end. *This is how I fail, stuck in a snowbank as the race director drives up in his snowmachine and tells us that our race is over.* But somehow, we get through the drifts, making it to the checkpoint fifteen minutes before the cutoff. It took me thirty-six hours to ride one-hundred-forty miles. Yet, these last thirty-two miles cost us eighteen. The clock passes 6:00 p.m. while we eat pancakes and bacon. The race director reminds us that we must leave the checkpoint by the cutoff time and then pulls us from the race.

Defeated, I seek solace in the fact that I completed one-hundred seventy-two miles. Someone congratulates me, but my eyes' frozen dullness suggests that I still have no story to tell. To this day, I still question why I stopped early on that blizzard's night. I tell people that it is about the journey. I repeat this often, but it does not console. Seven people finished. I can never share in their knowing embrace. Maybe though, merging with the rawness of an unconquered trail will teach me to let go of that need. Maybe in the rustic darkness filled with fractures and splits and holes, the beauty of some singular sunlit moment is enough.

# Plate Smashing Therapy

Abigail Tenney

Trigger warning: Religious Trauma

I cover this 50-cent porcelain plate with a reflection of my still-fresh scars drawn on the night before. The lines aren't neat, but they run deep with the weight of over two years of surviving. They spell out my pain, my weakness, and the names of those who hurt me. I trace over the name Brother Edmonds repeatedly, so it sticks. I write until the red color of the porcelain disappears beneath my inky recollections. My friends cover their plates with the names of their parents, abusers, sorrows, anxieties, and torments. I think BYUI is written on every plate. In the back of some parking lot, a dozen college kids let out hideous screams as they smash their pain into the asphalt and watch it shatter. Tired hands pick up the pieces and for a night, the shouts and aches are a welcome sound.

# My Fool-Proof Fail-Free Four-Step Method to Forgetting Your Fears

### Abigail Tenney

Trigger warning: Religious Trauma & Homophobia

I used to leave my door open at night so that I could see if something or someone came up the stairs toward my room. I thought that those few seconds of seeing an unfamiliar face moving in my direction might somehow save me. When I got in my bed, I would take a running start and then jump, giving any monsters hiding under my bed no chance of snatching my ankles. I would keep my feet covered by the blanket even if I was burning up and even if I removed the blankets from the rest of my body. As long as my feet were covered, nothing could touch me. I slept with my mouth closed to deter spiders from crawling down my throat and walked heel-toe to not wake up the spirits as I got a midnight glass of water from the kitchen.

I was quiet and careful, so I didn't get yelled at. I did my homework in class and extra credit work when I got home so that I would never be a disappointment. I got older and wore makeup so that people wouldn't talk about me behind my back. I kept my mouth shut when people were cruel so that I wouldn't be left alone. I never told her how I felt so that I wouldn't get sent to Hell.

Fear has had an iron grip on me my whole life, but the blanket armor, hiding, and 105% A++ GREAT WORK!'s didn't really protect me. The fear controlled me. Luckily, I devised a method to overcome my fears.

#### Step 1: Identify the fear

What are you so afraid of? Heights? The dark? The crippling inevitability of economic collapse and the loss of your freedoms? Snakes? Whatever it is, it can be overcome with just a bit of optimism! Right?

Franklin Roosevelt said, "there is nothing to fear but fear itself." And he was wrong. There are so many things to fear. You know that feeling when you're swimming in the ocean or a lake and you can no longer touch or see the bottom and you're just floating over what could very well be an endless abyss and you have no idea what could be lurking beneath you and at any moment something could come up and grab your ankle and pull you under? If that doesn't scare you, then you should reevaluate your priorities because you've severely miscalculated. Now I'm not saying that fear should keep you from swimming in oceans or lakes, I'm just saying that maybe you shouldn't be so comfortable. A few nightmares never hurt anyone.

Whatever it is that you're afraid of, don't be embarrassed about it. Chances are other people are afraid of it too, or they at least should be. To be honest, there are very few things that don't warrant at least a little bit of fear.

#### Step 2: Let your fears consume you

When it comes to fear, less is more but none is very bad. Fear keeps you from doing stupid shit like driving 40 over the speed limit while weaving in and out of traffic or not calling your mom back. Those aren't fears that you should try to overcome. However, if you want to overcome your fear of asking a cutie out on a date or giving your order in a drive-through, that's where I can help you. These are what we experts like to call "irrational fears."

Just because these fears are irrational, does not mean they're invalid. I totally get the sweaty palms and shaky knees before you get up to give a presentation or when you get to the top of a rock-climbing wall and you're too scared to let go and let the auto-belay carry you safely to the ground. You're allowed to be as scared as you like, in fact, I encourage it. Embrace the short breaths and heart palpitations (actually, you might want to mention that one to your doctor).

Anyways, I've strayed from the point. I have never been able to face a fear without first spending a good long while sitting in it and feeling all of the scary feelings. If it's a big enough fear, you should probably spend no less than 3 hours just being terrified by the mere idea of facing your fear. I also strongly suggest you cry a little, it works wonders.

I know this is probably not the advice you were hoping for or expecting so if you're not yet sold, I will give you a personal example. During my junior year of high school, I ended up in a debate class. I did not want to be in this class, you see I was terrified of public speaking. However, due to conflicts with my class schedule, I was forced to endure my worst nightmare. That's dramatic, but I'm a dramatic person.

I spent the entirety of my first debate class trying to discreetly wipe away my tears. I nearly had a panic attack as my teacher explained that we would each have to participate in three debates in front of the class over the course of the semester. Not only was the thought of speaking in front of the class terrifying, but I would also have to debate someone else whose job would be to poke holes in my argument and prove me wrong. Also, I had never really understood politics and I knew that I wouldn't be able to come up with a decent argument to save my life.

I think the fear of public speaking is misnamed. It should really be called the fear of looking like an ass and having nowhere to hide. And all the advice about picturing people naked is bullshit. How is a room full of naked people supposed to put your nerves at ease? The fact is, sometimes you'll make an ass out of yourself and sometimes there will be nowhere to hide. And you'll survive.

I left class, went home, and cried some more. I don't have an exact number, but I'm confident that I spent a surplus of 3 hours wallowing in my fear and sadness. Once I finally had to debate in class, I realized it was not too difficult. I was still nervous, but I did it. In fact, I ended up joining the speech and debate team and forcing myself to speak in front of an audience nearly every single weekend for the rest of the year. Fast-forward a little bit more and two years ago I spoke in front of an audience of about 1,500 people and I didn't even cry that time.

#### Step 3: Push yourself off the deep end

This is both my favorite and least favorite part. In the moment, you're going to hate it, but trust me, it's for the best. You know that moment when you're on the edge of a diving board and you just can't bring yourself to jump? I hate that moment. My stomach is doing flips and I'm shaking, and I will stand on that diving board for hours if I need to because when I'm on the edge like that, I won't jump unless I have to. So, I need someone to push me.

Diving board metaphor aside, you need to somehow construct a situation where you have no way out. I know this sounds extreme, but sometimes it's the only way. To prove it (as much as one can with anecdotal evidence), I'll give you a few examples.

First, when I was in high school, I was terrified of heights. There was a cliff near my house, and I would occasionally hike out there with my siblings, but while they would often sit on the very edge, I would not go within 30 feet of the steep drop-off. I didn't like climbing or flying, I preferred to keep my feet firmly on the ground. However, my friends had different plans for me. A few of them had decided to take a rock-climbing class together at school and if I wanted to have a class with them, I would need to do the same. I spent a long-time debating (and wallowing in fear, we can't forget the wallowing in fear) before I agreed. Once the next semester started, there was no turning back; I was stuck. Surprisingly, it did not take long before I stopped worrying about how high up I was. If I happened to look down, my stomach might drop slightly, but that didn't stop me from falling in love with rock climbing.

Second, when I was 18, I had my first kiss. I was super nervous for a lot of reasons: I was embarrassed that at 18 I had not been kissed yet; I was scared that I would be a bad kisser; and also, I was scared that if anyone found out we could be expelled (but such is the life of a gay BYUI student). I had been going out with someone for a few weeks and I really liked them, so I suggested we go for a walk. We walked to the gardens on campus and under the dark of night, we entered a secluded stone gazebo and I asked if I could kiss them. You see, the lead-up was not so scary. We just went for a walk and then stopped in the gazebo, not scary at all. Except, I knew that the signs were there, and once the intentions were clear, there would be no backing out. I am, however, sad to report that I was in fact a bad kisser.

I could tell you about how I forced myself to come out to my parents, or get a tattoo, or go cliff jumping, but I think you get the point by now. If you can't bring yourself to take that leap, try to find a way to take smaller steps to force yourself to face your fears. Or don't. Honestly, this method is probably not for everyone. Maybe you're totally fine with being afraid of heights forever and that's cool too.

#### Step 4: Accept that your fears never really go away

At the end of the day, no matter how many times you speak in public, you'll still probably get a little nervous each time. In my experience, it gets easier, but it won't go away. Which, I'll remind you, is a good thing. Please be afraid of things, it not only keeps you safe, but it keeps life interesting. There would be no adrenaline rush on roller coasters if there wasn't some part of you that's a little bit terrified. And you should really call your mom back, that fear is not irrational.

Also, please don't read this and think that I'm super brave and always face my fears. I've been out as nonbinary for over a year, and I still don't correct people when they misgender me. I also will never willingly hold a spider. Not to mention my fear of failure. I will either not take risks that I think I can't achieve, or I will break myself to make sure I achieve the things that I set out to do because failure is not an option. I definitely don't always follow my own advice, but you absolutely should because this plan is fool-proof, and nothing could ever go wrong by following it.

### 14:12

#### Jerri Thomas

I could not tell you precisely when I left the church, or if I ever was really a part of it to begin with, but I remember my mother pulling me out of bed those early Sunday mornings, sitting in the cold broom-closet-turned-Sunday-school-classroom as my second grade teacher told me stories of deluges, giants, and snakes with ill intentions. I remember the stale body of Christ and his tart blood staining my lips every fourth Sunday. I remember the reverend sweating profusely as he meandered the aisles and pews while the church mothers tapped their short heels and waved their hands screaming, "Take ya time!" I remember my own hands sweating profusely when it was my turn to stand in front of the church and tell everyone what I had learned.

I do not remember much of those days in church, but the stories, like the hymns and spirituals I sometimes catch myself humming, have remained with me to this day. I think of Moses, and how he led his people out of slavery and through deserts, only to be denied entry to the Promised Land. I think of Job - His most faithful servant - and how he lost his family, his home, and his health because of a wager. I think of Isaac laying on a bed of straw, his eyes trained on the silver blade that would give his father everything he'd ever wanted. I think of the slandered Magdalene, who followed Christ to the bitter end. I think of His own son. The son who was betrayed, nailed, stabbed, humiliated. The same son who - after wandering through the desert hungry, thirsty, tired, and alone - asked for our forgiveness as he bled.

But I don't see myself in these people. I don't see the humanity that Christ was meant to save.

More often than not, I think of Lucifer - that bright morning star who outshone all in the heavens. He who was once His favorite. I think of him and wonder if he thinks of us. How painful it must be to witness the horrors our kind carries out, and to know that we have the opportunity for forgiveness. Does he crave forgiveness? Does he long for grace? Are the fire and brimstone searing too deep in that unfamiliar flesh? Jesus wept for Lazarus, but I wonder who weeps for Lucifer. Would it not be him who needs the most forgiveness? Is he too prideful to ask for it? But what is pride if not the most fatal human flaw? Lucifer was the most human of all them angels. His own humanity - his flaws and his imperfections - made him unfit to walk the golden roads of heaven.



### Letter from the Editors,

As many creatives have expressed, the act of creating art is also the act of vulnerable. The editorial team for the visual arts section would like to express tramendous gratitude to all the artists who have submitted their pieces to riverrun and thank them for having the courage to be vulnerable.

This section features a wide variety of artistic mediums ranging from resin, mixed media, statues, watercolors, photography, and digital art. We thoroughly enjoyed each of these pieces and we hope you, the reader, do as well.

- From the riverrun editor team

Ella Barry
Olivia Bishop
Orion Capela
Nolan Dotter
Ben Hutchcraft
Iris Kim
Maddy Mayer
Ruby Medina
Nick Smith
Cannon Taylor

Trigger Warnings for the Visual Arts Section



**Body Horror**- pages 153, 159 **Blood**- pages 152, 158, 159

### Feature Artist: Macaley Sylvain

Macaley grew up here in Colorado, and has always loved the beauty that it holds. Growing up, Macaley had always given their best attempts at drawing/painting the landscape of Colorado, but it wasn't until they took drawing classes at PPCC with Garry Glissmeyer that they truly discovered their passion for art. Under his tutelage, Macaley honed their skills and found their niche in helping to show the beauty in traditionally "scary" creatures. Macaley hope to use my art as a platform to help spread acceptance and inspire conservation efforts of these misunderstood and captivating creatures.



**Curious Wonders** 

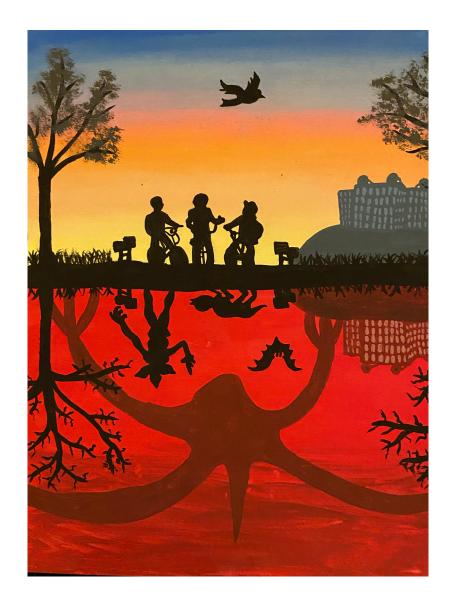
133



Garden of Tranquility Molly Boettiger



Pretty in Pink Molly Boettiger



Red Reflection: Good v.s. Evil Molly Boettiger Inspired by Stranger Things



Start Agin Eliana Diaz



Rocky Mountain Wildflower Walk David DuBois



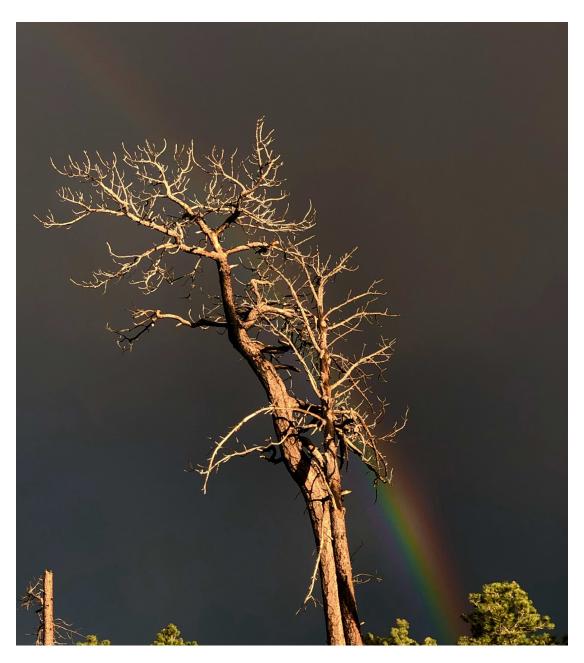
Flower Petals Preserved in Resin McKenna Argo



Boulder Arianna Hernandez



Night at the Marquis Arianna Hernandez Subject: Derek Thomas of Vista Kicks



Polychromatic Petrichor Lisa Kujawa-Levine



Coruscation; When Ceraunophilia Strikes Lisa Kujawa-Levine



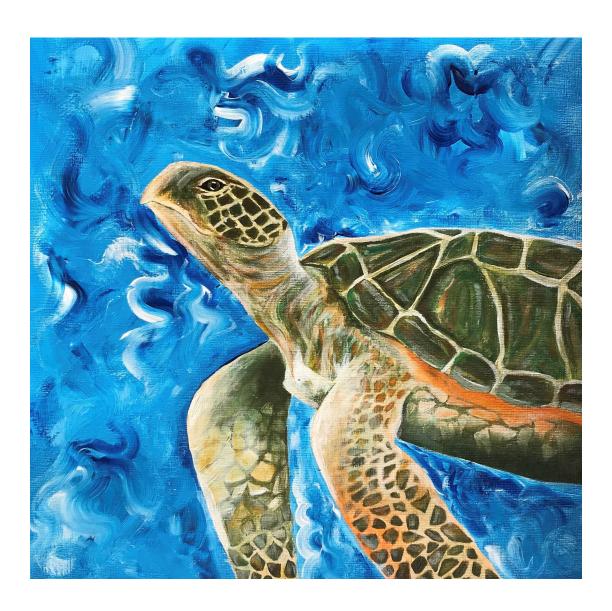
Frozen Bubbles Lisa Kujawa-Levine



Your Name Engraved Herein Oliver Omari



Decriminalize Olivia McKenna & Maya Berns



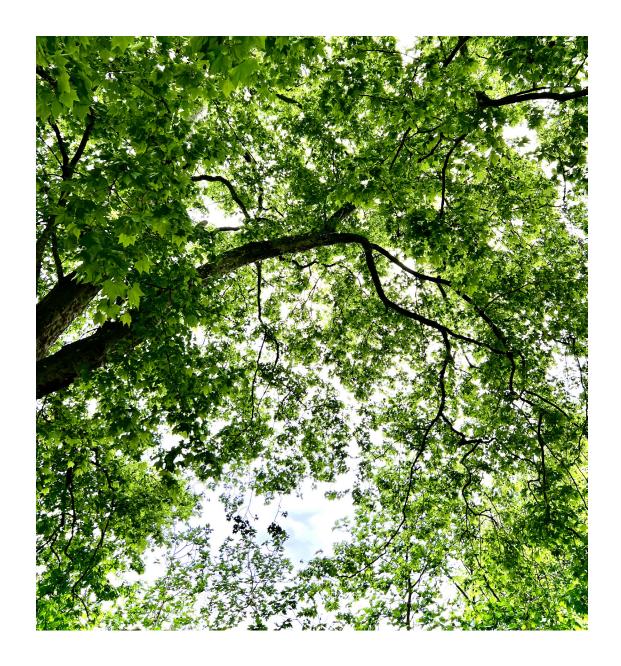
Kim Olivia McKenna



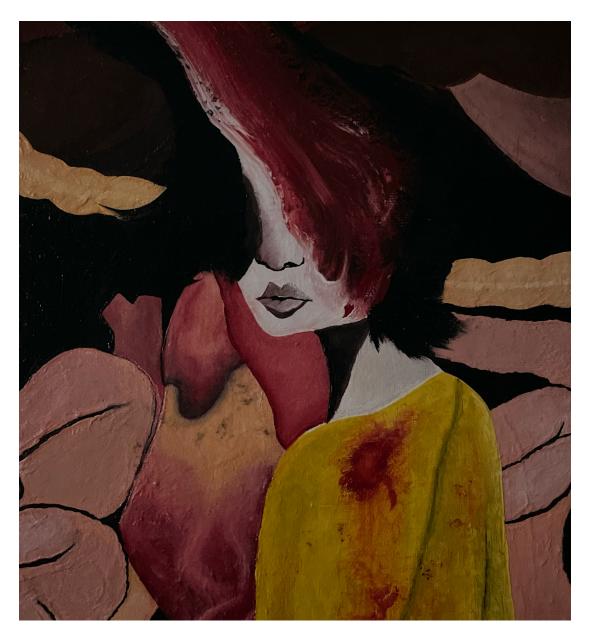
Consent Olivia McKenna



Ashes to Ashes Annie O'Keefe

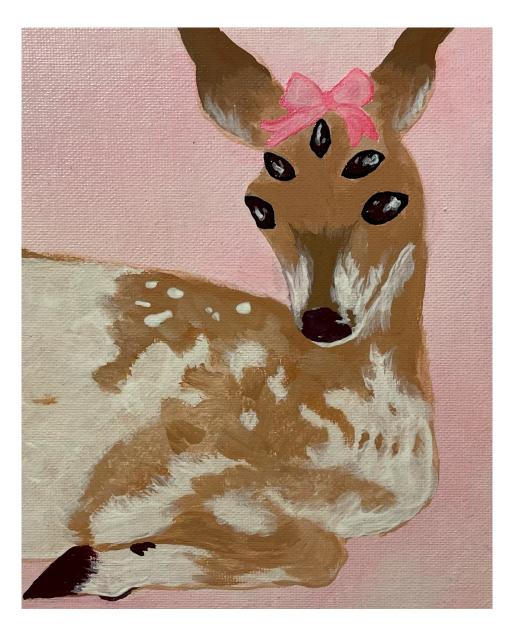


Reach for the Sky Annie O'Keefe



"Things Have Gotten Worse Since We Last Spoke"
Kane Ruiz

Inspired by Julia Lloyd's cover art



[Untitled] Kane Ruiz



"Happy Chipmunk" Larissa Snoody



"Ladybug's Journey" Larissa Snoody



"Lily Pad Reflections" Larissa Snoody



"Still Hummingbird" Larissa Snoody



[Untitled] Cassidy Stiles



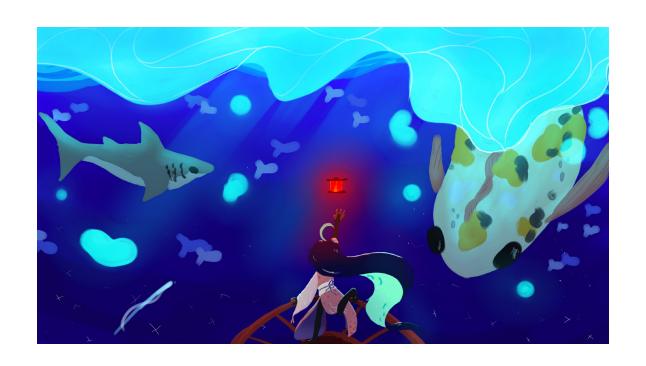
[Untitled] Cassidy Stiles



infinite Jamie Villarreal



Perfect as Is Jamie Villarreal



Niumi Katie Miniter



### Letter from the Editors,

Once upon a time, we were all children, listening as our parents and caregivers read us bed time stories before the sandman whisked us off to the land of sweet dreams. Soon, we learned to read those stories for ourselves and we became hungry for more—more adventures, more magic, more mystery. Picture books became chapter books and chapter books grew into novels. The adventures became more perflous, the magic began to bleed into science, and the mysteries only tantalized us more. Now, we are all grown up— or at least that's what our childhood selves would say—and the books on our shelves still couldn't satisfy the hunger of our imagination. So like any responsible adult, we had to learn to cook up our own stories.

The stories which we have gathered offer a taste of what the Michelin Star Authors of our student body have created. We present for you fantastical tales which will delight your inner child, action packed mysteries that will send shivers down your spine, and narratives so close to reality that it hurts. And don't worry, we didn't forget a true loves kiss to keep things sweet. We hope these stories, both joyful and full of grief, will sate your imagination. Or perhaps, sampling these stories has only made you hungrier.

Bon appétit,

Fiction Editorial Team

Olivia Bishop Nolan Dotter Brianna Jackson Katie Miniter Oliver Omari Anna Nast Uriah Oxford Tabitha Richardson Cannon Taylor

# Feature Author: Amelia Parr

Amelia was fortunate enough to find their passion for writing at an early age. They was not a child, yet they weren't an adult either. It was the perfect middle ground; enough to where they had a good start every time they began to write, but nothing Amelia wrote was perfect. Every time they picked up a pencil and pen, however, they saw themself improve. The adventurous and at times tumultuous stories Amelia constantly dreamt of in their head finally had somewhere to escape to. In time, Amelia realized the stories in their head deserved to do more than escape. They should be read, watched, and interpreted by an audience of their own. To be featured in UCCS' riverrun is just the start of that dream.

## My Friend Mia Amelia Parr

If you're reading this, it's too late.

I've gone and left. Taken Mia with me to a place where it's sunny and warm during the day, then dark and cool at night. I like to imagine us in a cottage somewhere, tucked deep into the wilderness where we're surrounded by nothing except ourselves. A small kitchen the two of us barely fit in. Potted ivy and basil hanging from the walls. A living room with an outdated television and a sofa we picked off the curb. A wooden bed frame Mia made from scratch that groaned every time we stepped in and out of it. A clawfoot bathtub. A porcelain sink. A backyard that stretched for miles on end, farther into the mountains than I could ever imagine.

It'd be ours; the whole world. This microscopic portion of it, untouched by anyone else, would be completely and utterly ours. No one can find us here. No one is looking for me or searching for Mia. No one is tracking us down or hunting our scent like bloodhounds. We're alone, together. We're alone together, and we like it.

I found my happy ending tucked in a cottage, humming along to the tune of an old radio as she whisks batter in a bowl. Robin egg blue apron tied around her waist, swaying back and forth every time her hips move to the beat of the music. I'm watching her, my happy ending, as she pours the batter into a pan so hot it begins to sizzle. I ignore the sound of girlish laughter and incessant chatter in the back of my mind as she continues cooking, tuning out every detail of my current reality until all I can see, feel, and touch is the future in which I've gone and left.

It's hard to daydream with the girls next to me giggling at their phones. No one within a fifty-mile radius could ignore them— nor can they avoid the ear-splitting scrape of Mrs. Greene's chalk stick incessantly raking against the blackboard. It's impossible to tune out the reality of my current situation, which happens to be sitting in chemistry class— not living in a cottage in the middle of the woods, watching my girlfriend bake with nothing but a blue apron on.

My face is shoved so deep into the surface of my notebook, all I can hear is the faint beat of my heart echoing in my chest. Even after the drowning sound of unencumbered laughs and beating hearts, I can still hear Mrs. Greene's shrill voice. Greene is new here; she transferred from Massachusetts just last year when I was still a junior. I didn't have her class when she first showed up, but I heard from other seniors at the time that she had a tendency to overcomplicate her lessons. Make them harder than they actually were. Some students said she did it on purpose, just so she could watch us struggle like she was some sort of sadist. I think she's full of shit. I've thought she was full of shit since the day I stepped foot into her classroom; on her first day, Greene had already assigned our seating arrangements. As if she knew to separate us, she seated her far away from me.

My friend Mia.

Although she's sitting three desks away from me, her placement near the front of the classroom

doesn't stop my ability to read her mind through the back of her head. Right now, she's either thinking about how many minutes until the bell rings, where she's going to smoke tonight, or she's daydreaming. At least, mentally, she's doing all of these things. Physically, she's still sat in her personally appointed seat, aimlessly doodling in the journal she bought specifically for chem notes. Only, I know she's not taking notes in it because she hates this class. Same way I know she's not listening either because she hates the way Greene teaches- like every other student in this school.

I can't help watching her from my desk. Every movement she makes, even ones small enough to go unnoticed, I notice. I watch her breathing. I watch her foot tap against the linoleum floor. I watch as she turns her head behind her shoulder and smiles at me. A warm smile I wish every time would come back just after it leaves. Just after she turns her head around and reverts her attention back to her notebook.

If I lift far enough out of my seat, I can almost see what she's doodling.

There are dark lines made of graphite where she's pressed too hard, almost ripping through the page. A few scribbles of black ink, but not many. The pen she had been using when class first started ran out of ink within minutes, leaving her to ask around the classroom for a utensil to use. I watched from my seat three desks back as everyone turned her down, refusing to lend her a single pencil. That's when she stood from her seat—without Greene's permission— and walked to my desk. Such a convincing excuse, I almost started to believe she had actually run out of ink.

I was wrong.

"Do you have a pencil I can borrow?" She asks me. Of course, I did, and of course, I gave her one. Told her she could even keep it for the rest of the day if she wanted. Bring it home with her in her backpack. Set it on her desk at home and never use it again. Just keep it there with her until the end of time, and I wouldn't care. Not one bit. I didn't search through my bag for one. I just handed her the pencil I had in my hand and she took it without a second thought. No hesitation, not even an ounce. She simply took the pencil from my offering hand, winked, and walked back to her desk.

Her pleated uniform skirt swayed as she walked away, slightly folding once she seated herself back in her chair. The chair that seems so far away from where I'm sitting. Greene was staring at her from the front of the classroom, arms folded over her chest. She was silently scowling at Mia for getting out of her seat without permission, unknowing to the fact that Mia couldn't give more care to Greene's impression of her. She had already tuned out her teacher. Floated away from the world around her and transported off to a new dimension— one where she wasn't sitting in a cold, desolate classroom, watching as Greene grated a white piece of chalk noisily against a blackboard.

Mia has a tendency to daydream. I call it escapism because that's what it is. She calls it something else because she thinks calling it escapism implies that there's something she's escaping from when she claims there's not. I think she's escaping from the world around her.

The world around her and everything and everyone it has to offer. She's so fed up and tired of what the universe has gifted her that she feels the need to run away from it. To flee. To cower in a dark

corner, imagining to herself what the world would be like had she been born prettier, smarter, happier. A fantasy she created where she has a new name and a new face and a hot boyfriend. Someone tall and muscular, but not muscular in the way of a gym freak. More in the way of a big boulder, or a mountain of a man.

The day Mia told me about her daydreams, I couldn't help but feel worried for her.

She told me how often she does it. When she does it and where. Why she does it when she's sad and why she does it when she's happy. Why most of her creativity comes from these fantasy stories in which Mia is someone else. She comes up with an entire plot, usually ending with her bleeding out in her mountain-shaped boyfriend's arms. I don't know why she always gives her stories such sad endings.

If I were in charge of writing her fantasies, I would take out the blood and the death and the violence and the drugs. Just put two happy people together and watch their relationship blossom as they fall more in love with each other every day.

When I told Mia this, she said two things to me in return: one of them, which I remember to this day, was a sentence I'll never forget. Not even when I'm old and saggy and dying in a nursing home. Not even while I'm writing this whole story out on this white piece of paper will I forget what Mia said to me.

"You should never trust a happy ending, Sammy; when a story has a happy ending, it means the author was too much of a coward to make their audience cry."

I could see it in Mia's eyes that while she told me this, she was really referring to life rather than story. Because in real life— not the fantasy world Mia so badly wishes she could live inside of— there is no such thing as a "happy ending" (unless you're referring to a masseuse that gives his customers sexual pleasure before the massage is over). What Mia really meant to say was: if there can't be happy endings on Earth, there can't be any in the fantasy world either.

The second thing Mia told me that day was that the only time she ever gave her stories a happy ending was when they were about her and I. Sam and Mia. She said when she daydreams about us, she gives us the life she thinks we deserve. The life she hopes to achieve one day in the future. Living in a cottage far from our hometown. Somewhere quiet where the only sound you can hear is the rustle of the leaves. Somewhere the roads are made of gravel and the bushes out front bloom bright green in the spring, only to shrivel up and die in the winter.

I liked the story Mia had created about the two of us. In stories like these, Mia has no reason to escape. No reason to imagine herself as this completely new person. She's just her, and I'm just me. And we're happy. We're older, we have a few wrinkles on our faces, and we're in love. Something I hoped would stay consistent throughout both of our lives.

I can't bear the idea of having to let Mia go one day. I never want to be away from her. Even when she's three desks away from me, I feel cold without her. I think she feels the same by the way she gets out of her desk the second the bell rings. Mrs. Greene hasn't even finished her last sentence before Mia has already packed her bag and begun making her way towards me. She pushes past anyone even

remotely in her way. They're just a blur to her; an unmarked name and age she can go her whole life without learning. Even the ones who push her back, cursing her for shoving past them without saying sorry, are paid no mind. Her only wish was to get to me— as if she were afraid I would get up and leave without her.

She knows I would never do that. Not in a million years.

We do our usual routine. Mia helps with packing my bag by holding the cloth straps in her hand as I stand from my seat, shoveling books and papers into the open pocket. Once the desk is cleared of all my belongings, Mia zips my backpack closed, and I turn around, patiently waiting for the feel of nylon to slowly creep up my arms while Mia helps put my backpack on. I gave up on doing this myself months ago— Mia always insisted. Same with opening and closing car doors, paying the bill at restaurants, and pulling out my seat before I sit in it— Mia always took care of it. Greene watches as we exit her classroom, prying eyes staring daggers towards the two of our pinky fingers interlaced with one another. Mia and I walk in sync to our next class together, only making a short pitstop in the ladies' bathroom to kiss in the larger of the two stalls.

She knows the girls filtering in and out of the bathroom can hear us, and she doesn't care.

I don't either; partly because we do this every day. It's a routine now, and it's not one I'm willing to break. Even for the sake of keeping my attraction to Mia a secret.

No one knows I like girls.

No one knows every day I fall more in love with my friend Mia.

**-** 167

# What do I Say? McKenna Argo

"How's school going?" He asked as his fork and knife ran past each other, making a dissident sound. *All heads turned towards me*. The dinner becomes a painting as time froze and I was the single vantage point.

"Sorry? Oh yeah, it's great!" The dinner guests were perfectly polite, still I can't help but measure myself up to their daughter. She's graduating on time with the highest grades, the best of both worlds. The plates and glasses I set with precise measurements had all lost their place at this point in the dinner, and we'd all just begun to eat. I'm careful to only rest my wrists on the table.

"How close are you to finishing? I bet you're looking forward to a career." *Emotions swirl inside* of me, and I feel a slight tension in my chest. He unknowingly asked the question I always dreaded hearing. It's nice how he was considerate to ask, but I can't help but feel angst. I scramble to craft my answer specifically for each person who asks it to minimize the judgment.

"Soon!" A simple answer for a simple man, perfect. Besides, I don't feel like divulging my greatest insecurities. At least by graduation I'll have accumulated so many honor chords it will make up for anyone's disappointment for me spending six years on a bachelor's degree. Yes, those coveted tassels that you adjust to hang perfectly against that black gown before walking that always seem to slip out of place. I know it's dangerous to place my value in them. I stare frantically into the celling laying in bed and spend my free time panicking and crying every time my GPA is threatened to drop a minuscule amount.

I grind my ankle into the wood supports under my seat like working a pestle. There's a certain pattern and pathway the edge hits and it gives me something to do. Everyone at the table has moved on to talk about some other topic that's been discussed 732 times over. I can finally breathe as the attention in the room is focused on something other than me. Yep, real estate, the family business. The same scripted conversation that must take place at every dinner. Hardly ever deviating from their lines, they'll go on talking about this for at least 45 minutes. *At least the dreaded topic is over*.

Why is it so hard to breathe when speaking? It's not just simple anxiety as complex as that is. My sentences run long as I string words together making the longest possible sentence trying to prove myself but inevitably running out of breath because I left no space for me to pause. Or my sentences will be choppy. Because I'm trying to put spaces in—— where I can breathe. But everything feels so unnatural. *Everything about this dinner is so unnatural.* 

Often, I find myself over explaining why college is taking me so long to complete. I blame it on the pandemic, that my degree is two majors in one, that I want to enjoy my life and the relationships around me. Each explanation always renders a friendly, "uh huh" and head tilt, which is worse than the initial question.

Out of the babbling swiftly emerges some comment that requires a quick response. "Uh huh!" I say as I tilt my head. *Hey, it's a good response and can be used in nearly any social situation, of course* 

*I'm going to use it.* I suppose I have learned some things. By the time I render my practiced response the moment passes, and it slips out of my mind.

Why does everything need to unfold without a hitch all the time? People are always saying to embrace failures but why then do people give me the side eye when what I've done is flawed? My mind is racing, and I hate that we can't be real. My chest is warm with envy and my jaw is sore from clenching it all evening. Everyone is so confident with their conversations and even their odd remarks. Some people would consider them rude, but they don't worry about it. It seems there's an exception to every rule, or at least if people deem it acceptable.

My eyes drift upwards. The crystal strands on the chandelier are as uneven as the silver that coats its arms. It distracts me with feelings of contempt every time I'm in the room, yet I find myself gazing at its beauty. How can something so imperfect be so admired?

Hours have gone by not quickly enough. Each moment drenched in tension. Goodbyes are filled with awkward murmurs and hugs. How many times am I supposed to say goodbye? Once before a hug, once after? Twice after? Who decides these things?

In the drive home I can finally be alone with my thoughts. There's no need to be mindful of my expressions or to juggle polite nods and thinking. I can finally breathe. I don't understand how people can graduate on time with perfect grades. It's always been a choice of one or the other for me. It's working out though. My judgement and confidence wasn't where it needed to be to succeed in a career last year. Besides, I don't like to give less than my best. Yes, that's one of the responses I store up for the dreaded question, but it's the most truthful one. I don't understand why I can't be confident in my decisions when other people are around. They don't matter. Well, some of them do. If only I could clench onto the reasoning I have when I'm alone.

## The Starspinner

All stories are based on the stars.

For when we gaze up during our darkest nights, we lose track of time in their beauty; one set of jewels pairs with another, then another, and before we even know it, we see a bear or a centaur. We base our lives on them.

But before the daring knight defeats the dragon, before the countless stories arrive on stage, a weaver casts a thread across the universe building a web to trap our imagination for ages. Only for a time, though. With the gift of boundless possibilities in the night sky a high price needed to be paid, one we never had to pay, but someone had to. Though the Starspinner never left us alone, the stars are enough proof of that. All we have to do is look up, and we can find parts of him in the constellations we form; we can hear parts of him in the stories we write and share with others. Though he might be gone, his ripple will never seize to settle in the lake. A hero unseen and unheard though he caused ripples across the millennia. He took no credit, nor praise, save from the few that know his name. The smiles and tears, the hope and beauty, were enough.

For without the stars, where would we be?

It is stories that get us through the days and stories that bring out the best in us, but they all had to come from somewhere, and the answer is not during the dawn of morning when life is just starting to wake up, nor at noon when everything is at its brightest, but in the deepest darkness when the stars come out to shine. I want to share a story that trumps all other stories because it *is* the original story and the creator of all stories to follow. It has been passed down through my family for generations, and it begins like this.

Before even the explosion that brought our universe into being, there was life. A set of beings full of life and promise saw the empty void we now call home and imagined the endless possibilities that might become a reality. But there is always a cost to creation; sacrifices must be given for life to blossom. We know it as the Big Bang, but the Starspinners who came before knew it only as their reckoning.

Pedals of bright light found their creation out of the shattered remnants of the Starspinner's souls, which filled the once eternal darkness. Out of the thousands of weavers who came before, only one remained to carry the torch of genesis. In the chaos of the young garden of creation, there was an early bloom of hope, but not enough to fill the deep wound in the last of the Starspinners.

In the blanket of stars that remained of their kin, he saw a map, a blueprint, and the birth of humanity out of the rubble. He saw a reflection of his kin in us, a warmth they longed to embrace. Guiding us was their only salvation. Like a phoenix from the ashes, we would rise to claim the stars, but there is danger in reaching too high. With our rise, he foresaw the pain and misery, the loss and regret, the love and heartbreak. He saw it all and knew it would break us.

With the strength that remained, the Starspinner shaped the night sky as we know it now, with endless possibilities of stories that might heal us, unite us, or bring us hope when we see none. He saw the power of the stars and weaved them in ways that the right person at the right time, looking up at their darkest hour, might find a light, a story, to guide them home. But as with our creation, so too did our salvation bear a cost. In his ending, we acquired our beginning; we received the best gift we could ever receive.

For where would we be if when we looked up at the night sky, we only saw darkness?

## The College Advisor

### Joe Brucker

Setting: The college advisor's office waiting area at Lower Pinnacle Community College.

Cast:

(*In order of appearance*)

Danny - 40s, Male.

Dr. Jenson - 40s, Anyone.

Moondust - 20s, Female.

Bro - 20s, Male

DANNY enters the college advisor's office at Lower Pinnacle Community College. The area is being remodeled. Only a receptionist's desk sits in the room. A banner reads "We Help All Students - WHAS UP Club."

#### DANNY

Hello? Hello? Is anyone here? Does anyone work around here?

(DR. JENSON enters disheveled and is on their cell phone.)

#### DR. IENSON

Listen, Nancy. I get it. You don't want to come to the student awards ceremony. Do you think I wanna go? I had Boyz To Men tickets for tonight that I ended up giving to my husband's sister. I know. I know. But you *did* nominate that student. And he won. And you have to deliver a speech about him. If you don't come, it's not gonna look good.

(DR. JENSON holds their finger in the air towards DANNY.)

Just come. We'll make it fun. And bring your flask so we have something to drink.

(DR. JENSON hangs up the call and acknowledges DANNY.)

DANNY

Tough day?

#### DR. JENSON

Just dealing with a professor who is afraid of speaking in front of a crowd. And she's the Chair of the Communications department. Are you here to work on the renovations? You aren't the same person they've been sending over.

#### DANNY

No. I'm a student. This is my first semester here at Lower Pinnacle Community College. (DR. JENSON looks DANNY up and down.)

#### DR. JENSON

A student? Oh yes, (DR. JENSON starts fixing her hair) of course. You must be one of our nontraditional students. You threw me off with your gray beard and bald head. How may I help you?

**DANNY** 

I need some assistance switching my major. It wouldn't let me do it online.

DR. JENSON

Well, that's what we do here. We help all students. Are you part of the WHAS-UP Club?

DANNY

No. I don't think-

DR JENSON

Oh, I'm sorry. Then we can't help you.

DANNY

You said you help all students.

(DR. JENSON points to the sign.)

DR. JENSON

Did I say that? Unfortunately, we can only help students who are part of the WHAS-UP Club.

DANNY

Where does it say that?

DR. JENSON

It's in the fine print. I told them to print it larger, but nobody listens to me around here.

(DANNY walks over to the sign and reads out loud.)

**DANNY** 

Relationship troubles? Nope. In need of financial assistance. Nope. In need of transportation. Nope. In need of assistance because you are a nontraditional student. It's right here. I'm a nontraditional student

DR. JENSON

And so you are, gray hair and all. Then I guess I can help you.

(DANNY looks confused but starts walking toward the office.)

DR. JENSON

But not right now. I'm waiting for my ten o'clock appointment. Have a seat anywhere and I'll be with you shortly.

(DR. JENSON exits. DANNY looks around and sits at the receptionist's desk and places his backpack behind the desk.

DANNY

This place is a fucking mess.

 $(MOONDUST\ walks\ in.$  She is visibly upset.)

#### **MOONDUST**

I have an appointment at ten and I need to get out of here quickly because I think my no-good ex-boy-friend has an appointment right after me.

**DANNY** 

What do you need help with?

**MOONDUST** 

I am *so* upset. Really upset. I signed up for this class and it's all about the solar system. That's not what I wanted to take. Do I look like I care about Titus?

**DANNY** 

Do you mean Titan?

**MOONDUST** 

What?

DANNY

One of the moons of—never mind. What class is it?

MOONDUST

It's called Astronomy, but I was signing up for *Astrology*. You know, to study signs and stuff. The Metaphysics. Can you switch me?

DANNY

Do they teach Astrology at this college?

**MOONDUST** 

I'm pretty sure they do. I'm not a mind reader. That's why I want to take the class.

(DANNY smiles and starts searching for a piece of paper. He finds scrap paper and a pen.)

DANNY

Alright then. Let me just write this down and get you into that Astrology class.

**MOONDUST** 

Don't you people have computers? It's like the 21st century.

DANNY

Yes, we do. But as you can see, we're remodeling.

(DANNY starts jotting down on a piece of paper.)

Okay. What's your name?

**MOONDUST** 

Moondust.

(DANNY's smile increases.)

DANNY

Alright. Moondust. And what's your last name?

**MOONDUST** 

It's just Moondust. Everyone knows Moondust.

**DANNY** 

Oh. Like Madonna.

**MOONDUST** 

Who?

(DANNY is annoyed by this but continues with the charade.)

DANNY

All set. I'll get your request over to someone in the Mythological Department.

**MOONDUST** 

Is that it? Like, really?

DANNY

Yup. Like...really.

**MOONDUST** 

Wow. I'm glad I put my two favorite crystals in my underwear this morning.

DANNY

What?

(MOONDUST turns around to leave. BRO enters. MOONDUST and BRO stare at each other menacingly.)

**MOONDUST** 

Gross. It's you! I should have worn my other two good luck crystals. You're such a stalker.

**BRO** 

You don't own this college. I can be anywhere I want to be.

**MOONDUST** 

I am shocked you aren't back at your apartment playing video games.

**BRO** 

You're so childish. I told you, I don't play video games. You look nice.

(MOONDUST ignores the compliment and turns her head from him and looks at DANNY)

**BRO** 

Are you signing up for more literature classes?

**MOONDUST** 

Are you doing edibles and having more gay sex with your roommate?

BRO

He's my bro! And it was one time. My congressman calls it experimenting.

**MOONDUST** 

You Republicans are all the same. I'm not a literature student anymore. I'm studying mythology and astrology now.

(MOONDUST looks back towards BRO and then back at DANNY. DANNY nods in agreement.)

I am over this conversation with you, Peter. Goodbye.

**BRO** 

Damn it, Moony. You know I don't go by my name. It's Bro or nothing

**MOONDUST** 

That makes sense. You're nothing.

(MOONDUST exits stage SL. BRO addresses DANNY.)

**BRO** 

Are you one of the advisors?

(DANNY folds his hands on the desk. He is enjoying this new "role.")

DANNY

It would appear that I am. How can I help you?

BRO

I'm good, bro. I knew she had an appointment today so I scheduled one after her so I could see her. I think it went well.

DANNY

You think it went well?

**BRO** 

Yeah, bro. Alright. I gotta get home. My roommate is waiting to play some video games.

(BRO salutes DANNY awkwardly and exits.)

DANNY

This place is insane.

(DR. JENSON walks in.)

DR. JENSON

Has my appointment shown up? She should have been here ten minutes ago.

DANNY

Nope. Just me and a bunch of boxes.

DR. IENSON

Alright. Come on back. And next time, don't sit at the receptionist's desk. A student might think you're an advisor.

DANNY

Oh yeah. We wouldn't want that to happen.

DR. JENSON

What did you say you needed help with?

DANNY

I'd like to figure out how to transfer to a different college. I was thinking...UCCS.

Blackout.

## Midnight at Crow Manor

### Jessica Bussell

Trigger warning: Horror, Death

"Six years ago on Hallow's eve, three children disappeared in the old Crow house. It was rumored they vanished without a trace. Gone with the night, never to return."

"Knock it off Ally," Carter said as he slammed the door in his sister's face. Carter just turned ten and his sister was twelve. She loved everything spooky and scary. Carter, however, couldn't care less about spooky and scary; it unnerved him.

"Ooooh," Ally teased, making loud ghost noises from behind the closed door. "Some say they're still at the old house. Trapped as spirits!"

"I said stop it!" Tonight was Halloween, and he was supposed to go out with his best friend Ben, but Ally had to go with him. The more time he spent around her, the more he didn't want to go out. "Why can't Mom just take me?" He flopped back on his bed.

Ally burst through the door. "Are you a fraidy cat? Mommy's little baby." She brought her hands up, mimicking a crying motion.

"Stop it!" Carter threw a pillow at her.

She caught it and laughed. "Gosh, you're such a wuss." She threw the pillow back at him and walked away. "Mom can't go with you because she has to work late, remember?" Carter threw another pillow after her as she cackled her way down the hall.

"I'm not a wuss!" He slammed his door shut.

Ben met up with Carter and Ally at a little past eight o'clock. He was a year older than Carter, but younger than Ally. He looked down at his tattered jeans and grimaced. Carter would no doubt be upset that he was the only one dressed up again, but Ben couldn't bring himself to buy a costume he'd only wear once.

Ally wore all black and held glow sticks in one hand. Carter was dressed as a famous pirate from a Disney movie. "I'm the only one dressed up!" His cheeks flushed with embarrassment.

"No," Ally laughed. "I dressed up as the night sky."

"That's dumb!" Carter growled.

"Not dumb when you can't find me in the dark." She danced around him. "Boo!" She jumped at him.

"Knock it off." He flung his bag at her.

Ben chuckled beside him. Carter glared, his eyes becoming furious in the dim light. Ben raised his hands slightly, as if to surrender. "Sorry, but it was funny."

"You only think it's funny because you like her!"

Ben's smile faded and he scowled. "Whatever." He shoved past Carter, and the three of them made their way down the street.

Ally leaned against a tree, disinterested. The streetlights flickered in the dark. The rows of white houses with picket fences dulled her imagination. The line of trees on the left side of the street waved at her with the wind. She waited for her brother to return, watching as other kids ran around the less than crowded streets. She'd jump-scared a few of them and disappeared at least a dozen times just to give Carter a fright. "I'm bored." She pushed off the trunk and fell into step with Carter and Ben.

Carter looked into his bag and picked out a candy, offering it to her. She rolled her eyes and snatched it.

"What do you want to do? Scaring kids and not getting any candy is kinda boring," Carter said.

Ally thought for a moment before smiling. "Campfire stories?" She grinned mischievously.

"No!" Carter groaned, recalling last year's story and how Ally had twisted their dad's friendly ghost story into a week-long nightmare of paranoia.

"What are those?" Ben asked, immediately interested.

"They're these stories our dad used to come up with. Best part is we tell them at midnight." Ally's smile widened.

"I don't want to!" Carter pleaded.

"Come on." Ben walked with Ally. "It sounds really fun!"

Carter trudged slowly behind them, grumbling all the way home how it wasn't fair for two to gang up on one.

Thirty-six years ago to this day, three people disappeared at the stroke of midnight, never to be seen or heard from again. Some say unnatural events took place, while others know it was a murder at Crow Manor.

A blood-curdling scream filled the night air. The winds blew through the trees, making a strange and eerie noise.

Natalie, Ian, and Summer all had made their way around the block at least twice, each time passing the Crow Manor. Rumor shrouded this house in mystery, and no one dared enter it; for if you entered the hallowed grounds, there was no turning back.

Summer, the most adventurous of the three, marched up to the gates. "You can't possibly believe those silly old rumors!" She leaned on the gates, which creaked in protest to the new weight. Her older brother wasn't there to stop her this time. The sensation of freedom numbed her senses to the eerie chill that hung about the old manor.

Ian and Natalie stood behind. "Why not?"

"Cuz they aren't true!" Summer called over her shoulder as she pushed the iron gate open and stepped inside. Natalie shuddered as a gust of wind came to greet them. Summer's heart pounded in her chest. Doing something she was not typically allowed to do enthralled her.

"I don't like this, Summer!" Natalie cried.

Summer skipped up the stairs. "You don't like anything!" Summer laughed as she pounded on the old oak doors. There was no response.

"Looks like no one's home," Ian shuddered.

"We should go," Natalie quivered.

"No!" Summer turned around to glower at them. "We can't go!"

"Why not?" Natalie crossed her arms.

"I already told you, someone *does* live here!" She insisted.

"Summer—" Ian began, but he was cut short when the door of the house slowly creaked open.

Summer jumped slightly and looked behind her, only to be greeted by darkness. She turned back to her friends, slightly nervous, but the sense of adventure returned. A smile curved her lips. "Come on guys!" she waved to them.

Ian raised an eyebrow at Natalie, who shook her head. "We're gonna head home!" he called to Summer after another moment.

"Yeah," Natalie anxiously cut in. "My mom is going to be worried if I don't get home soon!"

Summer pouted. "Seriously? Where's your sense of adventure? Where's that spirit? I mean, didn't you say no one lived here?"

Natalie glanced at Ian, worry etched away on her features. "Well," Ian started slowly, "Didn't you say someone *does* live here?"

"I mean, I did see a light a couple of nights ago." She glanced back at the open door. "Maybe it's new neighbors, but what if it's a haunted house?" Her eyes came to life with excitement.

"Summer—"

"Come on guys!" She brought her hands up in a pleading motion. Her eyes became wide and insistent.

Natalie's face scrunched with slight annoyance. She hated when Summer did that. The pleading was torment. No one could resist the sad look in her eyes. "Fine," she sighed, looking down at her feet.

Ian's head whipped right in her direction. Was she serious? She hated all things spooky and scary. For crying out loud, she dressed up as a sugar plum fairy this year! "Are you sure?" Ian pondered. Panic arose in his chest. *Goodbye wonderful sleep*, he thought bitterly as he tentatively followed Natalie.

Natalie ascended the steps slowly; the steps protested her entry. Ian followed close behind, preparing himself to catch her. She would no doubt bolt the second something spooked her. Summer stood at the top of the steps triumphantly, a smile on her lips as she turned her flashlight on and they made their way into the dark house.

"Ouch!" Natalie scowled. "You stepped on my foot!"

Though it was dark, Ian could feel her glare. "Sorry," he mumbled.

"Eeek!" Natalie scrambled back as she caught sight of a rat scurrying in the dark. She bumped into Ian, crashing into the wall with a loud thud. Dust settled around them.

"Quiet you two!" Summer scolded as she flung around to glower at the two of them. "You're such sissies." She shook her head and started forward again. She crept along the banister that was caked in cobwebs.

THUMP!

Summer stopped and turned to Natalie and Ian again. "What did I just say?" She blinded them with the flashlight.

"We didn't do anything!" Ian protested as he tried to stand and help Natalie up.

Summer rolled her eyes at them.

THUMP!

Natalie nearly jumped out of her skin, standing instantly without waiting for Ian. She grabbed his arm once he was on his feet. "What was that?" Her voice was a mere whisper, but full of fright. The moonlight illuminated the entryway behind her, making her features more daunting.

"I'm sure it was nothing?" Ian looked around, his heart pounding in his chest. "Probably just some rats." He glanced over at Summer for reassurance.

"I told you something was happening here." A smile crept along her face.

"Summer—"

THUMP. THUMP. THUMP.

The thumping got louder. Summer's smile seemed to grow deeper with each passing second. "It must be coming from upstairs."

"Summer." Ian winced. Natalie clung to his arm; his fingers started to become numb and cold from lack of circulation. "Natalie," he hissed.

Natalie looked up at him. Her eyes held back a flood of tears. Ian bit his lip. She was not going to sleep tonight. "Ian, I don't like this." Her voice was weak, and in the moonlight that seeped through the cracks in the roof, she looked ghostly. Her complexion was pale, and her body looked frail against the darkness of the room.

"Summer." He turned, but she had already moved on. "Summer!" He grabbed Natalie's hand and raced after her in the darkness.

Summer was standing at the stairs, examining them. Crow Manor had been abandoned for years since the strange disappearance of the Crow family. The house had been left, and no one had been in it for more than twenty years. Dust caked the old wood, and cobwebs decorated every corner of the old home.

Ian tapped her shoulder impatiently. She jumped ever so slightly and turned, giving Ian an eyeful of bright light. "You scared me!" She scowled at him.

"You ran off!" he retorted, snatching the flashlight out of her hands. He blinked a few times. "Stop blinding me with that!" he hissed.

"Sorry," Summer mumbled. "But look here." She grabbed the flashlight again and pointed them at the

stairs.

"Footprints." Natalie breathed. She latched onto Ian's arm again and refused to let go.

"Summer, we need to leave—"

THUMP!

Summer's attention was turned back to the stairs. "We have to know what's up there," she said excitedly.

"Summer-"

It was too late; she was already heading up the stairs, flashlight in one hand and determination and excitement flaring in her eyes. Ian sighed and looked at Natalie. She couldn't be left here by herself. "Come on," he whispered.

Natalie's eyes filled with terror, and she shook her head. "No." Her voice was small and pleading. "I don't want to go."

"Okay... Go wait outside," he whispered back, scared his voice would break her.

Natalie shook her head again. "I'm scared." she trembled.

Ian bit his lip. "It'll be okay." He gave her hand a reassuring squeeze and nodded. She seemed to relax at his words and nodded.

They slowly made their way up the stairs, a few paces behind Summer, who marched on with a newfound sense of exploration.

They made it to the top landing. Silence was all that greeted them in the dark Crow's house. Summer turned slowly, Ian and Natalie close behind her. "Look," she breathed. At the far door at the end of the hall, crimson light trickled from under the closed door.

"What-?"

THUMP... THUMP... THUMP.

The sound resonated in the hall. The house appeared darker, and the air seemed to become cold and still.

Summer stepped forward, but almost immediately stepped back. For the first time since entering the house, fear gripped her heart. Every bone in her body screamed at her to turn and run, but her feet remained planted where they were.

"Summer? Summer, I think we need to go." Ian's voice shook with fear.

Though his words echoed around her, Summer couldn't move. Something was wrong with this house. The walls seemed to watch her every move, and the feeling of something looming over her weighed on her. She felt she needed to leave, but the only direction she could focus on was moving forward. Without another thought, she started forward.

"Summer!" Ian protested. "Summer!" Natalie lurched forward to grab her.

Summer's hand clasped around the doorknob. Time seemed to slow as she pushed the door open. The crimson light illuminated the hall, becoming brighter by the second. The screams that ripped through their throats were drowned out as the thumping became louder with each passing moment.

At twelve o' one the thumping died to a rhythmic thump...thump, echoing into the dark night.

The fire crackled, Ally sitting behind it. Ben and Carter sat opposite her. Ben was leaning forward in awe. Carter seemed to shrink further down in his seat.

"What happened next?" Ben asked.

Ally shrugged as she stood up and stretched her arms out. "No one knows." She smiled and lunged forward, grabbing the arms of Carter's chair. "But once you enter the house of the Crows, you never return." Her smile deepened with a thirst for the fear in her brother's eyes.

Carter shoved her back. "You're so full of it." He stood up and looked around him. They lived close to the old Crow mansion. Sometimes at night, he could see its dark silhouette in the moonlight. "Besides, you're telling the story wrong!"

"Am not!" Ally retorted, sticking her tongue out at him. "I was older when Dad used to tell it, so I remember it better." She moved closer to the fire pit, warming herself in the memory of the Halloween nights she and her father would spend out here.

"No, because it's not supposed to be a ghost story." Carter's eyebrows furrowed. His anger stemmed from the fact that Ally was purposefully messing with the details of the story.

"And?" She crossed her arms, defensive of her mastery of keeping the story relevant. If Ben wasn't here right now, she'd pummel Carter in an instant.

"And you didn't start how Dad starts!" Carter grumbled. Why couldn't Mom be here? She'd tell the story right, as Dad would. "Dad always started with how you were a troublemaker like Summer was."

Ally brought her hand to her chin, thinking for a moment. "Oh, right." A grin crept onto her lips before she leaped forward again, grabbing the armrests of Carter's chair, leaving him with no escape. "Right. I was the adventurous Summer and you were the scaredy cat, Natalie." She straightened, recalling how her father would look longingly into the fire and mumble about how Summer and Ally would have gotten along just fine. As if she were a real person.

"But what happened?" Ben interrupted, after thinking long and hard over the ending. He didn't like stories with no endings.

Ally rolled her eyes at him. "It's just a story, Ben. If you're that curious, why don't we go to the old Crow Manor now?"

She smiled wickedly, glancing over at her brother, who shivered slightly. She suspected, from the suggestion of wandering the old creepy house, that he'd claim he was cold.

"Whatever." Carter rolled his eyes. "I'm going to bed."

"Wimp," she called.

"Freak."

"Loser."

"Weirdo!" He stomped up the deck stairs and slammed the door shut.

Carter tossed his bag onto the counter; it made a decisive thud. Candy spilled from the bag onto the floor. A frame fell off the counter and a splitting crack resounded in the house. Carter bent down and picked up the picture. It was one of the few they had of their father in his youth. There in the center was his dad, around ten or eleven, with three of his friends: a girl with a wide and cunning smile; a boy with a polite smile, as though he were only smiling because of the camera; and another girl, who looked timid and nervous in a bright pink sugar plum costume. Carter stared at the picture for a long while and a sense of unease filled his stomach. The smiling faces seemed faded like ghosts. The unease grew in the pit of his stomach.

He finally set the picture down when a chill ran down his spine. Though he knew he was alone, he felt as though he was being watched. He crept along the wall and made sure the doors and windows were tight shut and locked. Finally, satisfied with the knowledge that he was in fact alone in the house, he made his way up to his room. He looked around, and after a thorough search under the bed, in the closet, and behind the dresser, he flopped back onto his neatly made bed.

Carter leaned back on his pillows and stared at the ceiling. If Dad was here, maybe Ally would be nicer to him. Maybe she'd be relieved to have someone who was on her side, like Mom was for Carter. Carter felt guilty instantly. He understood why Ally kept telling the stories. It wasn't because she liked to scare him, but because the stories made her feel closer to their dad. After the disappearance, she'd been dead on the inside. The absence of their dad left a hole in her, and she'd found comfort in his stories. Maybe the memory of sitting around the fire with him is what kept her going, though tormenting Carter also seemed to keep her on her feet. These thoughts circled in his mind, wandering aimlessly.

As he lay awake, he could hear Ally's mad cackling fade further away as she and Ben made their way up the winding path toward the old manor. He could hear the glee in her giggle as she moved farther into the dark night.

Finally, he rolled onto his side and closed his eyes. The hope of seeing his father again drifted in his mind as sleep welcomed him. The wind howled loudly outside, and the echoes of the past cried out with the wind.

In the distance, the moon glinted off the old rickety roof of Crow Manor. The wood creaked and cried out into the dark sky. The gate groaned as it opened slowly from the breeze. The shadow of the house seemed to expand as clouds seeped over the moon's luminous light, encasing it in darkness. At the stroke of midnight, a brilliant splash of crimson flashed in the upstairs window of Crow Manor.

## And the Night Was Calm

### **Emily Crosson**

Trigger warning: Body Horror

Tree.

Tree.

Rock.

Tree.

Will was humming along to whatever song was stuck in his head, taking each curve far faster than the speed limit the glaring yellow signs recommended. The tall, spindly branches were illuminated for just a second by the too-dim headlights and Tommy shivered. He hated these woods.

Tree.

Tree.

Tree.

"What's the matter, Toms?" Will asked, so suddenly that Tommy jumped. "Woah, sorry. Are you okay?" He looked over, trying to assess his little brother's mental state in brief glances. His glasses glinted with reflections of the stereo lights, shielding his eyes, and making him look eerie and soulless in the dim, cramped car.

Tommy cleared his throat, tearing his own eyes away from the forest speeding past them. "Yeah, no, I'm good. Sorry. Just... just tired, I think." He didn't look out the window. For some reason, the thought of what he might see on either side of them was worse than the mild sickness he was getting from staring straight ahead through the windshield. The car was too small for them. Tommy's knees were practically hitting his chest with every haphazard turn they made.

Will gave him a look and Tommy had to fight the urge to snap at him to keep his eyes on the road. That was exactly the reaction that Will would be concerned about. Tommy *hated* these woods. He grasped at the armrest tightly as they whipped around another bend. These switchbacks were brutal enough in the daytime. At night, they were on another level. Giant rocks seemed to appear out of nowhere and the trees towered into the night sky, blocking out any glimpse of the stars. Tommy reached for a fraction of his brother's calm but found it out of reach. *How* was Will so relaxed?

"You've just been awfully quiet today," Will said, after a minute. He definitely noticed how tense Tommy was.

"Just tired," Tommy repeated harshly, eyes returning to the road despite feeling the pressure of Will's gaze on him every few seconds. 'Focus on getting us home, please.'

Tree.

Tree.

Tree.

Rock.

Oh gosh, was that a face? Tommy whipped around to stare over his shoulder but, no, it was just another stupid tree. A really, *really* tall tree with an almost-but-not-quite-human shape that loomed over their tiny car threateningly. Tommy *hated* these woods.

Will opened his mouth, a hint of a smile playing at the corners of his lips, but it dropped as soon as he saw the look on Tommy's face.

Tree.

Tree.

Rock.

Cabin with all the lights out.

Tree.

Tree.

The car slowed. "What are you doing?" Tommy asked, jerking his attention back to Will in a panic.

"I think I hit something back there. You didn't feel it?"

"No! And you probably didn't either! Get the car moving, please!" Tommy's heart was racing. They couldn't stop here. Not now. It was *too* dark and *too* late, and they were *too* close to being over the pass to stop now.

Will rolled his eyes and unbuckled his seatbelt. "Toms, there was a cabin back there. What if it was someone's dog?"

"Someone's dog wouldn't be out at this time of night. It's *three* in the *morning*. It is *not* worth risking getting murdered because you 'think' you hit something, okay?"

Will reached for the door handle and Tommy hit the lock button frantically. "Will, please." He swallowed, his throat tight, hoping the sincerity in his gaze would be enough. Hoping that his brother would listen for once.

But Will just sighed and unlocked the door manually. "I'll be right back, okay?"

"Never mind, don't even bother. Drop the keys, I'm leaving without you."

Will had the nerve to laugh at that, as if it was a joke. Tommy crossed his arms tightly over his chest and stared straight ahead. He didn't want to look at anything for too long without the safety of movement on his side. The car was quiet enough that Tommy could hear his own heartbeat. He swallowed again.

Looking out the window would be stupid. There was nothing there anyway.

Tommy licked his lips.

He wouldn't even check. It was too dark to see anything. There wouldn't be anything out there.

He had been holding his breath. When did he start holding his breath?

Then his heart dropped as a soft *taptaptap* came from the side of his door. Tommy froze, adrenaline and fear flooding his body. *'It's just Will. He's trying to scare me.'* But his eyes stared straight ahead, not daring to stray from the road in front of him, barely illuminated in the flickering

headlights. He had begged Will to replace them last week, but his brother had brushed off his concerns.

Taptaptap.

Taptaptap.

Taptap.

"R-real messed up of you to do this to me now. You know... how much I hate the woods." His voice was tremulous, and Tommy still didn't look to that side, gripping the armrest as if it could save him. The comforting, cramped familiarity of the little car pressed down on him, making it hard to breathe. Claustrophobia clutched at his throat. It was too late and too dark. He just wanted to go *home*.

Taptaptap.

Тар.

Taptap.

All Tommy had to do was turn. He'd see his brother's stupid face grinning at him and laughing about how easily spooked Tommy always was. Tommy would threaten to stab him, and Will would roll his eyes like he did at his empty threats, and they'd keep driving. They'd go home and go to bed and in the morning, all of this would look silly.

Still, Tommy could not make himself look. Something deep inside him was forcing his eyes forward. His skin prickled, as if every single hair on his body was standing up at once. An icy finger of dread slid down his spine and his ears rang. His breathing turned shallow and quick, pulse racing.

Taptaptap.

Taptaptap.

Тар.

The door opened and Tommy screamed. Fumbling with his seat belt, he tried to launch himself out of the car, but hands grabbed at him, pulling, *pulling*, *pulling*, and—

And it was Will, and he was safe, it was okay. Will tugged him close and held him tightly, murmuring apologies and soothing his frayed nerves.

When Tommy could breathe again, Will laughed gently. "Gosh, Toms, I know I'm not the prettiest face around, but that reaction was extreme."

Tommy pulled away and hit his chest. And then hit it again, hands shaking so badly he could barely form a fist. "Whatever, man. That was... that was messed up, okay? Don't do that again."

"What, get back in the car?" Will teased. "I thought that's all you wanted."

"No, the tapping thing. Not cool, Will. Really not cool."

Will tipped his head, buckling his seatbelt and turning on the car. "Toms, I don't know what you mean. I was back there looking for whatever I hit. I think it's probably nothing, by the way. You were right."

But Tommy had stopped listening. Slowly... *slowly*... he turned to look out the window.

Bright blue eyes met his own and a smile with too-sharp teeth glinted brightly in the moonless night.

And suddenly, the world was *wrong*. The car was moving but it was going backward, and Will's smile was upside down. The trees reached for them, and their claws tangled his hair, each strand falling out as if his skin couldn't hold them in anymore. Tommy looked down at himself dizzily and his hands were inside out.

"What's happening?" he mumbled, tongue feeling like it had been flipped the other way around.

The smile widened. The thing stared at him with darkness bleeding from its soul. It thrummed through him like a sick heartbeat, pumping foul wrongness into Tommy's failing body. Each second in its presence sucked the wind from his breath and squeezed his lungs with clawed fingers until he couldn't move, couldn't breathe, couldn't see. Will was still speaking, unwords falling from his mouth and melting away into the ground behind them.

The thing paused, and, for one last second, the night was calm.

Then, it spoke, and blood dripped from his ears.

"It is so nice to finally meet you, Tommy."

### First Date

#### Rachel Davidson

My brother was right.

I feel so dumb standing here with the ten dollar bouquet of flowers I left fifteen minutes early to go buy. Not to mention I used those fifteen minutes loitering in front of the flower stand wondering if she'd like more red or more blue, or if it was worth it to spend an extra couple dollars on one with baby's breath versus one without baby's breath, or if she even liked baby's breath, and what the fuck is baby's breath, anyway? Why are there so many options? And how did the guy at the flower stand look me over once and immediately figure out I'd never done anything like that before in my life?

So fucking dumb.

I should go. I should just leave, turn back now before I go in there and make even more of a fool of myself, and she realizes she never actually liked me, she never actually wanted me to—

Elsie opens the door.

It's a quiet sort of shock that goes through me whenever I see her. A soft pulse running through my body, like tiny moths flittering from where my fingertips meet the bouquet up to my chest and settling as a buzz in my stomach. It's not butterflies. It's lighter than that.

Now is no different. Her curls are half pulled up into a bun away from her face, and her smile greets me the way it always does, quirked up on the right side, dimples showing. She's wearing baggy jeans and a way-too-big Creedence Clearwater Revival tee she must have cropped herself. I'm grateful, for once, that I don't feel underdressed.

I'm grateful for about two seconds. Because two seconds after the door opens, there's a giant mass of gray and black fur barking and slobbering at Elsie's side, trying desperately to squeeze its way through the gap between her and the doorframe. I take an instinctive step back at the same time Elsie grabs the collar and holds the dog back from lunging at my throat.

"Ah ah, hey," she snaps, straining to keep the dog back. "Be nice to him. Be nice. *Gentle*." She looks up apologetically. "He's a sweetheart, I promise."

"I—" I blink. "That is the biggest dog I've ever seen."

"Yeah, he's—" She lets out a grunt as he tries to lunge forward again, but she manages to tug him back a little farther, away from the door. "He's a big boy." She bends down to grab his snout in one hand. "Toto. Look at me. *Look* at me."

He looks at her.

"You gotta be nice to our guest, okay?" Elsie tilts the dog's chin down to make him look her in the eye. "He's special to me. And you gotta be gentle with him. All right?" She moves his head up and down in agreement. "All right. Good." And she lets him go.

He heads right for me, but this time he's more tentative about it, sniffing at my feet and the cuffs of my jeans, probably smelling my dog. When he lifts his head, it comes almost to my stomach. His eyes

are huge looking up at me, and they soften when I reach out to scratch behind his ear.

"Good boy," Elsie tells him. Her smile is wider this time when she looks at me. "Hi. Sorry about him."

His tongue is hanging out now, and he's all but leaning into my palm as I scratch his neck.

"It's fine, really," I say, "I like dogs."

"Totoro's a bit bigger than Finley."

I laugh, letting Totoro lean up against me, snout gently nudging my leg. "Maybe a tiny bit."

Elsie's eyes glint a little as they jump between me and her dog. And when they land on me and they stay there, she says, "Flowers?"

Just for a second, I freeze. I completely forgot about them. I was so distracted by Elsie looking soft and comfortable in her oversized t-shirt and lack of makeup, and by her horse of a dog, that I forgot I was holding flowers.

"Oh yeah, um—" I let out another laugh, breathier this time, more nervous. "Yeah, I— I got them for you, and I now realize how stupid that is, because we're just watching a movie, and this is just a first date so I probably shouldn't have—" I press my lips together. "You know what, I'm just gonna go throw them—"

"Hey, hey." Before I've managed to take a step away, she's grabbing my arm and tugging me through the doorway, much to Totoro's delight. "You bought me flowers?"

I swallow. "Maybe."

Her eyes are soft as she studies the bouquet, as she takes it gently from my hand. I decided to go mostly blue, purple, and white—with the baby's breath—and I guess I didn't completely fuck up because she seems a tiny bit mesmerized. "You bought me flowers," she says again. She tucks her nose into the bouquet, sniffing. And I don't think time slows down, but it might because suddenly, I can see every fluttering of her eyelids, can see her long, dark eyelashes coming together for a few short moments as she closes her eyes. And then she's looking at me through those long, dark eyelashes, and for a second I forget how to breathe. And then she's opening her mouth, grinning now, and she's saying, "You bought me flowers, you fucking nerd."

It startles a laugh out of me. "Yeah," I say simply. "I did."

"I love them."

I let out a breath of relief. "You do?"

She's smiling still, smelling them still, as she makes her way into the kitchen, Totoro following curiously on her tail. "They're perfect," she says, opening a cabinet and reaching up to the highest shelf to grab a vase.

"Really? Because I didn't know your favorite, and I thought it'd be weird to ask, so I just sort of... guessed."

She sticks the vase under the sink, lets it fill up about a fourth of the way. "No, no, you did good." She sets the vase on the counter, unwraps the bouquet to stick the flowers inside. "You did good." Cupping

her hand underneath what I think is a hyacinth, she allows herself one more whiff before leaving them be, leaning against the counter to face me. She's biting her lip against a smile, studying me.

"What?" I ask timidly.

She folds her arms, shaking her head the tiniest bit as she ducks her chin. And then, after a second: "No one's ever bought me flowers before."

"No one?" I'm talking before I realize what I'm saying, telling her, "But you're so—" before cutting myself off one second short of embarrassment.

Her eyebrows shoot up. "I'm so what?"

Shit. "Nothing," I say quickly, as if that'll do anything except cause more suspicion.

The right corner of her mouth quirks up once again. "Were you going to say I'm hot, Simón? You can call me hot. We're on a date right now, you're allowed to call me hot."

Heat rises to my cheeks at the thought; my eyes fall to the floor. "I... I was going to say you're lovely. Actually."

When I dare lift my gaze, her face has shifted, her eyes wide in a way that makes me think maybe no one's ever called her lovely before, either. Her smile turns into a private one, flashing only briefly at me before she turns away and starts walking, prompting a now calmer Totoro to push ahead of her. "Wanna see my room?" she calls over her shoulder.

"I—" I hesitate just for a moment. And then I'm saying, "Um. Yeah. Sure," and following her down the short hall. I pass an empty room with a bed big enough for two, stopping at the door of the other bedroom sitting at the end of the hallway. "Are your dads here?"

"No," she says, leaning against her bed. "They're out for the night. Is that okay?"

"No, yeah, that's... fine... Um..." I trail off, putting the fact that I'm alone in Elsie's apartment with her, alone in her bedroom with her, aside to focus on the bedroom itself.

It's a decent size, a bit bigger than my room at home. The walls are beige, but they seem brighter somehow, more colorful from everything adorning them. The way she's decorated, it's like the room is exploding with *things*, but not in the way mine is, not in the way that makes it seem haphazard, overstuffed. All her posters and shelves and trinkets are meticulously placed so that the room feels deliberate and homey.

The wall her bed is pressed up against is covered in a collage of things—posters ranging from Star Wars to *Fullmetal Alchemist* to Harry Styles, postcards from a small selection of U.S. states, Polaroids, fanart of characters from animes. The wall across from it is a checkerboard of vinyls, each record with its own shelf and display, all of them connected by string lights. A teal record player sits at the base of the wall, open and empty and waiting. Fake leaves are strung up around the perimeter of the ceiling. The clutter on the desk in the corner is my kind of clutter—scattered with school papers and at least a dozen figurines I recognize as Studio Ghibli. Her bookshelf is littered with more figurines and mugs and some stuffed animals that I guess didn't make the cut to live on her half-made bed.

It's a lot of wonderful, to be honest. But my eyes get hung up on two posters in particular: one

from *Avatar*: *The Last Airbender* and the other the spitting image of the *Voltron* poster hanging in my own bedroom. My two favorite TV shows.

I imagine my eyes must be wide when they fall on Elsie again. And there's a hint of the awe I'm feeling in my voice when I breathe, "You're a nerd."

She lets out a laugh. "You sound surprised."

"No, I'm just... I don't know." Let's just say I expected the wall of vinyls. I expected the record player. I didn't quite expect *Voltron*. "I guess I am, a little."

She pushes herself away from her bed. "I named my great dane Totoro. I have *Demon Slayer* pins on my backpack. In seventh grade, I dressed up as Sailor Moon for Halloween."

"And you like Voltron."

"I've watched it twice, so." She shrugs. "Maybe a little."

"Three times. Who's your favorite?"

"Keith. Obviously."

"Obviously. But Allura—"

"—can get it," she finishes. "Absofuckinglutely."

I can't help but grin. I couldn't fight it even if I tried, it's taking up my whole face. There's this pressure in my chest—the good kind of pressure, not the anxiety pressure. Like something's building up to an explosion. Because no one's ever liked the things I like before. I've never had anyone to talk to about this stuff. As much as my brother always tried to listen and pay attention when we were growing up, he didn't get it. He didn't like things like I did. He liked music. I liked superheroes and firebenders and intergalactic robot lions.

It's just nice to have somebody who gets it.

"You like Ghibli?" Elsie asks.

"I've never seen any of them."

Her eyes light up like I've just opened a floodgate of ideas for her. Most of which probably include making me watch every Ghibli movie that has ever been created. "I grew up on Ghibli," she tells me, wandering over to her desk. She picks up one of the figurines with two fingers, holds it up to show me. "My Neighbor Totoro is my favorite, always will be. But they all have their charm."

Totoro the dog has been at her side this whole time, and now he lifts his head to sniff at the figurine in her hand.

"Yeah, that's you, baby." She boops the Totoro figurine to his nose, and his eyes grow huge. She does it again, and he tries to bite little Totoro. The resemblance between the gray, smiling creature and the great dane is kind of uncanny, if I'm being honest.

"Is that what we're watching tonight?"

She looks over. "Hm?"

"Ghibli?"

She leans her cheek against her dog's face, scratching the side of his neck. "You tell me."

My brow furrows, just a little. "But... it's your apartment."

"And it's our date. So. What do you wanna watch?"

"Honestly, I'm good with whatever."

"Great." She boops Totoro's nose one more time before putting plastic Totoro back on her desk. "*Ponyo* it is." As soon as she stands, Totoro's bounding out of her room and back into the living room. "You like popcorn?" she asks as she brushes by me through the doorway.

I turn to follow. "Who doesn't like popcorn?"

She nods. "Good answer."

Back in the kitchen, she takes out a big bowl and fills it with popcorn kernels and covers it. While it's in the microwave, she fiddles with the remote and brings up the movie. The popcorn comes out of the microwave steaming before being doused in a hearty amount of butter and salt, and then she's sitting down on the couch, telling me to sit down too, and wedging the popcorn bowl between us. Totoro settles down at the foot of the couch, curled up and fast asleep within a few minutes.

It doesn't feel like a first date. And I say that in the best way possible. It feels too natural to be a first date. Too comfortable. And I guess you could make the argument that homecoming was our first date, but she never said it was, and she was drunk half the time, so. This is our first date. And so far, it's been wonderful.

It keeps being wonderful, keeps being easy to sit there with her, easy to watch Ponyo the goldfish on her mission to become a little girl, easy to let our fingers brush each other as we find the bottom of the bowl.

Her eyes meet mine as she pulls her hand back. "You want me to make more?"

I shake my head, half focused on her, half focused on the movie. "I'm okay."

"Okay." With that, she sets the bowl on the coffee table, and suddenly, there's nothing between us on the couch, and she feels closer somehow, even though she hasn't moved.

The movie is reaching its climax. Sosuke has reunited with his mom, and Ponyo's fate is up in the air. If Sosuke loves her, she can be human and stay with him, but she'll lose her powers. It's a good movie. It's a really good movie. And I'm so invested that I don't realize for an embarrassingly long amount of time that Elsie is watching me rather than the screen.

"Hi," I say softly.

She doesn't respond for a second. Her lips part, her brow furrows, and she's studying me in that way she does. Scrutinizing me like she's trying to extract some unspoken knowledge from my features. And then: "Did we... kiss? Last weekend?"

My stomach does a little flip at her question. I try not to let the panic show on my face. "Um..." I wet my lips. "No, you... You were drunk. I stopped you."

"You stopped me." Her voice is faint, half there, like it's coming from far away.

My own voice is tiny. "I'm sorry."

"Why are you sorry?"

"I..." I'm having a hard time looking away. Her eyes haven't left my face, and the longer they're on me, the more my stomach churns.

"Thank you," she says. "Thank you for that. Thank you for the flowers. Just... thank you."

I'm frozen. I can't move, can't get out so much as a, "You're welcome." Because she's looking at my lips now, and she's close enough that I can see each freckle dotting her nose, each eyelash, each flyaway framing her face.

Time distorts around her. Drags out. Her eyes drift back up to mine in what feels like more than a few seconds, and they're warm and big and brown, and I want to fall into them. "I'm sober now," she tells me in barely more than a whisper.

I suck in a breath, not daring to move a muscle.

"Can I...?"

I nod. It's a small nod, a slight gesture, but it's enough. Her fingertips are feather-light when they brush my jaw, and I have no idea what I'm doing, but I know to close my eyes and I know to tilt my head and I know to let her kiss me. And I thought I might implode when she did, but I think I would implode if she didn't.

Her lips are soft. So soft. It's a quiet kiss, a timid one, like she's testing the waters. And she's moving slowly, so slowly, and I'm feeling her against me in a way I've never felt anyone before, sharing a breath with a girl who's too good to be true. But she's here in front of me, and she's cupping my jaw, and everything feels a little fuzzy. The world funneling into just this moment, just me and her, just her lips on mine.

There's a quiet noise in the back of her throat when she pulls away, like a low, short hum. Her eyes are still closed, so for a split second, I'm able to sit there and watch her. Watch the faint outline of a smile on her lips, flushed now, and her eyelids fluttering open to meet my gaze.

Neither of us say anything. Still angled toward each other, we both turn to look at the screen, at the movie forgotten for a few short minutes. Sosuke, holding Ponyo in her bubble and waving to his father, looks up in surprise when she jumps out of his hand. In the air, Ponyo meets Sosuke in a kiss, popping the bubble and smiling at him. The frame zooms out, and the screen closes in on the two of them, nose to nose, before fading entirely to black. The end.

We turn our heads back to each other, nose to nose. And she's smiling at me, and before I can return it, I'm feeling that grin against my mouth, her lips back on mine, harder this time. One hand falls on the side of my neck, the other on my shoulder, holding me, steadying me. And I'm kissing back. I didn't know I knew how to kiss back, but I'm kissing back, tasting her, tasting the popcorn we finished and a hint of peppermint chapstick.

Her breath is hot against my lips when she draws back this time. But she doesn't break away, not really. Her mouth stays hovering over mine, close enough I can feel it when she asks, "Did you like the movie?"

All I can do is nod. My throat is tight, there's that pressure in my chest. I'm reeling from the taste

of her lips, reeling from the fact that she kissed me at all.

She nods back, her nose brushing mine in the process. And the hand that's on my shoulder slides down my chest with a purpose, her palm resting on my sternum, fingers splayed out against me. "I'm gonna—" Her hand gives a gentle nudge against my chest, timid again, testing the waters.

My voice is hoarse when I finally manage to get out an, "Okay."

She pushes against me again, and I let her, let her guide me backwards until I'm on my back, my head resting against the arm of the couch. She's not quite straddling me, leaning over me with her knee tucked between my leg and the back of the couch. And she kisses me again, and this time I lift my head up to meet her, wrap an arm around her, let my hand rest on her back. Everything in me is warm, electric, the moths' flittering welcome.

She kisses like she's searching for something in me. And she smiles afterward like she's found it. She's sitting up now, looking down at me. I don't think I could get up even if I wanted to, but then again, why would I want to? I could stare at her smile for hours. For a second, it feels like maybe she'll let me. She's quiet, we both are, the credits of *Ponyo* rolling in the background. And then she cups my face, and delicate, feathery, her thumb traces gently over my cheekbone. I'm in a daze, but I feel her touch as clearly as I felt her kiss. And I hear her loud and clear when she murmurs, "You're awfully pretty, Simón Álvarez."

I let out a breath. If she can feel the shiver that runs through me at her words, she doesn't say anything. No one's ever called me pretty before. No one's ever really called me anything before.

Her smile widens a little when I lean ever so slightly into her palm. Her thumb moves over my face, dropping from my cheek to brush over my cupid's bow and rest on my bottom lip. She parts my lips, eyes skating over my face. Looking at me. I didn't know how good it could feel, to be looked at like this. "What are you thinking?" she asks softly.

I'm... not. For once, there's not much up there. There's no voice stressing me out for no reason, there's no "what if"s, there's no buzzing, no panic. It's just quiet. It's just the stillness of this moment, the deep, dark brown of her eyes pooling into mine. A moment I want to capture, keep in a little box and set on my desk with everything else that means anything to me so I can always come back to it.

"I think I want you to kiss me again," I tell her.

It was the right thing to say because I get to see her grin again, get to feel her mouth on mine again in a way that feels familiar now. I've got both hands on her back now, holding her closer, wanting to feel her as much as I'm tasting her.

I let out the tiniest whimper when her mouth leaves mine, trying to follow her, but she doesn't go very far, just moves her lips to my cheek to murmur, "So pretty." And against my jaw: "So pretty."

I'm shivering again, a rush of cold heat running through my body. And then I'm cupping the back of her neck and guiding her back to my lips because it's not a want anymore, it's a need, I *need* her. I can't even imagine how I went so long without knowing what this felt like, without knowing what her kiss felt like. I don't think I can ever go back now.

She's lovely. She's more than lovely, she's everything I thought she was, and then some. She's all kinds of wonderful—a colorful, deliberate collection of things. Things I love and things I have yet to explore, things that I would give the world to be able to explore, if she'll let me. I want to know her. Know her past the posters on her wall, past the feeling of her lips on mine, I want to *know* her.

I'm as breathless as she is when we break apart from each other, when she rests her forehead against mine, and I realize she's straddling me now—she's on top of me, pressed against me. My fingers curl into the shirt at her back just to feel more of her, just to feel a little bit closer. And through her panting, she breathes out, "Orchids."

I blink. My brow furrows as I try to process the word and what it means. After a second: "What?" Her hand slips into my hair. "My favorite flower." She leans back to look at me. "No one's ever asked."

"Oh."

She grins, dimples and all, and she falls back into me. And we're kissing again, and her couch could be the whole world for all I care, and I'm as alive as I'll ever be, one step closer to knowing her.

# Relapse

#### Rachel Davidson

Trigger warning: Mentions of Suicide, Mentions of Child Abuse, Panic Attacks

It's a little surreal showing back up at school after disappearing off the face of the earth for two weeks. And it's more than a little awkward, seeing as my teachers know I was out sick, but not that kind of sick, not the kind they're thinking of. I have it on good authority that most of them don't have a single clue as to how to handle kids who relapse into depression.

My mom insisted on driving me. Dropping me off so that she could see me off as far as she could. I get that she worries, I get that she doesn't want to leave my side, I get that. If I'm being honest, I don't want to be here. I'd take my warm bed over this any day, this sensory overload, even if it meant having to hear Mom crying from the other room.

Well. Maybe not.

It's overdue. That's the bottom line. And I'm here. I got out of bed, I got dressed, I'm here. That's all that matters.

Mom pulls up to the curb, puts the car in park, turns her body toward me. "Call me if you need anything, okay?"

"Okay."

"I'm only a call and a ten-minute drive away."

"I know."

"I'm serious. You need anything, don't hesitate to ask. I told my boss I might have to leave if—"
"Mom."

I don't have to look up to know that her face has fallen.

"I know, baby," she says softly. "I know." She reaches over, grabs my arm, and I let her turn me toward her. Let her lift my chin to make me look at her. "If it's too much for you, you call me. Okay?" It's firmer now. Less of an offer. More of a demand.

So I nod. "Okay."

She nods back. "Good." She lets go of my chin, instead resting her hand over mine. Her head falls back against the seat; she lets out a sigh as her eyes close. "Fuck, I hate this," she mutters.

"Yeah," I say, "that makes two of us." And with that, I open the door.

I can't get out, though. She's still holding my hand.

I turn back, and she's looking at me, and her eyes are big and watery and vulnerable, and I just know she's not here anymore. She's twelve years in the past. It's my first day of kindergarten, and she's crouching down to hug me, and she just won't let go. She won't let go, and I don't want her to let go, but we both know she has to.

So I give her my best attempt at a smile and squeeze her hand. And then I'm climbing out of the car, shutting the door, standing on the curb as she finally drives off.

I tighten the straps on my backpack. This is normal. This is returning to ordinary life. It really shouldn't be so hard. I really shouldn't feel so... empty.

Walk. Just walk, and everything will be fine. Take one step, and then another. Sit through one class, and then another. Get through one day.

I've only taken a few steps when a car horn that sounds all too familiar stops me in my tracks.

I turn. My dad has parked on the curb across the street, leaning inside the car from his spot on the sidewalk. He lays off the horn and straightens, offering me a small wave.

And I don't know what it is about that that strikes me straight through to my core, digs at the root of my anger. All I know is that he's here, of course he's here, and I'm *pissed*. Pissed that no matter how hard I try, I can't get away from him. Pissed that I feel like this. Pissed that after all this time, I can't *stop* feeling like this.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" I wish I could say it comes out as a snap. It doesn't. It's weak, and it's choked, and it just makes me more pissed. "Were you just waiting for me to show up? Is this, like, a fucking stakeout or something?"

He folds his arms, leans against the side of his car. "I wanted to see you," he calls over.

"Bullshit." God, I can't deal with this. I can't deal with him right now. My hands are already starting to shake.

"If it's too much for you, call me." It hasn't even been two minutes.

"Okay. Fine." He reaches into his pocket, pulls out a wrinkled piece of paper. "I wanted to talk about this."

"What, the restraining order?" Yeah. That. The thing that was supposed to prevent things like this from happening.

"Yeah, the goddamn restraining order." He spreads his arms. "What the hell is that about?" "Take a wild guess."

I should leave. Just walk away. I could. It would be easy, just turn around and not look back. But for some reason, I can't. I'm glued to the spot.

He waves the paper in the air. "You can't do this."

I shove my hands into the pocket of my hoodie. "We can, actually. We did."

"Dammit!" He slams his hand on the roof of his car, and I hate to say that it makes me flinch. Even from all the way over here.

I press my lips together against the tears, against that stupid sinking, drowning feeling I get whenever I'm around him. "I'm gonna go."

I finally turn to leave, finally get my feet moving, but I'm stopped again not a second later.

"You're not going anywhere. You're gonna talk to your mother, and you're gonna fix this."

I turn back. I've drawn a few curious glances from other kids milling around and parents coming and going, but that's the least of my concern. "Why don't you talk to her yourself?"

He laughs bitterly. "You saw what happened the last time. She'd punch me."

"Yeah. She would. And you'd fucking deserve it."

"Really? I'd deserve it for trying to reconcile with the only family I—"

"Oh, don't even talk to me about fucking *family*." I shake my head at the sky. "We both know the only reason you're here is because you're broke."

"You don't-"

"Here." I dig in my pocket for my wallet. "You want money? I have money." I take all my cash out, hurling it at the sidewalk in front of me. My vision is blurring. My hands are shaking—bad. "If that's what it takes for you to leave me be, then fine. Take it. Take it all." I stand back, hands up, trying not to let my shoulders shake, trying not to show him how weak I really am. And when that doesn't work, I start to walk away again to cover it up.

"Jesus, that's not why I'm here."

I keep walking.

"I want to be in her life again."

I keep walking.

"I know she wants me. I know she misses me. If it weren't for you and this stupid grudge you're clinging onto—"

I turn. "Grudge?"

"Yeah, *grudge*. If you weren't too much of a goddamn pussy to let it go, then maybe she would actually—"

"That's your plan? To march back in here and act like nothing happened? Just because you're broke *and* lonely?"

He rolls his eyes. Folds his arms. "There you go again with the accusations, Jesus. Your soul's really so black you can't even find an *ounce* of forgiveness for me?"

"Forgiveness?" My hands clench into fists at my sides. "What the fuck is that? Forgiveness? You really think I'm gonna forgive you for what you did to me?" I can't see at this point; I don't care. All I care about is telling him off. Speaking my mind, letting it all out, screaming at him like I wanted to do all those times in the past.

So I do. I scream.

"You broke me! You fucking broke me down to nothing!"

"For fuck's sake, Elijah, can you just—"

"No, you don't even *know* what it's been like!" I shake my head. Keep shaking my head. "It took *four years* to put myself back together! Four fucking years, and now you're here, and now it's all falling apart, and— And— *God*, you don't even *care!* You don't care that you're the reason I'm like this! *You're the reason I tried to fucking kill myself, and you don't even*—"

I can't. Can't get the sentence out, can't get anything out, can't breathe.

I can't breathe.

Fuck.

I'm losing it. I'm breaking down. Just like I promised myself I wouldn't do, not in front of him, not in front of all these *people*—

I don't know if he's still there. But there's someone here, someone closer, someone really close, and I don't think it's him. There's a hand on my shoulder, a voice coming in clear through everything else, through my own rattling thoughts: "Give him some space, hey, give him some room."

Space, yes, space, I need space. But there's still no space, still no room, there's still that hand on my shoulder, that someone standing in front of me, I think it's a teacher.

"Let's go to the nurse, okay? Let's call your mom."

No, please don't, she'll only worry.

"Come on."

God, fuck, I can't breathe—

There's another hand. A familiar hand, a soft hand clasped firmly in mine. I look down at it, follow the arm up to the concerned face.

"Let's go," Cassidy says.

I can only nod.

"I've got it. No, that's okay, thank you. I'll take him home. Yeah, I'm sure."

And we're walking. Away from the people, away from the curb, away from my dad. It's quieter the farther we go. I don't feel so hot. Clammy. Trapped.

The parking lot is a blur of black and gray and red and blue and silver as we make our way across it. All the while, she doesn't let go of my hand. Not until we reach her white Mini Cooper, and she opens the door for me and helps me in the passenger side. She pulls some lever underneath the seat, and it reclines back as far as it allows, leaving me leaning back as she closes the door and goes around to the driver's side. As soon as her door's shut, her hand is back in mine, and it's steady, and it's comforting, and it's calming me down. Just being in here is calming me down. Being away from everything else.

I focus on the little giraffe sitting on her dashboard and let my breathing even out. Let my heart slow down. Let my body relax. I take off my glasses and wipe my eyes, wipe my cheeks.

Eventually, I look over at her. Her legs are tucked up underneath her, and her other hand is fumbling with the air conditioning.

"You're good at this," I tell her, voice a bit hoarse from shouting.

She glances over. "Yeah, well." She shrugs. "I have a lot of experience."

I nod. My head falls back against the seat, and my eyes drift closed before I can stop them. "Where's Jack?" I ask.

"Oh, he had to come in early to make up a test."

I nod again. That's probably the only reason he didn't drive her today.

Except-

I open my eyes. "Wait, shit, what time is it?"

"Ten to eight."

I try to sit up. "No, no, you gotta go to class."

"Really, it's fine, it's not a big deal."

"Cassidy—"

"Lijah." Her voice is soft. Gentle. Her eyes are even softer. She gestures for me to lean back again, so I do. She reaches over to turn on the radio, and the car is filled with the low hum of music.

She's skipping class for me. Something she never does. Just because I couldn't handle myself.

Great.

"So, um..." She shifts in her seat. "That was your dad back there?"

"Yup," I say, popping the *p*.

"What was he doing here?"

"Hell if I know." I look out the window as if I might be able to see him. As if he might suddenly appear again. "Sometimes it seems like his only goal is to torment me."

She's quiet. I'm quiet.

And then, softly: "Did you really try to kill yourself?"

I squeeze my eyes shut. I don't want to see her. I don't want to see her looking at me the way I knew people would if I told them. Like I'm some helpless little thing. Even though I am. "I really don't wanna..."

"No," she's quick to say, "no, of course not. I won't make you talk about it." She swallows, her thumb rubbing gently over my knuckles. "I just..."

I look up at her. She's biting her lip, her eyes big and brown and not as full of pity as I expected.

Her thumb goes back and forth. Back and forth. "I need you to know that I love you."

My face softens; my gaze drops. "I know."

"Mason loves you."

"I know."

"We all do."

I glance back up. "I know."

She nods, the creases in her forehead smoothing out. "Good." She gives my hand a quick squeeze before finally letting go and turning to face the windshield. "I should probably take you home."

"No," I say, "don't. I don't want my mom hearing about this." I reach underneath the seat to return it to its regular position. "I need to make it through today."

"Right," she says. "Sure. But you know what would be more fun?"

I eye her carefully, one hand on my backpack. "What?"

She smiles. Just a little. "We could go get boba."

My eyes widen. "Boba? During school?" I click my tongue, shake my head. "My God, Jack's corrupted you."

She laughs, shoving against my shoulder. "He didn't *corrupt* me."

"I beg to differ. The boba begs to differ."

"Shut up." With an eye roll, she untucks her legs, puts her feet back on the floor, buckles her seatbelt. "So what I'm hearing is you don't wanna get boba?"

"Of course I wanna get boba," I say, buckling my own seatbelt. "I always wanna get boba." She grins over at me. Puts the car in drive. Pulls out of the parking lot. And I've gotta say. It's nice to be back.

### The Rose of Death

### Riley Gentsch

Trigger warning: Violence, Death

Blood sprayed across the room as the head tumbled off her target's neck. The assassin stepped forward, cleaned her sword with the man's clothes, and then placed a white rose in his outstretched hand. She looked around the room and found the black rose she had sent earlier that week sitting on the dresser. Placing it in the body's other hand, she grabbed the head and put it in her sack. The assassin jumped out the open window and returned to the keep.

\*\*\*

Rune's long strides ate up the distance between him and the king's council room. The summons came when he was entertaining some court ladies in the garden. He thanked the maid who brought the letter with a gentle kiss to her hand, which made her face a rosy pink. *Gods, he loved making the ladies flush bright red.* 

When he arrived at the chamber, the guards outside opened the doors and announced his arrival. The others in the room watched as he approached the king's table and sat to the king's right. Some glared at his arrogance, but a predatory smile had them looking away. His best friend and cousin, the king, shot a sorrowful glance at him before starting the meeting.

"As we can all see, Lord Dryas is no longer here. He was assassinated last night," King Odon announced.

Shouts demanding answers shot across the table. Some lords stood so abruptly that their chairs were tumbling to the floor. Rune watched from his seat as the chaos grew. He knew that all his questions were already being asked, so why add to the crowd when he could observe anything strange in the nobles?

"Who did this?"

"How was that even possible? Lord Dryas-"

"What does this mean for us?"

"He was the most protected. What's stopping the assassin from just killing us all right now?"

More questions filled the air, the volume of the panic rising so loud it would not surprise Rune if the guards from outside came rushing in. He looked over the crowd and made eye contact with the king, who nodded at Rune to get a hold of the council.

"Silence!" He shouted, slowly standing up and placing his hands on the table. He bowed his head and turned to his cousin. "King Odon, apologies for my fellow councilors' lack of decorum. Please allow us to hear the full report of Lord Dryas' assassination."

"Thank you, Duke Rune. Lord Dryas was found in his bed chambers this morning with two flowers in his grasp, a white and a black rose. The white rose was fresh, but the black rose was slightly wilted, as though it had been cut several days ago. It was hard to identify him, as only a body with no

head lay in his bed, but his wife confirmed the remains were his."

Several of the councilors paled, and Baron Sonil started screaming. "I have a rose. I woke up several days ago with a black rose on my dresser. I am going to die! Die? No, no, no!" Rune watched as the man started pacing back and forth, murmuring how death was near. Another noble put a hand on the baron's shoulder and tried to get the man to sit and breathe. A moment later, not stopping, Baron Sonil ran and threw himself against the glass window. He was a heavier-set man, so the glass exploded on impact, and the baron, still murmuring to himself, fell to the ground several floors below.

Screams from the nobles and people in the garden reached Rune's ears long before he could process what in the Hells just happened. Several nobles raced to the shattered window and peered below while some stared at where the baron had been standing moments before.

"Guards! Go collect Sonil's body. Councilors, this meeting is adjourned. Everyone is dismissed. Rune, stay behind, please," King Odon shouted over the nobles.

The councilors quickly filed out of the room, their boots thudding against the stone floor, shaking Rune out of his trance. Once they had left, Odon let his head fall into his hands and sighed. He looked up at his cousin and looked utterly defeated. "What do we do, Rune? Whoever the assassin is, they managed to kill the most guarded of us. Baron Sonil just jumped out the gods' damned window. If the public learns how vulnerable we are, they will panic. Our enemies will try to take advantage. Who knows who the next target is?"

Rune glanced at his cousin and gave him a reassuring look. "We will figure it out. Baron Sonil said he also had a black rose, so maybe the assassin marks his targets that way. We will increase security. If anyone receives a rose, we will watch them closely. My spies and I will not rest until we find him. Trust in us, cousin."

**\***\*\*

Deianeira screamed as a body and glass fell from the sky in front of her. The neck was twisted awkwardly, and the crunch of bones on the pavement echoed in her ears. Her eyes were stuck on the body. Footsteps raced around the corner, following the sounds of more screams. A courtier stopped in his tracks and called for the guards. More footsteps came running as the guards pushed through the forming crowd. Deianeira stood rooted in place as the guards picked up the body, Baron Sonil's face turning to look up at her. Her body refused to look away from the smiling face as the guards dragged it off.

Deianeira freed herself from the terror that gripped her and let the guards know she had found him. Taking deep, calming breaths, she allowed herself to be escorted to Duke Rune's office. *Apparently, a body falling from the sky is enough to warrant an investigation*, she thought as they made their way down the halls.

"Come in," a deep voice called out from behind the wooden door.

Deianeira stepped into Duke Rune's office. Her eyes caught on the bookshelf that covered the entire back wall from floor to ceiling. Filled with books, she noticed a few titles—the History of War and

*Empire Narits and Its Conquest* were some of the books lining the shelves. Deianeira wondered if he's read all of them but remembered the duke's reputation and decided they were probably all for decoration. Her eyes moved from the bookshelf to the man studying a report behind the intricately carved desk. His bright eyes met hers, and she inwardly cringed. *This is what the women of the court fall for?* 

"Duke Rune this is Lady Deianeira. She is a witness to the baron's unfortunate death," the guards' leader said.

"Thank you. You may leave. Oh, and please inform the person helping Lord Dyras that I will arrive soon," Duke Rune said as he pushed off the desk and made his way toward her. "Lady Deianeira, it's a pleasure to meet you, albeit I wish it were under better conditions," his voice dripped with charm.

Deianeira dropped into a curtsey. "The pleasure is mine, Your Grace. I have heard many things about you and am pleased to make your acquaintance."

Deianeira could feel his watchful gaze as it slid up her body. *Disgusting*. "Regarding the unpleasant scene you have just witnessed, are you okay?"

"Your Grace, this is not my first encounter with death."

"My apologies. If I am not too bold, may I ask what happened?"

"Duke, when a person says death is nothing new, do you always interrogate them for a reason?" she questioned, lifting her head to meet his gaze.

"My apologies, Lady. I was just wondering why a pretty thing like you would have experienced the horrors of death."

"Well, Your Grace, if your curiosity ever gets the better of you, ask your magnanimous king," she retorted, returning to her full height. Deianeira smoothed out the folds in her dress. "If *I* am not too bold, Your Grace, get on with your interrogation so I may return to my chambers. The whole situation has left me exhausted and needing a good book."

Rune's mouth dropped open slightly. His actions had never been called to attention before. If he wants something— women, money, or power, he gets it without anyone blinking an eye. When she first walked into his office, he was thinking of ways to charm her, but now he wanted to own her completely. He cleared his throat and said, "Of course, my lady. Please explain what you were doing when the body fell."

"I was rounding the corner to enter the garden when I heard someone scream. When I looked up, his body had hit the pavement with a crack," she began, horror filling her eyes. "When I finally turned the corner, his body was twisted at awkward angles, and a white flower clasped in his hand. I had thought to myself, 'How tragic. He did this knowing he would die and held on to the flower of peace the whole time.' I screamed, and the guards came rushing, and here we are."

"A white rose? Are you sure?"

"Yes, Your Grace. I remember it because it was so odd."

The duke thought for a minute. What does any of this mean? "Did you see anyone leaving the scene?"

Deianeira yawned slightly. "No. Why is there someone dangerous going around? Was the baron killed?"

"No. No. Not at all. I can assure you the castle is perfectly safe. And I wanted to ask if there was anything we could do to keep this matter private."

"Ah, so that is what you are after. We cannot have news of a suicidal lord reaching treacherous ears, now, can we? Do not fret, Your Grace. This event dies with the poor Baron Sonil." Deianeira curtsied once more and left the room.

After wandering the halls for a bit, Deianeira returned to her room and flopped onto the bed. *Today has been exhausting*. She pulled the covers up to her chin, not bothering to switch out of her gown, and fell asleep.

\*\*\*

"Mother!" she screamed. The pretty woman walking away from her turned.

"You have to hide, Little Rose. Don't come out until your Aunt Esme finds you, okay? I need you to be safe."

The child's mother and father ran out of the rose garden as she curled into a hidden passage. The multi-colored roses around her smelled sweet and familiar. As she looked closer at one of the red roses, it melted in her hand, and the scene shifted. She was standing aside from her aunt as the axe swung down. The horrifying thud of the two heads echoed in her ears, her face splattered with her parents' blood. The child walked up to the dais as the blood streamed off the stone. She sliced her palm and vowed that one day; she would have her revenge and make it very, very painful.

The assassin shot out of her bed, soaked in sweat. It had been a while since she had dreamt of that day. She walked to the washroom when she found the message written in a foggy mirror.

#### Midnight. A message you might be interested in has arrived. See you tonight. -E

She splashed water onto her face and the mirror, then changed into her dark suit before making her way across the city. The assassin slipped into the open window of the keep's top level. Everyone in the capital knew this building housed some of the most dangerous people, and authorities turned a blind eye, especially since many use this tower's services.

"Welcome, my darling Little Rose," a raspy voice called out from the darkness of the office.

A faint whoosh sounded. "Mistress Esme, I hope you are well?" the assassin said while plucking a dagger out of the air.

"Very. You will be, too, after learning who the next target is."

The moon's light shone on the assassin's face and revealed the anticipation in her eyes. She grabbed the letter on the desk and read through its contents. A cruel smile formed hidden in the shadows of her hood. "You were right, Mistress. This might be the best day of my life."

#### KILL THE KING

**\***\*\*

Rune stared at his ceiling, replaying the interaction with Lady Deianeira. Never in his life has

he been so wholly rejected and humiliated by someone. Rune did not dare close his eyes, for hers would stare back, cold and uninterested.

When she stepped into his office, the air in his lungs was sucked out by her beauty. Her hair was tied in a sophisticated knot, and her eyes. *By the Seven, her eyes*. They were filled with a rage that simmered just below the surface. The mention of the king cracked something off that wall. The fury in her eyes was released, and a fire lit inside him. *That fire will burn everything in its path, but it is worth the danger*.

"I will make her mine. I swear on my life, that girl is mine," he vowed into the dark as his eyes closed and met the freezing fury of Deianeira's gaze.

\*\*>

Cold empty eyes met his own as Deianeira looked up from her book. Rune had watched her from his office window for the last hour before finally giving up on his work and deciding to talk to her. There had not been any new information on the assassin, and his frustration was growing.

"Oh, Your Grace, to what do I owe the surprise?" she asked, returning her gaze to her book.

"I was just walking by, and I saw you reading. You looked so enchanting I soon found myself under your spell and in front of you," he replied, trying to catch a glance at the book title. "What are you reading, my lady?"

"If I tell you will you let me return to my peace and quiet?" Lady Deianeira raised her eyes in annoyance.

"I could join you. We could stroll to the library, where I can introduce some of my favorite titles."

"An interesting strategy, Your Grace. Very well, I will play your little game, but do not think for a moment that your charms will work on me. I always win in the end."

Duke Rune extended his hand to help Lady Deianeira up. She gently placed her arm around his as they walked to the castle library. The jealous stares from other noblewomen were amusing initially but only got more bothersome as they continued. For the rest of the afternoon, Rune would add to her pile of books. He would stack one after the other, smiling with each suggestion. Once he seemed satisfied with the large stack of books, Deianeira looked at him.

"Your Grace-"

"Please call me Rune. Entertain my little game, as you put it."

"As you wish, Rune. I was saying that I have already read most of these," she said, smirking. The look of shock that ruled over the duke's face was priceless.

"But how? I have never met anyone interested in any of these."

"My parents wanted me to be well educated." Lady Deianeira walked over to the shelf and pulled out a book bound in leather with gold inscriptions on the title.

"Oh, I love that one," Rune said as she passed him the book. He opened a random page and felt the petals before seeing them—black rose petals stuffed within the pages. Rune closed the book as

fast as he opened it.

"Is something wrong, Rune?" Deianeira turned to face the duke. "You seem a little pale; perhaps you should sit down."

Rune looked into her eyes and only saw concern. *The contest isn't lost after all.* "I just remembered that I have to report something to the king. Let me escort you to your chambers before I meet him."

"I guess I have to start reading if I want our conversations to start having some substance." Rune rolled his eyes and collected the now much smaller stack of books, and the two walked back to her room.

When they reached the door to her chambers, Rune bid her farewell and made his way to the king's council room. Deianeira waited until she could no longer see him down the hall before closing her door and locking it. She quickly stripped out of her dress and bathed, trying to get the feel of his hands off her. After scrubbing her skin raw, she dressed in more comfortable clothes. Deianeira hummed her mother's song when they walked through the rose garden. She walked over to the chest at the foot of her bed and opened it. A sweet odor filled the room, and she continued to hum as she watered the chest's contents.

+\*\*

Rune slammed open the door to the council room. King Odon looked up from behind his desk and frowned. "What is the matter, cousin?"

Instead of replying, Rune threw the leather-bound book on the table and began pacing. *Was Deianeira the next target? Did he just save her from the assassin's warning?* Odon looked at the cover, eyes widening. "I was just about to send for this," he said, opening the book. "What in the Seven? Where was this?" Odon demanded after seeing the petals.

"In the library. Lady Deianeira and I were choosing books to exchange when she picked this one. How did they even get there?" Rune stopped his pacing and looked at his cousin.

Odon scowled at the dead flower petals. "Did you say Deianeira?"

Rune studied his cousin as he cautiously replied, "Yes, which reminds me. The lady told me to ask you why she has already witnessed death before. She has just made her debut in society, so how could she witness such travesties at such a young age?"

"I have no idea why she would say something like that. How would I know what this young countess has seen? These flowers could be meant for her, which means she is in danger. I trust you will keep an eye on her?" Odon said, not meeting the duke's eyes.

Why is he lying? The threat to Lady Deianeira's life consumed Rune's thoughts before he could overthink what the king was hiding. "Of course. There is something strange about her. Something that just seems to enchant you," Rune walked over to the door. "I will continue to search for the assassin and will not rest until we find him."

\*\*\*

Deianeira was not the only one who noticed the extra guards surrounding the pair as she and Rune made their way through the gardens. It had been a week since the library visit, and Rune made a point to visit her every day since. She will admit the duke's attention felt nice when she watched the other court ladies' faces as they strolled down the path. Many of them would kill someone for his attention, but to Deianeira, it was becoming smothering to be in his presence. Rune seemed to be glued to her side every minute, and if he wasn't there, one of his lackeys was hiding nearby.

"Rune," Deianeira smiled sweetly as she said his name. "Is there a reason you will not let me be alone?"

"What do you mean, my dear?" Deianeira cringed slightly at the name.

"Well, you are always with me, so I was just wondering if you had admitted defeat?" "You would like that, wouldn't you? I can assure you that while your grace and beauty may completely enchant me, I will not stop trying to charm you to fall for me," he said, turning towards her to look into her eyes.

Deianeira returned his gaze and smiled. At that moment, Rune's world went still. The impulse to kiss her was so strong he dropped to his knees and hid his face in his hands.

"Your Grace, are you well?" Deianeira asked, laughing at his reaction to her smile. *It's almost time*.

"I am wonderful," he mumbled into his hands. What was that? The fire that burned behind Deianeira's eyes sparked and transformed into a cool, refreshing calm and a gentle light when she smiled. It was as though someone had bewitched him. After seeing that transformation, he did not know whether to cry or pray to the gods. When he looked around the gardens, everything seemed cold and dull, but looking up at her, his body began to heat, and pure light appeared behind her. She is a fallen goddess.

Rune shook his head and stood up. "Apologies, my lady. I am not sure what happened there." "Oh, isn't it obvious, Rune? You lost but are too proud to admit it."

*Had he lost? No. Impossible, but*– "I fear you are too observant. May I escort you back to your chambers?"

"How courteous, Your Grace," Deianeira took his arm, and the two walked back to her room.

When they arrived, Rune grabbed her hand and hovered his lips above the back, staring into her eyes. "I bid you a good night, my lady," he whispered, then turned on his heel and left.

Deianeira smiled softly before closing the door and locking it. She changed out of her gown and into her evening attire. Opening the chest once more, she grabbed something inside, slipped out of the room, and made her way down the hall, quiet as a mouse.

\*\*\*

Rune stalked into the library, careful to keep his steps silent. Finding the row with old reports of family lineages, he searched for Deianeira's family name. Several minutes later, he found the record and opened the scroll. As he scanned its contents, his eyes grew in horror. He quickly closed the scroll and raced to the king's bed chambers, knowing that he would likely be awake but in bed at

this hour.

Without even knocking on the door, he burst through and began, "You disgusting and rotten liar! How dare—" his words caught in his throat as he witnessed the scene before him.

The light of the full moon shone through the opened window. The metallic smell of blood was so strong it tied his stomach in knots. The giant canopy bed in the middle of the room looked almost black as the crimson liquid dripped down. A lithe figure was making its way to the bed when Rune walked in. The white flower in the assassin's hand dropped to the ground after being replaced by a short sword.

"Wha- Why? Who are- What is going on?" Rune stuttered as he took in the scene, feet rooted in place.

The assassin stalked forward, which sent Rune into motion. He tumbled and fell onto his back. Scrambling to find a weapon, Rune quickly righted himself and took a calming breath.

"It is unfortunate it turned out this way, Your Grace," the assassin said as she strode over to him.

He knew that voice. It was the same voice that haunted him at night. The one that belonged to the burning eyes that taunted him every day. The one that belonged to a fallen goddess.

"Deianeira? I don't understand. How?" Rune's mind was racing, attempting to come up with an answer to how she was the assassin.

She reached the spot where Rune froze before reaching down and grabbing the scroll that had been abandoned in his panic. She opened it and read, "'Count and Countess Trandafir: charged with treason and executed. It was inconclusive if there was solid evidence of their treachery, but to prevent any discourse, the two were sentenced to death. Their daughter was sent to be raised by a relative but never reached her destination. The Countess Deianeira Trandafir was presumed dead until she arrived three months ago," Deianeira stopped reading and watched as Rune's face paled. "Don't you see? He killed my parents with no evidence. The record doesn't say how the king made a spectacle of their deaths so that no one would think of committing treason. Now tell me, Rune, are you ready to die?"

Rune dropped to his knees, "Please. I had nothing to do with this. Now that he is dead, I will inherit the throne. Allow me to live so that I can right his wrongs. Please, just don't kill me."

A cruel smile formed under the assassin's hood as she stepped closer to the duke. "It is too late for you, Rune." She took one final step and stopped in front of the kneeling duke. He looked at her as she lunged her sword into his gut.

Blood gurgled up as Rune tried to take a breath. "B- but I loved you. I changed for you."

"You sweet thing. Did I ask you too? You speak of love, but we both know it was an obsession. You wanted to own me rather than see me as an equal."

Rune collapsed and rolled onto his back, breathing slower than before. "That's, that's not true."

"My dear, we both knew this was just a game, and it had to end. Like I told you, I always win," she said, walking towards the dresser where she had put her freshly cut flowers—their sweet odor

struggling to overpower the stench of blood. Deianeira found where the king had stashed her black petals and threw them onto his body. She placed the white flower in the mouth of his decapitated head beside his body.

"You are lucky I predicted your death tonight as well. Otherwise, you wouldn't have got your flowers. Don't worry. You will find your peace, Your Grace, just not here," she said as she placed the two roses, plucked from the bush hidden in the chest, into his chilling hands. After observing her masterpiece, the assassin strode to the window, jumped, and returned to the keep.

## Blithe

#### Tyler Hyong

Trigger warning: Violence, Sexual Violence

It's as if all these mindless walkers have forgotten where they're going.

They search their phones for an answer, not a single one paying attention to more than five inches in front of them. They bobble around each other like ice cubes in a frigid sea. None use umbrellas either as if completely unaware of the midnight dew which slicks the top of their heads. They all wear the same uniform, the same black trench coat, the same shoes which tap obnoxiously against the damp pavement, and the same cheap perfume. I can taste it on my tongue, just beside it sits the nauseating reek of gasoline, which shoots from passing cars. As if they have anywhere to be at 11pm. I wonder if anyone here enjoys these nights, if they prefer to spend their hours walking amongst a crowd of people they'll never see again, soaking in the frigid temperatures of the storm, the orange citrus hues of the night, and breathing in the same obnoxious industrial aroma. Are they as aware of the storm above them as they are to the people beside their shoulders? Perhaps not. This is Paris, after all. Nobody here remembers anything but the body they slept with and the name they never asked for.

Nor remembered.

I tried resting in the hotel suite, and they gave me a nice room too. Though the longer I sat on the bed, the more the silk sheets felt like a bed of needles. I thought watching the forecast might help ease the restlessness of my fingers, but I was pacing the street before I could even flip through the channels. I did forget my umbrella, along with my gloves. They're resting quaintly on the nightstand as my umbrella leans on the wall by the door. I'm sure they're screaming for me to go back and fetch them, but it's too late, I'm already close to my destination.

Perhaps it's worth mentioning that I'm not walking towards a brothel looking for sex. I have no intentions of sleeping with anyone tonight. Rather, I'm here on an assignment. And tonight, I've been ordered to exterminate Pierre Boudoir, the CEO of Boudoir Beauty, a cosmetic company with an underground business in facial reconstruction. More so, the reconstruction is what happens after they've completely erased any remnants of your identity. It took many years to weasel Mr. Boudoir out of his hole, but all it took were a few years of silence and an agent desperate enough to take the mission. Luckily, our agency, Shepherd, has basket fulls.

My name is agent Blithe, I would tell you my real name if I knew. It rests beside an empty void where memories once existed, I don't ponder on them often. It's difficult to think about something that no longer exists. But if all that a hole of non-memories does is distract from my assignment—and the benefits to come with its completion—then they're better suited to rest in the blank spaces of my mind.

After a few minutes of walking, I make it outside my location—a brothel Mr. Boudoir attends regularly. The Faceshopping Clinique.

Fitting.

I make my entrance through the front doors. There's no use in trying the back doors seeing that there are none. The only escape from the sex and steam of this building is through the front entrance. I take note of this as I walk down the hallway, turning left before coming to a desk and the woman attendant. Her face seems to be melting, drooping to the floor beneath the humidity of the shop. The makeup beneath her eyes gives the illusion that I'm staring into two black holes, an abyss of emptiness and silence. She's clouded in a stench of rose perfume, which fills the space around me.

Though I tell her I'd like to see Andres, I have no plans of entering his room tonight, for my true client, Mr Bourdoir's favorite, lies behind door two-eighty-seven—a bright pink paint with a shiny golden handle.

I walk down what feels like miles of hallways just to reach his door. I hadn't originally understood the capacity for which this brothel had for the men and women who come as a means to make a living. Just as lost upon me is the sheer demand Paris has for lust and pleasure, though I shouldn't be surprised.

I make it to the door, the metal sends chills through my hand as it bangs gently against the door. I wait for Jerome's sweet permission before opening the door to four red walls surrounding a white bed. Jerome just in the center of it.

I can understand why Mr. Boudoir enjoys Jerome's company. Even from the door, I find it hard to resist diving into those plumped lips, which rest before a canvas of caramel skin. His eyes undress me, slowly peeling away the layers of my damp clothes from the skin beneath it, keeping me chained in teases. The men and women who come here are granted one hour with their lover of choice, though begging and a few euros slipped beneath the table could surely prolong your visit. But unfortunately, Jerome will spend most of his night stuffed beneath the bed.

At first, he giggles as if we're playing a game, as if the zip ties I place around his wrists and ankles are just another ordinary Wednesday night. But any inkling of foreplay slips from his joy as he succumbs to his consciousness. But I have no reasons to hurt Jerome, he's done nothing wrong. I put him beneath the bed gently. When he comes to, he'll wake up in his bed, his appendages freed, and mind oblivious to the man who visited him the previous night.

I've forty-five minutes left to prepare for Boudoir's arrival. I make due by quickly placing a knife between the bed frame and the mattress, my firearm beneath the pillow, and strip down to nothing in preparation for the jockstrap and bowtie I've borrowed from Jerome. Of course I've already prepared the means of his dispatch, but the timing of his entrance and my exit are what put a delay on any further plans. Though I've no name but the one Shepherd gave me, the French government has no intentions of letting the face of a murderer go unseen, even if, ultimately, that murderer did the country a favor. If my face is broadcast to the entire country, spreading to other networks around the world, then I might as well kiss goodbye any future I had with Shepherd.

Along with it, the promise of an easy retirement. There were five cameras coming down the four hallways I had taken to get to this room, seven if you include the one at the reception desk and

one outside the only exit. You'd think someplace as scummy would have just as shitty surveillance. Luckily, each watching gaze can be controlled from the security office and easily disposed of by the heavy smash of the tape beneath my foot.

It's simple, really. I'm due for an easy objective and an even tastier reward.

"Tobias?"

I turn my head ready to respond, but the crack of a metal tray and glasses ushers all thought from my mind. Wesley raises a gloved hand to cover the modest stubble on his face, as if caught in between a yawn. His eyes vibrate intensely, each one shaking as they scan each and every feature of my body.

But none of this stands out to me, not the fact that I'm down to nothing before this stranger. I've found myself in this circumstance countless times. It's not his hazel eyes that continue to shake and stare, not the modest scent of his cologne, nor the new plumpness in his cheeks.

It's that this stranger has a name. And supposedly, so do I.

Tobias, Wesley, the names echo in my mind, filling the spaces in my head as reality tries desperately to pull me back. But there it is again, the name—my name—flooding the room.

"Tobias, you're alive," Wesley says. Before I know it, I'm caught in a fury of hands and scratching. From his mouth screams curses, each one clawing away at my skin as his fingernails shred my arms into sheets of paper.

Not a thought comes upon me as his attacks grow more violent–more emotional. All my body urges me to do is grab him by his shoulders and squeeze him as if he were an accordion. But his hatred doesn't cease with his movements, and I can barely make out his curses through the choking of his tears. He continues on for five more minutes before resting his eyes on mine, searching for an answer. I want to give him one, to tell him I haven't the slightest clue who he is, that I've never seen him before, and that, somehow, his name is Wesley.

Suddenly, another man joins us at the doorway, more so a presence than a body.

My objective.

My mind begins making the calculations, my hold on Wesley tightening. I could leap from the doorway, grab the knife, and deliver it to his throat in seconds. Better yet, I could shoot him with the gun, that would eliminate having to double back. But I can't risk either of those options, Wesley's too close to Boudoir, he could easily grab him and use him to defend from the bullets. I refuse to take that risk.

Boudoir begins walking away, afraid he's stumbled upon the wrong room.

I release Wesley from my hands.

"Jerome? Tu es venu pour Jerome, non?" I ask, recollecting his attention. I tell him Jerome is out for the night with a cold— the damn rain. But I'm sure to let him know that I'm just as fun.

Boudoir gives both of us an eye before sending Wesley from the room without another word. He places me within his sights one last time, his lips curling a smile.

"Comment tu t'appelles?"
I'd tell him if I really knew.

\*\*\*

The haze of the club is nauseating, the reek of weed and smoke invade my senses as the bassey music shakes my brain. Boudoir insisted on getting to know me better, intending on prolonging my night and postponing my rewards for a few drinks at the club below the brothel. The club itself is no news to me, but the liquored lips of its attendees are. Countless targets that Shepherd has been searching for, all found in one hazy bar. Taking out any of these faces could land me right beneath palm trees—a soft sun kissed breeze beneath the glowing warmth of summer.

One bullet is all that stands between me and paradise.

But instead, I'm flashed like a dog on a leash before these men, my face put under a spotlight. Suddenly, Boudoir is no longer the only target on my list.

He sits me down with three other men, each wearing the same tempestuous smirk and eager excitement. Did he ever give Jerome this sort of treatment? How many drinks did Boudoir force down Jerome's throat? All these endless spiked cocktails and glasses of promise. A part of me wishes I had asked Jerome for pointers before laying him to rest. Any sort of kink, smile, joke, or whisper that could tease him enough to take me back to the room.

Back to the gun that sits longingly beneath the pillow.

"Hey sugar," one of the men snicker, "why don't you go get us some drinks so I can get a better look atcha'?" They cry like a pack of hyenas, but it's the only offer of escape I've been given this whole night. I don't hesitate. I slide my way through the booth and stroll to the bar in the back of the room, their howling pushing me deeper into the mist and closer to Wesley.

The heat from his glares have burned into my skin for the past hour. Even through the blinding lights and burning haze, his hazels find me in an instant. When I get to the bar, my skin could burst into flames under the blaze of his focus.

"What will it be?" he asks, cleaning the rim of a glass.

My body goes cold. "You're Wesley, yes?"

His hand stops. My body anticipates the moment that glass shatters over my head, but it remains beneath his grasp.

"I'm surprised you remembered."

"So it is. You're Wesley.

"What did you want?" Wesley grieves.

"I want to know who you are. I want to know how you know my name," I say, not realizing my hand had curled to a fist against the counter. It's all out of place, this mission, my target—and all my new ones—and my own name.

Wesley tilts his brow and curls his lip, the glass shaking beneath his grip.

"I thought I did," he says, "now, I'm not so sure I know anymore."

I follow him down the counter.

"So, you did know me. How?"

"I don't want to talk to you, Tobias," the words wrap around my throat.

He lifts from beneath the counter a tray of colorful umbrellas–pinks, oranges, yellows, and blues–and begins placing them into drinks. He's gotten good at this. Before, it would take him ten minutes alone just to get the glasses set up. But now, he's already poured within them colorful spirits without a single spill.

But what was before? Why does my mind drift away with each moment I'm around him? Whatever it may be, I can't leave without it. Taking out a target and finding myself in paradise is easy, especially in a room filled with opportunities.

But these men are armed no doubt. A shootout in this tight of a space would surely end in more than a handful of casualties. Shepherd has never had much care for how many names I drag down with my target, especially considering most destinations that I've found myself in hold no mentionable names. These strangers don't have names. The most they'd get in terms of remembrance are blank faces on a news television screen, a headline: *twenty-eight dead in a sex shop*, and a week of pity before everyone forgets.

Like I said; Paris, nobody remembers names.

But things have changed. My mind tries hard to focus on the face of our objective, but is pulled from sight with each time Wesley glances my way.

Perhaps I'm getting ahead of myself. All I need is Boudoir, he's all I've been ordered to kill-not any of these other potential targets. I can finish my mission and report back about the other targets that occupy these hazy walls. Hopefully Shepherd can act upon the information before these men realize someone's infiltrated their house of kinks. But in order to do this, I need to get back to the room, back to my gun. Any hopes of a silent kill are out the window, I need something quick and clean. Though I doubt anyone in this club would notice the gunshot over the loud music and dreariness of their minds.

"Tobias," Wesley's voice pulls me back, "are you all right?" He steps back with a glass in his hand, ready for defense. I hadn't realized this entire time that my eyes had been set on him. "You should go, you wouldn't want to keep your *client* waiting."

Fuck this.

I shove myself out of my seat and stomp my way behind the bar, the glass in Wesley's hand eager to shatter my skull. But before it can catch speed, Wesley's back in my hold.

"How long has it been?" I ask.

The confusion builds on his face instantly, "Don't pretend like you don't know," Wesley spits. I only wish I were pretending. I only wish the man between my hands wasn't just a memory, that the moments that come back into my mind aren't locked away behind Shepherd's tinkering. How wonderful this would be if it were all pretend, like we were two performers putting on a show, hiding behind a curtain the fact that our love had been washed away by a choice I once thought I made. The nights

spent above the chinese restaurant-endless amounts of takeout, wine, and laughter of whatever romcom he had decided was palpable enough-how easy it would be to pretend as if it never existed!

Wesley's eyes become glassy, "Tobias, you're hurting my arm!" his shoulder shaking beneath my grasp. But my fingers don't dig into him out of anger, at least not for him.

"I'm sorry," I release him from my hands, "fuck!"

I hide my face in the sweat on my palms, expecting to hear his shoes tap as he runs to escape. But they remain silent on the floor, still pointed towards my bare feet.

His hand grazes against my shoulder and sends electricity surging through my chest, as if being brought back to life.

"What happened to you?" the music in my mind silenced to make room for Wesley's voice. But before I can answer, I'm interrupted by the slurring of a mindless French accent.

"Qu'est-ce que c'est que ça?" Boudoir spits, his hand jittering over his pocket.

I knock Wesley's hand from my shoulder as I turn trying to grasp whatever drink I could find from beneath the counter. But my fingers run over something cold, colder than any water dripping off the sides of these glasses. My hand wraps around the handle, my finger slither around the trigger.

Boudoir's mistaken Wesley for a distraction—an obstacle, even. He's not intent on letting such distractions continue on through the night. He reaches into his pocket as his torso is ripped to shreds by a shotgun shell, delivering both halves of himself into opposite sides of the room.

The music in the room falls silent, all drinks and smoke hangs still. Each mind spins and swirls as one collective confusion, searching the clouds of weed and slur of their drinks for an answer. But I've already found mine.

It waits locked away in my mind and stands just beside me.

## Painter

#### Drew Johnson

My friend is in his mid-'20s, and lives with a few roommates. They live in an apartment in the city.

He is tall and lanky usually with clothes that do not fit very well. He normally looks disheveled. His messy clothing does not help first impressions.

Sitting, staring at the mostly white canvas his eyes were nothing to be considered still. Tracing over the ideas, whirling around his head, was always his favorite part of the process, but the end result never looked like he imagined. Distracted, again, he shot up out of his squat to make sure no one was home. With eyes darting everywhere he was not able to get a full picture of his surroundings. He stood as still as his shaking temple could manage.

"You always start but never finish, maybe that is why your pieces stick out." He heard reverberating through his existence from head to toe. As he tossed his unfinished painting in the bin, all he could do was think about that moment, the last time. The meeting with her. His agent dropped him after the last viewing party, that one lost money.

He looked up from the trash bin and sharply inhaled. "You are wrong!" He shouted, at hopefully no body. Quickly covering his mouth and looking around to make sure no one was home, again.

"I know I have a hard time finishing things but I can sell a piece." He repeated over and over in his head until he actually believed it himself. Sometimes someone has to convince themselves they can do it, right?

"It always comes back to the last time." He whispered. "How many times was I given a chance?" he whelped as he fell to the ground, on his knees. He knew the answer but could not admit to himself the truth. He has wasted every extra chance he was given and he was going to squander everything in the future anyway.

The painting sitting in the trash bin glared into this of his soul as he knelt on the floor. A loud crash sounded outside his window and he exploded to his feet. Shaking off his nerves he knew that he had to finish the painting he was just about to give up on. He stepped over, snatched his painting and loaded it onto his easel.

# Crashing Into Crimson Waves

## Stephanie Martens

Trigger warning: Death of a Loved One, Suicide

The dead body before me wears a blue silk scarf. I know it's a corpse of a man, his ashy brown hair is brushed up against his chocolate-brown eyes. In his chest lies a long silvery sword with his pale hands loosely grasping part of the blade. Dried blood leaks out of the corners of his mouth and gut, pooling on his white and gold striped pajamas.

This man is dead. This man is my brother, Venturi Asher.

I can hear screaming. The shill voice echoes from the other side of the bedroom. The chill in my heart spreads ice around my blood.

"Oh my God!" Lyon sobs loudly. His breath quicking as his fingers grip onto his salt-and-pepper hair. "There's a dead body. Here. Oh my God."

"Nikki," Viviana shakes my shoulders, her palms wet from her morning swim, "Look at me. Bro, hey! Hey!"

Venturi is dead. No, this is a corpse of an unknown victim. Venturi couldn't be dead. He has a whole life ahead of him. He has a fencing tournament next week. He has a wedding to plan. He has a project he needs funding for.

Venturi can't be dead.

"Detective Navvaro," Rehemea's melodic voice pulls my focus off of the dead body on the bed before me, "I believe you have a crime to solve."

"What crime? It's a clear suicide!" Viviana snaps. Her cold hands ripping off my shoulders, "There's no way Nikki can investigate. He was too close to Venturi to make a sound judgment."

"You're kidding, right? Why would Mr. Asher bring us here to get funding for his marina biology research just to kill himself?" Rehema snarls, her brown curls framing her golden snake-like eyes, "Or did you fail the autopsy part of nursing?"

Viviana stepped up to Rehema, her wet hand reaching for Rehema's long neck, "How did-" "Enough, sis." I stand up, my knees buckling under me.

Viviana glares back, "Nikki, there's no way you're actually considering this?"

My fingers pinch together. The hot rage of grief pulled tears out of me. By the now broken door, Lyon breathes quickly and rocks side to side. My fingers twitch in mid-air, "We're going to stay calm. Then I'll do some pre-investigation. Once law enforcement arrives, I'll hand it off to them. I need you to help Mr. Lyon. After that, I need you to help examine the body."

"I don't think I'm-"

I reach out, holding her shoulder and smiling gently. I can't break down in front of her. I have to be strong. "I trust you." Viviana pulls away silently. She nods before checking in with Lyon. I turn, staring into the hardened eyes of an Ivy-school regent, "Mrs. Rehema. Please leave this room for the

time being. I may need to interview you so stay nearby." I step past her toward the bathroom

"Why aren't you upset?" Rehema coolly asks, "Asher was your adopted brother. A best friend in a big family. Yet you walk and talk like he's not."

"Mrs. Rehema, please leave." I walk further into the bathroom before closing the door. The tiny room has no evidence but privacy for me. My nails dig into my palm. Along one wall are a countertop and a sink. The other wall has a glass shower with a toilet next to it. My fingers curl around the unfortunate sea turtle soap bar by the sink.

I say unfortunate because I next throw it at the glass shower door. All the ice melts away with a crimson fire boiling my blood. An unearthly scream rips my voice apart. The shattered glass falls like snow.

"WHY! God damn it, why!" I collapse against the wall and sink to the floor. The gun hidden behind my back bites into my skin. My fingers dig into my short black locks. My nails are like cold claws against my scalp. As I sob like a child, the icy grief in my chest slowly begins to boil. It's not fair. It's not fair. Venturi shouldn't be dead. I scream again, my voice rattled and sore.

The glass on the floorboards slides side to side, in perfect time with the waves below. My limbs were heavy and impossible to lift. Like a puppet with cut strings, I can't move. My mind turns over what I just saw. The victim, Venturi Asher, is sitting on his bed. A sword in his chest. The maroon-red a sharp contrast to the white and blue cover he was sitting on.

There's a quiet knock on the door, Viviana gently pushes open the door, "Nikki? L-Lyon is out of his panic attack now."

I hum.

She tiptoes over the glass, sitting next to me, "I'm not going to ask if you're ok. You're not. But maybe you're not supposed to solve this case in the first place."

"Why me? You're right, I'm too emotionally close to this."

"So we should leave it for now. Rehema left to figure out how to call on the radio. Maybe we can play cards with Lyon until help arrives? I don't think we finished our game last night." She bumps into my shoulder with hers, "Don't be the puzzle genius, golden son. Just be Nikki and leave this case alone."

I shouldn't solve this case. The pieces of this puzzle are too emotional for me. Putting them together would be a stab to my heart. But not solving it would become an infernal itch forever unscratched in the back of my mind. I don't have to solve the whole crime but getting a grip on the situation should satisfy my burning curiosity. "No." I turn, giving her a half-hearted smile, "The least I can do for Venturi is to get some evidence to help the police get started."

"But we're in international waters. I thought the police couldn't touch a case like this."

"So long as we dock at an American port, they should have the authority." My hand pushes me up as I'm mindful of the glass, "Shall we, Nurse Navvaro?"

Viviana bites her lower lip when following my lead. Her brown eyes were hidden behind her

damp hair, "Ye-yeah. After you Detective."

Reaching past her. I reenter the master bedroom. The white and yellow walls seem less bright than before. There is a pall of darkness in the room due to the corpse on the bed. Unlike the bathroom, there wasn't much decoration here. A simple white dresser, nightstand, and bedframe pressed against the far wall are all that give the room life. The hooks on the walls once held the golden sheath sword which is now on the floor. The door's handle and hinges lay scattered on the floor. Perhaps I was a bit too anxious to get into the room.

"Mr. Lyon," I gently touch his shoulder with a false smile of confidence, "Can you do me two favors? First, it is in my room. There's a notepad and pen I need. The pen is very unique, it has four sides with four colors. You can't miss it. Second, there are medical gloves in the biology lab, Viviana and I will need those."

The man jumps to his feet and runs out like a rocket. A few moments later, he throws in the requested items before sprinting up the metal stairs. He's certainly a subtle one. I grab the pen and yellow notepad. The familiar plastic of the pen calls me back to simpler puzzles. Days when I'd solve missing cat mysteries and was rewarded with a crisp five pesos. The blocks of the pen spin, and the four various colors are mixed up like a Rubix cube to be solved. I write out what information I do know in bold letters. Victim: Venturi L. Asher. Age: 26.

Viviana pinches her nose, "Be sure to breathe out of your mouth. He's starting to smell." I carefully inhale, only noticing a slight rotten egg scent. But Viviana gags like she would when eating Papa's tomato soup. With only a thin rubber covering my shaky hands, I start my examination.

Venturi's muscles are similar to heated lead. Warm but stiff. With effort, I move one hand off the blade. His palm is clear of any cuts and the back side has no blood. With how deep the sword is, he would need a lot of force to penetrate his chest. From his current hand placement, there should be cuts on his palm and some blood on his thumbs. But there's only blood on the sword's guard, not on his hands. Therefore, Venturi couldn't have killed himself.

Breathing becomes easier as if removing the idea of suicide was like moving a ton off my shoulders. Yet the pool of blood on his lap sparks a furious fire in my chest. Carefully, I place the hand back and write down the deduction simply. **No cuts or blood on the victim's hands. Suicide can be ruled out if the sword is the killing method.** I look over at Viviana. She presses her finger against the underside of Venturi's thigh. Her face twisted with confusion and worry for our brother, "He has livor mortis. At most, he's been dead for four hours."

"Thanks. His upper body is showing early rigor mortis. I was thinking somewhere between three and eight. Thanks for narrowing it down." I step back and twist the red side of the pen. Vivianna tightly presses her lips together as I write. **Time of death: likely seven A.M.** 

Viviana looks at the thick mist-like layer hiding Venturi's eyes, "So we really have to figure out why he'd commit suicide at seven in the morning?"

"No. It was a murder. If it was a suicide, there should be cuts on his palms."

"Maybe he only stabbed himself lightly?"

"No. Based on the sheath's length the sword is thirty inches long. But we can only see twenty inches. Whoever stabbed him nearly went all the way through."

Viviana checks the palms for herself as I examine Venturi's body as a whole. A blue silk scarf with white pajamas is certainly a strange fashion choice. Yet the blue scarf is tied around the middle of his neck, not the base. Goosebumps crawl up my arms as I pry open his jaw. The tongue inside smelt of rotting meat. My head turns with a shiver rattling me. His mouth is swollen. Why would his face be swollen if he was stabbed? My fingers pinch at the smooth and silky scarf, carefully undoing it.

"What are you doing? Isn't that messing with evidence?"

"Relax. It should be fine as long I can replicate how...it-it-" Air squeezes out of me as if my body was in a vice. Under the royal blue scarf lies a straight thick purple bruise. I scramble away as if it was my hands that killed him, "Strangulation."

"Hmm, looks more like choking to me. His air flow was disrupted, not the blood flow. Wait, how do we know that's what killed him? It could still be the sword." Viviana steps back with me, small tears in her eyes as she helps me to my feet.

With a click of the pen, I scribble out the new evidence taunting my face. **Cause of death: Choking via a long and firm object. Bruising was hidden under a scarf.** The only objects that can move in here are his clothes and the sword. His clothes would be too flimsy to use effectively but the sword sheath is about the right size. I grab the gold sheath. Holding it carefully I measure it against the bruise. "A perfect fit." I returned the sheath to where it was on the floor.

Viviana taps her foot on the tile floor, "Oh, I get it now. The sword is the cause of death, the cuts on his palms show a suicide." Viviana...I know you and Venturi didn't have the best relationship but that's not what happened. Her glassy smile held some shred of hope, "He stabbed himself."

"What are you talking about? I didn't find any cuts on his palms." My head tilts slightly as she pulls up one of his hands. A thin line of crimson now shows on his fingers. "I must have put his hand down too hard. That wasn't there when we first looked, remember?"

Viviana shrugs her shoulder when placing the palm back, "So you think it was still a murder? In which case, the killer broke in somehow and used the sword against him. Why didn't he fight back though?"

"No, you missed a step. The killer choked him with the sword sheath and then stabbed him. Look, the blood on his mouth is drier than the blood by his stomach." I leave the scarf undone, when law enforcement arrives it would be quicker for them to understand this way. "But I agree, why didn't he fight back? Unless he was asleep, it's a sensitive spot."

Viviana hums as her red hoodie swings around her, "Too bad there are no fingerprints on the sword handle." I told you, it's the sheath. Why are you getting this wrong? Viviana folds her hands together, "It sucks that Venturi's lab doesn't have forensic equipment."

"He was a marine biologist. We're lucky that he had gloves." A marine biologist who needed

funding for his next project. Hence why he invited Rehmea and Lyon as potential investors. Both came from large families so Venturi invited Viviana and me to help sell him as a person who valued family. The evidence in this room has settled my mind to a simmering fire. But there are still pieces missing. I open the bedroom door, "Come on. We have suspects to interview."

Viviana follows and gently closes the door, "Huh? But I'm a nurse. I'm not much help when interrogating people."

"I'd still like for you to come. We make a great team after all." A smile pinches my cheeks as Viviana glances away. She holds herself and shakes slightly.

"Why? Why are you so dependent on me now?"

"I've always depended on you." I pull her into my arms, hugging her doll-like body. She stiffened, the back of her hands pressed against my chest, "You're my little sister after all. I'll always need you." She stays frozen. Perhaps the shock of our youngest brother's death has finally hit her. "Come on, we're through the hard part. You said Rehema was in the radio room? Let's head there first."

~~~

"Mrs. Rehema, how is the radio?" I step into the small control deck. Rehema sits on a wooden stool with a furious snarl on her lips and her knees pressed up against the messy countertop. Poor Viviana is pressed against the wall as I sit next to Rehema. The stone-cold regent doesn't look at me as she thumbs the detachable microphone. Her black and white painted fingers tap against the VHF's silvery buttons. My fingers twist a yellow block on my pen as I clear my voice, "Rehema, is-"

"No." She pulls away from the console, the number sixteen bright on the screen. Her arms fold over her black and white shirt, "I got through to the coast guard. But there's a storm over the ports. Once it's over, they're sending a police boat." Silently, I open my notes as Rehema rolls her eyes, "Tch, I can't believe I have to stay on a boat with a damned murder running around."

"Y-you don't think it was suicide?" Viviana spoke up, her prayer-like hands pressed together to the point where they were turning white.

"Of course not. The timing doesn't make sense. Mr. Asher invited me and Mr. Lyon for our investment. Why kill yourself over a deal that hasn't been discussed yet?"

True. But then why would Rehema or Lyon kill Venturi? This project would greatly benefit Rehema as it could give her university more majors to start investing in. Lyon would also profit, this deal could create an aquatic rescue branch for his charity R.A.A.M. "Mrs. Rehema, I don't believe that suicide is a possibility either." I hand her my notes. She snatches them and reads at the blocky scribbles at lightning speed, "Could you tell me where you were at seven this morning?"

Rehema returned the notepad with a snap, "I tried to use the restroom in the dining area around seven thirty or so. It was occupied. Venturi's door was closed and I was in no rush, so I returned to my room. I didn't leave again until you were knocking at Mr. Asher's door at eleven." Her cobra-like eyes look at me, "I could ask you the same question, Mr. Navvaro."

"Do you really think I'd kill my favorite brother?"

Rehema smiles like a cat hunting a mouse, "About a quarter of murders in the US are committed by family members." She looks back at the black VHF console, "As much as you're pretending to be impartial, you are just as valid a suspect as me."

"I solve murders, I don't commit them." My fingers twist the blocks of my pen. Some of the colors are still mismatched. The red and white rows are alined as I write down her alibi, "I was eating breakfast with Lyon. I woke up around nine-forty. I saw Lyon sitting and my little sister was taking an early morning swim."

"Really?" Rehema's steady voice holds an air of suspicion, "Why were you swimming, nurse?"

"I-I...I." Viviana lowers her shoulders in embarrassment, "I ate too much for breakfast. A new study showed that swimming is the best exercise to burn off calories."

"What's the big idea? My sister isn't under interrogation."

Rehema scoffs when standing up, "When did you get up to swim, nurse?"

"Hey," I snap to my feet, "Leave her alone."

"She's an adult. She can answer the question. Or does this part of the puzzle not interest you?"

My teeth grind in my mouth. "Listen, I'm not going to solve the whole case. Just enough to help the police once they arrive. What I'm not here for is your high and mighty bullshit. I might leave your alibi out if you keep being uncooperative."

Rehema bites her lower lip. Her snake eyes are no longer sharp and full of venom, "Touche, Mr. Navarro. Ah, I recall a detail I'd forgotten, when I was trying to use the restroom, I smelt Lyon's musty cologne."

"Thank you for the tip." I get up and glance at Viviana's milk-white face, her lips in a tight pinch. The poor thing is scared out of her mind. Stepping out, I pull her with me. The afternoon sky makes her pale face and whiten lips more apparent.

Why was Lyon awake before me? He seemed scared enough during the discovery but that could have been just an act. The simmering anger in my chest growing to a boil. I have to know. I have to connect this piece of the puzzle.

Which puzzle piece is stained red? Rehema or Lyon? My mind toys with the possibility that the cold and stoic regent of a university is capable of murder.

If only I didn't see her coming out of her room. Which proves her alibi partly.

The salt and peppered fox jumps when dropping a small bowl. His withered hands cover his racing heart, "Bon sang! Why can't I stop these damned nerves?"

Viviana folds her arms when standing next to me in the tiny wooden kitchenette, "Maybe because you're the true killer?"

Lyon gasps, shock rolling off his face like the waves on a beach, "Do you even know who I am, little girl? The chairman of R.A.A.M. The organization that prevents the cruel death of animals. If I

can't stand an animal dying, what makes you think I could kill a human?"

"Viviana," My hand pushes her away slightly, "Let's not be accusatory until we know more information." With a pout and a roll of her eyes, she backs off. Hot breath exhales out of me as I face the fearful man, "Mr. Lyon, what were you doing around seven in the morning today?"

Lyon gravitates to his seat, his thumbs tapping on the dining table, "Venturi and I were supposed to talk in private here around ten. I wanted to be presentable. I got up a little before seven and saw the door to Venturi's room was ajar. Assuming he was awake, I went up to the kitchenette for breakfast. And-..Um." He holds his hands over his stomach. A worried flush reddens on his face, "I wouldn't recommend the cream croissants today. My stomach was twisted into knots and I felt so nauseous."

"Minor food poisoning." Viviana whispers softly, "If I had to guess, it's probably staphylococcus aureus. You should feel better by the evening."

Lyon gives a small smile of thankfulness, "Merci, my dear. I fled to the bathroom and stayed in for a while. There was some obnoxious knocking I think by seven-thirty."

I write down the alibi thus far. Lyon was ill due to food poison. A chemical test of the food may be required. Claimed to be in the restroom during the crime. I stared into his shifty and fearful eyes, "How long were you in there?"

"The first was I think from seven-thirty to nine. I stepped out for about five... maybe ten minutes. The lovely Lady Navarro next to you was already swimming, I heard her splashing in front. I started to feel bad again and returned to the restroom. I came back out when you appeared. And we enjoyed our morning together."

"If you were supposed to meet with Venturi around ten, why weren't you more on edge as to why he didn't show up?"

Lyon bites his lower lip. The animal prints on his shirt shift as he cowards with hunched shoulders. "I was more focused on the ache my body was and still is experiencing." He hides his hands under the table. "What made you realize your friend wasn't around, Mr. Navvarro?"

"Venturi loved watching the sunrise on the sea. No matter how late he went to bed, he'd try to wake up early enough to see it." My arms fold. My thumb rhythmically twisting the last two mismatched sides back and forth on my pen. This is such bull. He's got to be lying to my face. Right? But that does partly match Rehema's alibi.

"If I may be so bold, how did the killer even get into Venturi's room? He'd lost his key and we found the door locked at eleven. Is there another entrance?"

"Not one I could find. I had forgotten about the key. Thank you."

Lyon bows his head slightly, his hand grazing his chest in matching time, "But of course. Do you think the killer still has the key on them?"

"It's a possibility. But this is such a small boat. If they hid it, then we'd find it eventually. What's more likely is that they could have thrown away the key."

Viviana jumped like she stepped on a livewire.

Lyon leans back with one hand grooming his goatee, "Should we begin looking? Everything could be solved much quicker once the key is found."

"No. I don't want to solve the case. I wanted to get the ball rolling for the police once they get here." The pen clicks and blocky letters follow the tip. **The killer might have the key to the victim's room.** There might be another angle I haven't considered yet. The blood on the sword handle would mean the killer would have blood on the back of their hands. If Lyon is being honest, then the killer couldn't have cleaned themselves up after the deed was done. But no one had blood on their hands by eleven.

Unless Lyon cleaned his hands in the bathroom this morning. The timing would match up and it's still uncertain if the food is the actual cause of his sickness, "Under normal circumstances, I agree. However, I've found that alibis combined with a timeline of events can be as effective as a key."

"I'm sorry, detective, I'm not familiar with Venturi's murder details. Could you elaborate?" Lyon asked.

I flip the notepad to the first page related to this case. "The victim: Venturi L. Asher was found dead in his room at eleven today. However, this isn't the time of death. With help from nurse Navvaro, the time of death is likely around seven this morning. We found that the victim's prized sword might not be the murder weapon. A bruise over the victim's neck was found under the scarf. I believe that the murder weapon is the sword's sheath and the sword in the chest is a distraction. Without the proper equipment, I can't know for sure.

I've already interviewed Mrs. Rehema in the radio room upstairs. She claims to have been in her room the whole time apart from leaving to try and use the restroom. My interrogation of Mr. Lyon is more fruitful. His alibi is easier to prove once proper testing equipment can verify the spoiled food. And-"

Lyon gasps loudly, "Tu blagues? You don't believe me? What's not to believe?"

"Why you were in the restroom for so long?" Admit it. I can see the murderous venom in your eyes. You have to be the killer. Rehema could have lied and been an accomplice, "Food poisoning is one thing but according to your testimony you spent at least two hours in the restroom. That amount of time easily allows you to clean your hands and dispose of the key."

Lyon's lower lip shakes. The tears in his eyes began to pool, "I really was ill."

Viviana presses her hand against his forehead, "Stop it, Nikki. I don't think he's lying. He has a mild fever."

"We're near the equator. We're all a little warm." I tuck my notes under my arm. My thumb clicks the pen like a ticking clock as the weight of my gun starts to feel like a brick. "Lyon, why were you in the restroom for so long? Is it because there is blood in the sink? Venturi's blood?"

"Aucun. You have it wrong." He snaps his fingers and his brows pinch together, "Ah. If I was the killer, why didn't I destroy the radio when I had the time? Why would I kill Venturi if there's a

detective on board?"

"Why did you do it? Why kill Venturi!"

Viviana steps away from Lyon, "Nikki. Stop it. You don't want to solve this case, remember?"

"Screw that." My thumb rubs the handle of the gun. The metal biting back with ice. "Why did you have to kill, Lyon?"

"I did no such thing! This is slander! I am ill."

"You are a liar."

Small arms surround me. Viviana's tears are hot against my chest. "Stop it, Nikki. Would Venturi want this? Would Papa? I don't want to see you like this. I need you to stop. I need you to let this go. Forget about the killer. You're ripping yourself apart if you focus on this." She looked up at me with porcelain and painted a smile on her thin lips. "Just be Nikki Navaro. No golden son. No brilliant puzzle solver. Just be my brother."

The heated rage in my chest simmers down. The boiling blood in me cools. My shoulders relax as I hold my sister the same way I used to hold my childhood blanket, "He's dead. Venturi...I...-. How can I live without my brother?"

"...Ok then." She steps back. Her head bowed like her black hair has become a veil. One hand hides behind her back and the other hand reaches into her pocket. A small silvery key is shown.

The fire in my chest is gripped by ice. Frosty goosebumps coat my skin. "Vivana?"

"S...so-sorry." She said.

In a blink, she dropped the key and bolted out to the diving deck. I reach out, fumbling forward as I chase after her. Sprinting through the door, Viviana stays at the furthest end of the diving deck. She looks down at the sea, my gun in her hand.

I approach her slowly. "Sis, let's just talk."

"I can't do it. I couldn't do it." She turned to face me. With a swift motion, she loaded the gun and aimed it at her head, "S-stay back."

"Please, don't do this. What about Papa or Mama?"

"What about them? They couldn't be proud of me the way they are of you."

A wave of frozen anger sprawls in my chest. Not her. I can't lose another sibling. Be calm. Panic insights more panic, "I'm proud of you. In three months, you're going to be—"

"It's a lie!" She cries. Her tears splash against the open wooden deck, "I couldn't save him. I can't be a nurse anymore. I can't do anything." Her breaths have become sharp and small hisses, "He died because I wasn't enough. Because I'm not good enough. I'm not smart enough. I'm not gentle enough. I'm not enough."

"Venturi? Is that who—"

"No. Venturi knew about my secret. He told me that he was going to tell you, Mama, Papa, everyone. The shame..."

"What did Venturi know?"

"...I guess you found out anyway." She regretfully muttered. She titters on the edge of the deck. "Nikki, this is a puzzle I don't think you should have solved." The bullet snaps out of the gun with a loud crack.

The solved puzzle pen drops at my feet as I reach forward. Vivana tipped back, her body crashed into the waves below. Her blood turning the waves crimson.

# **Drowning Above Water**

### Ashlynn Royall

Trigger warning: Death of a Loved One, Panic Attacks

The water downed out the sound of everything. Eryk Kane used to love that fact. When he was in the water he did not have to deal with the noise of his life. He couldn't hear his parents screaming at each other in the middle of the night. He couldn't hear his teachers constantly pressuring him to answer questions he understood yet was scared to get wrong. There were no high school jocks asking him about all the girls he hadn't been with, or annoying sisters bothering him with stupid questions. When Eryk was in the water he didn't have to worry about anything other than the next stroke, the next kick, the next breath. The water drowned out all his problems. That was, until it became his problem.

Now as he stood at the edge of the pool, watching ripples flutter across the surface, and smelled the chemicals used to sterilize the water, everything Eryk wanted to drown out rushed to the surface. All he could hear was his sister's screams and the screech of tires. He squeezed his eyes shut, trying to block out the memory, to think about a happier one like his therapist told him to, but the empty place in his heart was filled with the darkness of that night, blocking out all the light.

He jumped at the feeling of a wet hand on his shoulder. He ignored it, like he had all the other phantom feelings or comforting touches. When the cold hand shook his shoulder, Eryk finally opened his eyes, the lights reflecting off the bright tiles overwhelming him for a short moment. As he pulled his mind from the terrible memory and refocused on the pool room around him, he reassured himself that the moisture beneath his feet was not rising water seeping into his shoes, but rather water that splashed out of the pool onto the cool tile. He also realized someone was talking to him.

"Eryk?" the voice questioned, as he turned around to face the person.

"Hmm," he hummed in response, his mind still waterlogged by his past.

"My dude, are you coming back?" Mateo asked when Eryk's focus was on him. He seemed super excited.

"Um," Eryk started, shaking his head slightly as if he were forcing the memory from his mind like water from his ears. "I'm not."

"Why, dude? You're the best swimmer, and I know you loved it. It was your favorite thing to do and then you just...quit"

"I didn't just quit! You know as well as everyone else why I left the team. I can't swim anymore." Mateo scoffed.

Eryk snapped, "You don't understand, can't understand."

"I want to understand, Eryk! You were my best friend and after everything you just shut me out completely"

"You have no idea how much I wish I could swim. It was my escape, but now..." Eryk shook his head slightly, tears building up in his eyes. "I just need more time. I can't get back in the water yet. Not

after what happened."

"Lydia," Mateo started, but Eryk cut him off.

"Please don't. I don't need you telling me what she would want. I get enough of that already."

The tears that had built up in his eyes started to fall at the mention of his twin sister's name. Eryk pushed past Mateo, bumping roughly into his shoulder as he rushed away, quickly wiping the tears from his face. "Eryk!" Mateo called after him.

Eryk pushed open the locker room door. It swung shut behind him. He tried to force his way through the locker room as fast as he could, only stopping for a moment to slide his shoes back on, not caring to dry off his feet before pulling on his socks. His hands shook as he grabbed his backpack from where it sat on the narrow, wooden bench. The smell of sweaty teenage boys filled his nose as he tried to ignore how every sound was a terrible reminder. The rushing water pouring out of shower heads, the slamming of locker doors, the squeak of rubber soled shoes on the wet, tiled floor.

He rushed past the nooks surrounded by bright red lockers, ignoring how his old teammates called out to him. Happy hollers of "Eryk", "My dude", and "I didn't know you were swimming again" bounced off the concrete walls of the room behind him. His breathing started to quicken as he pushed open the door that led to the hall, drowning out the friendly voices that quickly turned into the echo of his sister's as she begged, "Eryk, please", just before the water rose above her head. Before the water did exactly what Eryk used to love it for, drowning out her voice.

The locker room buzz was quieted by the thick wooden door. Eryk took a breath in an effort to calm down. He slid down the wall, the back of his head resting against the off-white painted bricks as he looked up to the ceiling. The hallway was much darker than the locker room, only illuminated by the emergency lights at the end of the hall. It made the red lockers look like the color of blood as it mixed with the dirt in the water making a maroon. He closed his eyes, trying to block the image from his mind. Eryk could hear the faint buzz of electricity from where he sat. The fishy smell of swamp coolers didn't help, but as he breathed in the cold, damp air Eryk kept reminding himself he wasn't trapped underwater anymore.

When his breathing slowed, Eryk pulled out his phone, the screen illuminating his face. He stared for a moment at the background photo. It was of him and his sister, frozen in a perfect moment. Eryk's hand was on her head, her hair messed up. Both of them smiled with true happiness that made their blue eyes more vibrant. Looking at the numbers on his screen displaying the time, Eryk realized he was running late for therapy. He pushed himself off the ground and shrugged his bag farther onto his back, only one strap holding it in place, and started down the hall.

The halls seemed vacant, but as Eryk rounded the corner before the exit he ran right into someone. They dropped a water bottle, the lid flying off, causing water to spill all over the floor, slowly seeping into the papers that had also been knocked out of their hands.

"Fuck, I'm so sorry," Eryk mumbled as he crouched down without looking at who he had run into, too focused on saving the now wet sheets.

He started to pick the papers up, small droplets of water flying off the corners as he pulled them away from the puddle. A second pair of hands, paler than Eryk's tan ones, came into Eryk's field of vision, grabbing the last few. They also grabbed the water bottle, putting the cap back on as they stood.

When he was back standing, Eryk finally got a look at who he had collided with. The low lighting of the hall made it so only half the boy's face was illuminated, but Eryk could still see his eyes widen for a moment. He wore a black jacket over top of his plain grey t-shirt, and had his backpack slung over only one shoulder, much like Eryk.

Eryk recognized him, and not in the "we go to the same school, so I have seen you around" kind of way. He knew him from somewhere else but couldn't quite figure it out. There was more light in this section of the hall, coming in from the windows in the red metal doors at the end. It allowed Eryk to see the guy's hazel eyes behind his black rimmed glasses. He wore a beanie, but his dark hair poked out from underneath.

Eryk looked away from his face to see the other boy had his hand outstretched toward Eryk.

"Oh," Eryk jumped. "Sorry. Here." He handed the now ruined papers back to the boy.

"Thanks," the boy mumbled in response.

"Sorry, again."

"I can just reprint them."

It was silent for a moment, only the ever-constant creaking of the old school's walls, before Eryk interrupted, "I'll go get a towel out of the locker room for the water."

He didn't really want to re-encounter the swim team, but he was the one to make the mess so he thought he should be the one to clean it up. He was going to turn around, but before he could the boy spoke up.

"The janitors will get it. It's just water, right? Anyway, aren't you late already?"

Eryk's face morphed into a look of confusion, his eyebrows drawing together. "I didn't mention being late."

"Sorry. Group therapy with Dr. Brager," he clarified.

"Roman!" Eryk blurted out at the realization of who the boy was.

Roman nodded his head. "You sat in the corner on the anniversary of my accident," Roman commented. "You used to talk all the time in school. This conversation is actually the most I've heard you say since yours."

Eryk shrugged his shoulders, looking toward the ground. He didn't really know how to respond. How could he tell Roman that the reason he stayed quiet was because there was no one he wanted to talk to, that all he really wanted was to be in his room again having stupid conversations with his sister, Lydia. How could he tell someone that every time he opened his mouth his throat closed up at the thought of never getting to talk to his best friend, his sister, again. His hand subconsciously moved to play with the hair tie on his wrist. It was Lydia's, some of her blonde hairs, slightly lighter than Eryk's, were still knotted around the seam where the two ends were melted together, impossible to get

off. He had always kept one with him for her because she was always losing them, but now he wore it to keep her close.

"It's okay to still miss her," Roman spoke up, like he had read Eryk's mind. "I miss my mom every-fucking-day, and it's been over two years since my accident."

Eryk finally looked back to Roman from where he had been staring at the poster for Prom, "Dancing in Wonderland", on the wall. His eyes met Roman's, fragments of green standing out against the brown.

He remembered the first day he walked into group therapy. Dr. Brager, who ran it, was also Eryk's personal therapist and had suggested he go a few months ago saying, "It's a group for people who lost others in car accidents. It'll be good for you to meet other people who can understand."

Eryk had gone to his first meeting last month. When he walked in, Roman was talking about his incident.

"Today's the two-year anniversary of the crash" he had said. He was looking down, his elbows resting on his knees and his hands fiddling with the black beanie between them. "I haven't come here in a while, but today was hard. For the first few months afterward, I thought it was my fault. Mom was in a rush, trying to get me to the school on time for my competition.

He stopped for a moment, running his hand through his curly, dark hair.

"I thought for a long time that if she wasn't rushing, she would have seen the car coming. Now I know there was no way to stop it and it wasn't my fault, but every now and then I think she would still be here if I didn't have that competition." He pulled off his glasses and quickly wiped at his eyes.

"It took me a little over a year after the accident to get back into debate. I used to love it, but after I couldn't do it. All I could think about when I looked at the debate arguments and topics was mom."

Eryk had stood in the doorway waiting for him to finish, before he hesitantly entered the room and sat down in one of the black plastic chairs across the circle from where Roman was and listened as others gave Roman advice and told their own stories. There had only been one other meeting so far, but Eryk had not spoken about his own story, too scared to.

"How did you get better?" Eryk asked, breaking a small silence.

"Time... and help from people who understood. Group helped a lot. Talking about my accident with other people who understood how I felt, who went through something similar. Have you talked about your accident?"

Eryk shook his head.

"You don't have to, but it helps," Roman told him. "I refused to talk about mine at the first few meetings I went to. I thought I would be judged for feeling the way I did, or thinking it was my fault. No one can help if they don't know what happened or how you are feeling. When I finally told them about that stuff, let it all out rather than trapping everything I felt inside, that's when I started to heal."

"So many people tell me to talk about it. They want to know what happened and how to help me," Eryk put finger quotations around the words, "but I can't. I've tried, but it already fills every one of my thoughts. I'm constantly reminded of it by doors closing, sinks running, or shoes squeaking in the halls. I don't really want to bring it all to the surface more than it already is."

"It's hard. I know, but you can't just push it all down and hope it will just go away," Roman said. "I felt that way too in the beginning, that everything triggered me and the only way to stop feeling that way was to try and forget."

"I don't want to forget, because if I forget it then I feel like I forget her."

"You shouldn't forget. This will always have an impact on your life. You just need to find a way of dealing with those memories that hurt, because pushing them down won't work. When you push them down, try to ignore them, you are letting them control you," he paused, his hand moving in a small circle like he was trying to think of the right thing to say. "You need to find a way to control them."

"How did you do it?" Eryk asked, wringing his hands.

"I started by talking about it. Not doing so is part of why those memories control you. You keep it all in and don't give people a chance to really help. I also found an outlet, something to focus on other than my constant thoughts about the accident. If you want to get better, Eryk, you have to start by talking about it."

Eryk nodded, the words echoing in the back of his head. For the first time since the accident someone's advice had finally made sense. He felt like he wasn't alone, that someone else understood what was going through his mind and knew how he felt. The way Roman explained why he needed to talk about it made so much more sense than the reasons other people gave him.

Before the conversation could continue, a group of boys from the swim team exited the locker room. Their voices and laughter echoed off the hollow hallways and interrupted the moment. Eryk moved to hide behind the wall, hoping they would exit the building in the opposite direction, and that none of them would notice him.

"What? Don't want to be seen by your jock friends with the class nerd?" Roman joked.

It earned a small laugh out of Eryk, the edges of his mouth turning up slightly. It was the first real smile and laugh he had in a while.

"No," he responded. "They aren't really my friends anymore."

"Why?"

Eryk shrugged. "I don't know. I kind of pulled away from them after everything. Plus, more recently, with the information meeting being today and season starting soon, they have been persistent about me coming back to the team. I mean I want to, but I just... can't."

Roman nodded in understanding. "I get it. I couldn't debate for a long time after the accident. I associated them too closely together. But it did help getting back into it, that was the outlet I found. Or I guess re-found. It was sort of an outlet before, for different reasons."

Eryk nodded. The way Roman described debate made him think about how he thought about swimming. It was his outlet too, a safe place to get away from the chaos of his life before the accident

The noise from the swimmers had faded and Eryk peaked his head around the corner, spotting the clock as he did so. "Damn it," he mumbled.

"What?" Roman asked.

"I'm super fucking late now, and I've missed the bus." Eryk dropped his head into his hands, letting out a groan of annoyance.

"Let me drive you," Roman suggested.

"It's fine, I'll just go to the next meeting."

"That's in two weeks," Roman reminded him. "Just let me drive you. I know where it is, plus it's on my way home from here."

"Um," Eryk hesitated. "I kind of like taking the bus." He hoped Roman understood what he meant.

Roman's eyebrows raised in realization, before he slowly nodded his head. "I won't force you, but if you really wanted to go today, I'm extra cautious when I drive, otherwise I freak out. It took me a while to get back into a car too."

Eryk stared for a moment too long as he thought over everything Roman had told him. He thought about talking about his crash. Roman was right, by trying to push it all down he hadn't gotten rid of the pain, he just let it take over more. He never tried hard to fight the darkness that had taken over, but opening up to Roman, even a little, made it smaller.

"Okay," he mumbled, slowly nodding his head, and pulling himself away from the wall.

"Okay?"

"Okay."

Eryk followed Roman out of the building, nervously running a hand along the wall of lockers. He watched Roman discard the ruined papers into a trashcan by the door.

"What were those anyway?" he asked, gesturing toward the grey cylinder where the still soggy sheets now laid.

"My debate arguments. The competition is this weekend. I'm supposed to turn them in tomorrow to be revised beforehand," Roman explained.

Eryk slowly nodded his head, walking past Roman who was holding open the door. He opened his mouth to apologize, but Roman interrupted him.

"Don't say you're sorry again. I already told you I could reprint them tomorrow morning."

There was a comforting silence that fell over them as they approached the parking lot. The sun had started to set behind the mountains even though it was only 4 o'clock. The sky was becoming a blend of warm reds and oranges. The moon was higher in the sky, a planet shining below the tip, like the fishing boy's hook from the movie logo.

There were only a few cars left in the parking lot, likely belonging to teachers working late or

the few athletes who loitered around after school. Roman guided him to the only SUV, its blue color matching the darkening sky. The rays of light that hit it made the artificial sparkles in the paint twinkle like thousands of stars.

When he heard the familiar beep of the car unlocking, Eryk had to remind himself he wasn't getting into his sister's and his shared, silver van. His hand shook as he reached for the handle and opened the door. As he sat down, he placed his bag at his feet.

There was a lingering smell of fast food that reminded Eryk of his car that night. They had gotten McDonald's for dinner. The image of a grease-stained paper bag slowly absorbing dark water as it filled the car flashed through Eryk's mind. He tried to pick out everything about Roman's car that was different.

He took a deep breath at the feeling of warm fabric beneath his legs, rather than smooth leather. He pressed the small button to unlock the car, the click reassuring him that he wasn't stuck anymore, that he could get out. His door had been jammed shut that night.

"You okay?" Roman's gentle voice broke Eryk out of a spiral.

Eryk looked over to Roman, "Yeah," he mumbled. "We should get going."

Roman nodded, flicking on the headlights, even though they weren't necessary yet, and putting the car into drive. Eryk took slow deep breaths as the car started to move. His hand tightened around the handle on the door, causing his knuckles to turn white. He focused on the road, choosing a point and watching it approach before disappearing below the front of the car, repeating the process over and over again.

Roman hadn't said anything since they had left the school, and the silence was deafening in a way. Eryk could almost hear Lydia complaining about his music again in the buzz of the road below them and the whistle of air rushing past the bike rack on top of the car.

"Can we play some music?" Eryk asked.

"Sure," Roman replied. "Just plug your phone in." He pointed at the grey cord sticking out of a USB plug in the center console.

"If I have something playing, I can't think of it," Eryk blurted out, as he scrolled through his playlists selecting the one titled "Your Taste Sucks" that Lydia made. He didn't really know why he said it, but he guessed he hoped Roman could understand.

"Is that why you always have those around your neck?" he asked, pointing at the white headphones that rested against Eryk's chest, the end of the cord disappearing into the pocket of his jacket.

"It constantly replays over and over again in my head..." Eryk paused to press play. The soft vibrations of a piano filtered out of the car's speakers. "I don't know if that makes sense."

"You can't stop thinking about what happened, what you could have changed, how you could have stopped it, what you said to her last..." Roman trailed off.

"Yeah," Eryk solemnly replied.

"On bad days I still think about that stuff too. It took me a while, and I had help from other

people, but eventually I realized that I couldn't have done anything. Getting back into debate helped, it gave me something to focus on, took up time so I wasn't constantly thinking about the accident."

The car slowed and Eryk realized Roman was pulling into the parking lot.

"Thanks," Eryk mumbled, as Roman placed the car in park.

As Eryk reached for the door, Roman shut off the car. Eryk looked over when he heard the small click of Roman removing his seatbelt.

"You're coming in?"

"I might as well. I'm already here, and it can't hurt."

Roman and Eryk walked together into the building, navigating through the hallways to find the room their group therapy was in. When they entered Dr. Brager was addressing the group. He wore a variation of his usual outfit, a pair of khaki pants with a sweater over the top of a collared shirt, and his ID hanging around his neck. Today, the sweater was Christmas themed, with the holiday approaching, and the red stood out against his dark skin. He stopped what he was saying to greet Eryk and Roman.

"Come in, take a seat. We are just starting."

Eryk followed Roman into the room and sat down in the empty chair next to him. The room was well lit. Dr. Brager was sitting at one end of the circle, which didn't really look like a circle. It was lopsided, as if a first grader drew it. There were less people attending than the last two meetings Eryk went to. They were scattered around with multiple chair spaces between them. He could hear the buzz of the AC pumping cooled air throughout the room.

"It's nice to have both of you back with us," Dr. Brager stated before continuing on with his beginning of the meeting spiel. When he was done with the normal pleasantries he asked, "Does anyone want to go first? Have anything they want to talk about?"

Eryk quickly glanced over to Roman, who was already looking back.

"You can do it," he whispered. "I promise, it helps."

Eryk took a deep breath, trying to slow his heart that was pounding in his chest. He could feel sweat building up under his arms despite the room being cold. He realized he had been chewing on the nail of his thumb and pulled his hand away from his mouth. His leg bounced up and down as he hesitantly raised his hand.

"Yes, Eryk," Dr. Brager said.

"Um, I don't really know where to start."

"Anywhere you want. There is no outline for this."

"Um...I went to the pool for the first time in a while today. I guess I've always liked water. It was calming, the one part of my life that wasn't chaos. But then we got into the accident. I went because I miss it. I still love swimming, but now all I associate the water with is that night." Eryk paused to take a shaky breath.

"Lydia was stressed about finals and whenever she was stressed, I was stressed. I don't really know, I guess it's a twin thing. Mom and Dad were also fighting again, which racked up my nerves. I

hate loud noises, and their yelling was never quiet. Lydia and I both felt like we needed to get out of the house, away from them for the weekend." Eryk tapped his fingers against his legs one at a time, moving in a constant pattern. His vision started to blur with unshed tears filling his eyes. He tried to blink them away, dropping his head to look at the ground so no one saw his face.

"It was good to be away from everything. Lydia was able to relax and because of that I was able to relax too. Lydia insisted on driving back because I drove there. She always cared like that, sometimes too much. We were coming around a blind corner with Ganaport Lake on our right. The other car's right headlight was out." The room was nearly silent when Eryk stopped. "Lydia didn't see it coming."

Eryk paused again. He felt Roman's hand comfortingly on his back. His cheeks were wet, and he realized a few tears had escaped from his eyes.

"They were coming around the corner too fast and slammed into us. We rolled into the lake. I could feel my seatbelt dig into my shoulder and stomach, and I could taste iron in my mouth. I had bitten my tongue. At one point my head hit the door, the window was broken," he moved his hand to rub across the scar on his forehead. "Generally, though, I was okay, other than bruising, whiplash, and a few broken ribs."

"Lydia was trapped though. Her legs were stuck between the steering wheel and her seat. The water filled the car fast. I..." he trailed off for a moment. The words got caught in his throat. "I tried to help her, but the water rose too fast. I ran out of air too quickly; I should have been able to stay under longer. I made it to the surface, but when I went back, I couldn't get her door open. By the time I caught my breath again and was ready to go back under, the car had sunk too far. I couldn't reach it... I couldn't get back to her."

His heart pounded in his chest. He felt as if he had held his breath too long, trying to make it that least stretch of the race. He took slow deep breaths trying to catch his breath without letting everyone know. The pain that came along with the memory made his chest feel tight and tears flow without permission. A small silence followed his conclusion. He could still feel Roman rubbing small circles on his back. He sat up, wiping the tears on his cheeks, but they were quickly replaced. His vision tunneled at the sight of everyone looking back at him. There was too much focus on him. It was overwhelming to know so many people now knew exactly what happened.

"That's not your fault," Dr. Brager broke the silence.

"But I think it was." He sniffed, and Roman handed him a tissue. "I'm a swimmer. I should have been able to hold my breath longer. I should have been able to dive far enough to get Lydia out."

"You were injured, Eryk," another member reminded him. "There is no way you could swim at the same level you normally did."

"No matter how often I tell myself that, I still think I could have done better. Fought harder." Each breath he took was a short gasp.

"Eryk," Dr. Brager cut in before anyone could continue. "I want you to take a deep breath." Eryk listened, taking in a large breath of air, and slowly letting it out.

"Good. Again."

Eryk repeated the action, and afterward he felt calmer. His breaths deepened and his tears slowed.

"You did the best you could to help," a woman said. Her smooth voice reminded Eryk of the way his mom used to speak to him when he was down, now she didn't talk to him at all. "Don't stay hung up on it. We all do it, thinking about what could have been, but you can't go back and change what happened."

"I don't know how to not stay hung up on it."

"You have to let it out," Dr. Brager stepped in. "When you fight it, Eryk, that's when the grief and the guilt stay around. Talking about it helps most people, sometimes you just need another person to bounce things off of. Other times you have to scream and cry until you make yourself sick."

"You can't let it control you," Roman spoke next to him. "The grief can be overwhelming, so much so that you want to just lock it away, to feel numb. You have to let yourself feel all those emotions though."

"Sometimes the sadness is so..." Eryk stopped to think of the right word, he felt like there wasn't any way to explain how he felt all the time. "overbearing it keeps away everything else, the happiness, the calm, the love. But when I do feel happy, I don't think I deserve to be... I don't know how to be, I guess."

"When you feel sad, be sad, cry, do whatever you need to in order to *feel* that sadness. But also, when you feel happy, *feel* happy. Laugh, smile, anything but push it away. You feel guilty for being happy without her because she doesn't get to be happy anymore, and maybe because she was always there when you were happy?" Roman phrased it as a question. "I can't tell you not to feel guilty, that's normal, but you have to fight it. You can't give into that guilt, or you let it control your life"

Eryk slowly nodded his head. The corners of his lips twitched up into a short, small smile at the thought of how Lydia would brighten the dark days. "She was always making me laugh or cheering me up when I was upset, but now I don't have that. It feels like the only method I had for dealing with my dark moments is gone, and I can't deal with the empty, dark hole that's left."

"Is that how you see it, as a darkness?" Dr. Brager asked.

Eryk shrugged his shoulders, "Yeah, I guess."

"Lydia wasn't the only thing that made you happy though," Roman reminded him. "You said it yourself earlier. Swimming was an escape, something you loved and that helped cheer you up."

"Yeah," Eryk mumbled, putting his head back down. "I still do love it; I just don't know if I can do it anymore."

"I think you can," Dr. Brager said. "Eryk, you are so much stronger than you think. If you want to swim again, then swim again. Doing something you love, having that outlet, will help you take control of your emotions rather than letting *them* control *you*. Have you talked to your parents?"

Eryk shook his head.

"What about your friends?"

Eryk shook his head again. "They don't understand."

"Do they want to? Do they try to talk to you, try to understand?"

Eryk thought back to his conversation with Mateo, only an hour earlier. He nodded, wringing his hands together.

"You need a support system," Roman spoke up. "You can't go through it alone."

"I have this group."

"You need people who understand *you* too, Eryk, not just understand what you are going through. Try to reconnect with what you love, your friends, your family, swimming. When you do that, then you can fight the darkness together." Dr. Brager advised.

After Dr. Brager and Roman finished, no one else spoke up so finally Eryk replied, "Um... Thanks," slowly nodding his head.

"If you need anything we are always here for you," Dr. Brager reassured him before moving onto the next person.

It was like Eryk heard the rest of the meeting through a closed door, everything seemed quieter, muffled. Their advice ran around in circles in his head. What they said made sense. Before it was like he was dry drowning, from the inside out, and no one noticed.

The advice Dr. Brager and Roman gave him, made him see he had to start making an effort at healing. He could not simply try and push the past away, and his friends and family along with it. The way their support made him feel, ever so slightly, better made him think about what having the support from the people who used to support him the most could do.

He thought, just maybe, with support from the right people and a way to deal with the pain when it was too much, he could get to the point he wanted to be at in time.

"Do you need a ride home?"

Eryk jumped at the sound of Roman's voice. Roman was standing over him, his hand on Eryk's shoulder. Eryk realized the meeting was over.

"If you don't mind," He replied as he, too, stood up. He felt comfortable in a car for the first time when he rode with Roman earlier.

"I don't."

Eryk followed Roman out of the office building. Returning a goodbye to Dr. Brager as he left. When they went outside this time it was dark out. The stars had started to show up and Eryk spotted the red star, Betelgeuse, that marked Orion's head. The moon shone brighter now in the dark, and maybe with a little help, from people like Mateo and Roman who wanted to or did understand, Eryk could shine brighter in the dark too.

As he got into the car, Eryk took out his phone and sent Mateo a message.

Do you want to meet up and talk?

He received a response as he was unlocking his front door, after Roman had already pulled away.

I could come over right now.

Eryk opened the door and looked around at the mess that was everywhere.

Sure. he replied. Just give me a few to clean up a bit.

Okay

Eryk took off his shoes, placing them by the door, next to his father's always unmoving ones. He dropped his backpack to the ground and started to make his way around the ground floor cleaning up. He picked up the old take-out containers from the coffee table and took them to the kitchen to throw away, taking the bag out to the garage when he realized it was full. Eryk returned to the living room, taking multiple trips to carry all the used glasses back to the kitchen, putting them into the empty dishwasher. He picked up other trash and folded the blankets on the couch before heading upstairs. He opened the door to his dad's room, checking to see if he was awake; He closed the door when he saw him still tucked under a pile of blankets, almost exactly how Eryk had left him that morning.

The doorbell rang, and Eryk made his way downstairs again. He turned on lights as he went, trying to make the house look brighter, happier.

"Hey," Mateo said when Eryk opened the door.

Eryk stepped out of the way so he could come in. "Sorry about the mess. I tried to clean up a bit."

"It's fine. I've been over when your mom was in spring cleaning mode. There was shit everywhere, this is nothing."

Eryk let out a small laugh. His mom had always gone crazy every spring over making the house look perfect. It annoyed the hell out of him and Lydia.

"We can go to the living room."

Mateo nodded and headed in the familiar direction, not needing Eryk to show him the way.

Mateo settled down on the dusty brown couch, while Eryk sat in the same-colored recliner to his right. There was an awkward silence, the only sound that of the clock on the wall ticking filling the room, before Mateo spoke up.

"So, um. What did you want to talk about?"

Eryk shrugged. He didn't know how to say what he wanted to. "I'm sorry I shut you out," He decided on.

"I get you needed time. But Eryk, it sucks seeing you going through this and not being able to help because you don't talk to me like you used to."

"I know. I just really miss her," his voice broke. "And then mom left, and dad got super depressed. There was no one I thought would understand."

"I may not know what you are going through totally, Eryk, but I miss her too. I miss you too. I want to understand Eryk, but I can't do that if you don't let me."

"I know. I'm sorry. That's why I texted. I ran into Roman, and he got me to talk at group therapy, and he and Dr. Brager knocked some sense into me. They said I needed to have a support system," Tears had started to fall down his face again. "I guess I finally realized you were trying to help me every time you tried to get me to open up," He trailed off. "I miss you too, so you know."

"God Eryk, you are such an idiot. You've always wanted to do everything by yourself, but you can't always do that. Why did it take Roman, the smartest kid in our grade and a whole group to get you to realize you need a support system?"

Eryk shrugged. "You said it yourself, I'm an idiot.," He paused for a minute before continuing. "Doing everything on my own usually works, I don't have to deal with people and their expectations that way. Everyone wants me to be better already, even you do. You kept asking if I was going to come back to the team. I thought if I pushed everyone away, I could get better because I wouldn't have to live up to some unreachable standard."

"I didn't ask if you were coming back because I expected you to be okay by now. I asked because I knew it was your escape before. I thought it would help you relax, get your mind off all of it."

Eryk huffed out a laugh. "You know me better than I do."

"I know," Mateo said quickly, which made Eryk let out a real laugh.

"Dr. Brager and Roman both suggested I swim again for the same reason."

"Are you going to?"

"I was going to try next week. Would you be there? For support," Eryk nervously wrung his hands together. Intently watching Mateo for his reaction.

Mateo stood up and forcibly pulled Eryk from his seat into a hug. "I'll always be there to support you, Eryk. I wish you would have let me in a lot earlier."

Eryk relaxed into the hug, tears falling from his face. He finally felt a version of comfort he had been missing since the accident. His parents had shut him out before shutting each other out too, his mom leaving and not talking to his father and him since, and his father living almost exclusively in his room, only leaving to eat and work four days a week. He no longer had his sister to talk to and he had shut out his only other friends. Slowly now though, he was building back up that support. Roman, Mateo, Dr Brager. They all helped.

#

Eryk spotted Roman's now familiar head of curly dark hair down the hall.

"I'll see you in class. I've got to ask Roman something," Eryk told Mateo before he sped off to catch up. "Hey, Roman!" he called, trying to get his attention. It was the middle of the passing period, and the halls were filled with other students, all focused on their own missions. Roman was walking away from Eryk, pushing past people in his attempt to get to class. Eryk did the same, brushing by other kids in the hallway trying to catch up. He finally reached Roman as he was about to head upstairs to the history hall. Eryk placed a hand on his shoulder, making him stop and turn around.

"Huh?" he offhandedly asked, without really looking at who stopped him. He seemed a little

annoyed.

"What? Don't want to be seen with the dumb jock?" Eryk asked.

Roman laughed, finally looking up, "No, I just don't want to be friends with the person who ruined my debate papers the day before they were due," He joked.

"You said it was okay. That was months ago anyway, you can't hold it over my head anymore."

"What's up?" Roman asked, switching the topic.

"I've got my first swim competition this weekend, would you come?"

"Of course, I'll be there."

He had reconnected with swimming and his team, which helped, but he didn't think he could get to the point he was at without Roman. Roman had had a way of saying the right thing, of shining a light into the dark and finding where Eryk had been trapped and guiding him out. He had convinced him he needed to take the first step, to stick himself out there and that he needed to be open in order to heal. He was the first person able to say everything just right and convince him to seek the support he needed.

"Thanks," Eryk replied. Roman nodded his head and turned to leave, but Eryk grabbed his arm again. "For helping me get my head out of my ass and get help, too. You helped me realize a lot, pulled me out of the metaphorical water that was rising above my head. I hope that makes sense, it's the only way I can describe how I felt, like..."

"Like you were drowning in all of it, the pain, the guilt, the memories," Roman finished for him. "Like you were drowning above the water."

## One Last Adventure

#### Zechariah Stricklin

Content warning: Death of an Animal

Bunny is a curious name for a dog. Yet when I first saw her distinct ears, I knew no other name could embody her as well. She was already an elder by the time I met her, full of all sorts of worldly experience. Afterall, her time on the streets imbued her with a resolve all her own. But now came her golden years. Days spent in warmth, underneath the glow pouring from a window. Nights teeming with joy and peace. For she loved and was loved by the family who rescued her.

So she enjoyed her life for many years. Her grey became bold and her gait slowed in turn. Days passed in blissful abundance. Until one evening, while taking a stroll, a fox appeared from the forest's edge.

"Excuse me, madame, excuse me!"

Bunny turned and studied the fox as he approached.

"I hate to trouble such a refined matron as yourself," pled the fox. "But I am in quite a predicament."

"I'm afraid you have mistaken me for someone else. For I have not been a matron for many years, and I have *never* been a madame." Bunny stood as tall as her small stature allowed, beaming with pride.

The fox was struck.

"My sincerest apologies *mademoiselle*; where are my manners?" He caught his breath. "My name is Forney. I am in desperate need of your help."

Bunny looked back at her cozy home and around her yard. There was no one else in sight.

"Unfortunately, I don't believe I can be of any help to you, Forney. My legs refuse to move as they used to, my breath is short and labored, and my eyes no longer cooperate with me. Please do not wait any longer. I have friends up the street; go to them and they can help you."

Forney redoubled, "Oh. While I am sure your friends are capable as you say, there is no time, and it must be you. The life of *my* friend hangs in the balance."

"Your friend will surely be dead by the time I arrive. I am old, and you are still mistaken. Save your friend and find someone else."

The fox was despondent. From off in the countryside, a low cry for help echoed through the vale.

"I am coming my friend!" Forney bolted away towards the plea.

Bunny squinted, drawing Forney's unlucky friend *nearly* into focus. A few hundred meters down through the woods, a mass of feathers flailed, disturbing the surface of a gentle pond. The situation *appeared* to be desperate. She looked back at the house, someone stirred inside. Her departure would not go unnoticed. Surely the fox possessed the ability to save his friend. Darkness enveloped the

landscape. She thought of her precious bed. Memories of her days before paradise flooded her head, sharpening her resolve. There was no reason to risk everything when she offered equal aid where she stood as she would at the pond. Hesitantly, she started towards the open door.

A breeze parted the dusk – ruffling the fur behind her ears. The image of the helpless bird, thrashing for its life, commanded her thoughts. It was surely freezing. Maybe she could disappear for a few minutes, unnoticed. With the familiar hearth beckoning, the choice bore the weight of not one life, but two.

"Oh dear. What am I to do?" she cried. "It is nigh impossible to provide any assistance, yet I cannot be left wondering *if*."

Convicted, Bunny backed away from the quiet abode she so loved and entered the forest. For a moment, she lost her place – the thicket blocked all view of her destination – thorns tugged at her fur.

What a dreadful place, she thought. Not at all where she wanted to be. Her legs stiffened with each step. She blamed her age, but her reluctance held equal fault. Thus, it took far longer than she anticipated to navigate the underbrush. And just when she turned to give up, her ears captured the sound of the drowning bird. She was close.

Emerging from the tree line, Bunny surveyed the situation. The would-be rescuee fought fitfully about five meters from the shore. Forney paddled a log raft in between (without much success). On the bank, muck and sticks covered an assortment of water toys. It all looked so desperate. A far cry from her bed up the hill.

Making her way down to the water's edge, she began pacing its length.

"Ouch!" Her toe touched the cold pool, freezing her already stiff body.

"Bunny! You came!" Forney exclaimed. "Quick, I'm in danger of being as stranded as my friend!"

"What do you want me to do? There is nothing here that can possibly help," Bunny said.

"Anything. Anything!" Forney pled.

Bunny scoured the beach once more. Surely there was something to use. A rope? No. A floatie? None in useable condition. This whole trip amounted to nothing. She should have stayed home. Now she must watch the horrible scene unfold. Exhausted, she collapsed.

"What is this?" A thin green rod protruded from the mire. "It's a fishing pole!"

She bit down and began pulling. Nothing. Weighty mud held her hope down. For ages, she tugged without progress. Finally, the dirt gave up its prize. To free the line, Bunny ran opposite the pile, ears flopping in the winter air.

"Forney, look!" she cried.

"That's great," he replied. "But we need it *now*." Forney turned to his friend. "Quick, his head is going under!"

With the rod betwixt her teeth, Bunny's head snapped sideways, casting the line. The hook set into a broad feather on the bird's chest – narrowly avoiding the skin. Forney grabbed the line with his

paws as it settled on his log.

"Pull! Pull!" he cried.

Her heels dug in. With all her might she pulled that fishing pole. Inch by inch, she towed the line towards shore.

"Almost there," Forney managed. Bunny gave the line a big jerk, landing him ashore.

"Brilliant," he said. "You did it."

"Nah kite," was all she could manage with her mouth holding the rod's handle.

"What is that you say?"

"Nah kite."

"Bunny, I believe now is the *worst* time to fly a kite. But when this is all over, perhaps we can spare a moment for kiting." Forney bit opposite the reel, doubling their effort. Bunny rolled her eyes. A few more strong pulls brought Forney's friend to safety. For the first time, Bunny recognized the mass of feathers as a turkey.

"Thank you. Thank you from the bottom of my heart." The bird straightened his feathers, and since he was now standing, demonstrated why the deliverance had been so laborious. He weighed at least double the dainty dog but stood thrice her height. "I am Gregory. Gregory Gobble, to be exact. To whom do I owe the pleasure of this rescue?"

"Bunny. And if you will excuse me, I must go home now," she replied, turning her gaze to the lights she knew so well.

"Well, Bunny, you have my sincerest thanks. I –," Another turkey (far drier) hobbled out of the woods, rapturing Gregory's attention. "Brother George! Why are you here? You were to stay with the flock."

Panting, George managed a few words: "Bad - coyotes, came - fast -could."

"Oh no, we failed."

Gregory hung his head.

"Not exactly cousin," George said, catching his breath. Gregory perked up. "The family is in a tree, a few miles from here. They are safe for now, but we must go now."

"What can we do? The coyotes will not let us perform an extrication under their watch."

Bunny interjected, "I wish you all the best of luck, but the time has come for me to go home." She started her shuffle away.

"But wait," Gregory said, "You are the key to my family's rescue!" The gears turned in his head. "George and I can only gobble, which serves to awaken the coyote's hunger. But your bark will scare them away. When they see all four of us coming, you and Forney yelping furiously, they'll surely head for the hills." He laughed gleefully imagining his plan unfolding.

"No, no, no. I can't," Bunny said. "My bark is as defunct as my bite, and more than that it is time for me to get home. I can go no further. My legs are shot, and I have yet to catch my breath. I am muddy, mangy, and tired. There is no way I can go on. Please, I do not wish to be a burden. There is *no* 

way I can do this."

Forney spoke up: "But Bunny, you are no burden." His eyes leveled with hers. "Gregory and I would be chum for the fish if not for you. There is *no way* we can do this without you."

"I – "

Gregory interrupted her, "You do not have to walk; I can carry you on my back. We'll be there in no time."

She gave one long look home. "I suppose I must. It would be wrong otherwise."

"Then it's settled. Hop on."

After some struggle, mostly due to her stature, Bunny settled in atop the turkey. Her ears poked comically from behind the bird's neck.

"Let us away," Gregory shouted.

The misfit squad dashed into the forest, Bunny clinging to Gregory's feathers. His trot proved adequate to turn Bunny's stomach and she closed her eyes. A peace passed over her. Many years stood behind her since she traveled this quickly. She held up her head, letting the wind carry her away. Her eyes opened. Pale moonlight blanketed the rolling hills. It was a wonderful night, and (in spite of her current situation) a wonderful life.

"We're almost there," George whispered. Near a knoll, he stopped. Soft gobbles overlaid low growling nearby.

Bunny dismounted.

Forney sniffed the air. "Be careful, they are close. Bunny, go up the left flank. I'll take the right. Gregory and George, you take the middle. When surrounded, they will flee in confusion."

The ragtag bunch crept over the bank. Four coyotes guarded the base of a tree absolutely brimming with turkeys. In front of them, railroad tracks ran off in each direction. Bunny stayed low to the ground. On the left. Just like Forney said. The others fell into position. Mere meters separated them and the tree, but to Bunny it felt like miles.

Finally, they were almost upon the coyotes.

Snap.

George looked over at Bunny in shock – he had broken a twig.

The coyotes wheeled to face the unseen noise. Noses out, they began encroaching on George's position.

"It's now or never I suppose. Attack!" Forney shouted.

Attack? Bunny thought. I hope not.

But the coyotes struck first. The two on the right lunged at Forney, with the others each assailing their respective turkey. Forney darted side-to-side, dodging one coyote and then the other. George and Gregory just ran in circles. Bunny was left wondering what to do.

Her miniscule frame in combination with the stiffness in her bones painted her an easy target. Yet, she remained undetected. She turned desperately to her friends, all in peril. Through the roar of the

battle, a frantic choir of gobbles rose over the brush. The others! Of course!

She made her way to the tree, careful to avoid any wanton sticks.

"Psst. Here. Down here," she whispered. The turkeys didn't notice her. "I said, I am down here. Listen to me!"

"Shhh! Quiet down now." A voice urged from inside the foliage. "The dog has something to say."

The rafter settled themselves – turning to Bunny.

"I know this looks dire, but I refuse to let my friends, or you, down. What I'm going to ask you to do will take courage, so dig deep and let's save our friends!"

"We can't do anything. We have no teeth or claws, and our gobble is hardly a growl," whispered one turkey. "Run while you still can little dog."

Bunny scowled.

"No, no, no. This ends now! Follow me or fly away." She turned towards her desperate friends. The turkeys looked at one another in confusion, but one by one, they came down from the tree and fell in line behind her.

Several meters away, Forney was running out of steam. His darts turned into hops, and the coyotes prepared to close in. Gregory and George weren't faring any better. Their circles had overlapped, and they collided, falling to the ground in a daze.

The coyotes licked their chops, drooling over their conquered meal.

But their victory was interrupted by a tiny yelp emerging from the grass. Suddenly, a multitude of gobbles joined in.

"Get em!" shouted one energetic turkey.

Surprised, the coyotes turned to face the noise, but were met with a wall of feathers. In the ruckus, it was impossible to tell where one turkey ended and another began. As soon as the coyotes could swat one, another took its place, kicking and pecking their eyes and snouts. All the while, Bunny nipped at their vulnerable heels.

For a while, the coyotes tried to fight, but they were simply outnumbered. When each one got a chance to escape the fight, they took it. Running away, tails tucked. Finally, only one remained. George gave it a swift kick on the rump, and it followed suit.

"We did it!" Bunny cried.

"No Bunny, you did it. You saved us all," Forney smiled in appreciation. All the turkeys nodded in agreement. Single file, they approached her.

"Thank you," one would say, then the next did the same until all had expressed their gratitude. Bunny was proud, as proud as she had ever been.

"I don't know about you, but I'm just happy to be alive," George said to Gregory. The others joined them, and they paraded around the tree, flapping their wings and howling in celebration.

"Bunny, join us!" they said.

"I will. Just give me a moment to catch my breath." Bunny smiled to herself. She knelt in a patch of soft grass and fell fast asleep. A pleasant dream set her ears twitching.

The wind whispered, and she was gone.

# Paper

#### Zechariah Stricklin

Trigger warning: Mentions of Rape, Mentions of Abuse, Substance Abuse, Addiction

"I'm in freefall," she said.

"Isn't that normal?"

She laid her head back on the chaise, her eyes searching for a pattern in the stippled ceiling. After a few wasted minutes, she looked at me.

"No. No I don't think it is."

"What is it then?"

"Damn distressing is what it is."

"Distressing?"

"You'd be distressed if you felt the shit I felt."

"I do feel what you feel." I lied. I knew we shared an addiction, but she had a rougher go of it than I did. It was rare to meet a woman who hadn't. They all had an abusive lover or track marks deeper than potholes. They were prostitutes, sex slaves, groupies, junkies, or trophy wives.

Gillian had been raped by an entire family reunion. At least that's the way she told it. She said it was part of her healing process, to be able to talk so openly. I called bullshit. Her brow furrowed and I knew I'd hit a nerve.

"You don't feel anything I feel."

"You're right."

"I don't feel at all right now."

"How about a cigarette," I held up my pack.

"I'll always take a fucking cigarette."

I remembered the first time we'd met. Smoking cigarettes behind the residences at rehab. I didn't have a light, she did. We both lived in Chicago, after we got out, we met up. She needed a friend, and I know I did too.

She lit her cigarette and drew.

"Maybe I should work the Steps."

"God. Anything but that."

"I'm serious. Julie A. works the Steps, and she found a husband and became an executive. She talks about it in meetings all the time."

"Julie has a business degree."

"Shut up. You know what I mean." Gillian didn't like to be challenged.

"You don't even want a husband. Or a job."

"They're nice things to think about."

"Everything is nice to think about until you have to live it."

"Not everything." She turned back to the ceiling. She was done talking.

There was no use trying to open her back up now. Once she quit sulking we could talk again.

I went to the kitchen and poured a tea from the glass pitcher. It was warm in her flat, wetting the face of the glass. It slipped in my hand, but not out of it.

Gillian was always moody lately, but she was the only friend I had. It's incredible how all your friends up and disappear when you stop doing dope. There I was again – trying to control people – expecting them to act how I wanted. Expectations are future resentments. What bullshit. I hate rehab, you go in an individual and come out a platitude spewing asshole, but at least you're sober. A blunt would be nice, or a drink, or some H. Anything. Any fucking thing.

"You coming back?"

What else am I going to do?

"You were gone a while."

"I was thinking."

"You can talk to me about it."

"Can I?"

"You can talk to me about anything."

"I don't like being sober."

"Nobody likes being sober. That's why it's hard." She eyed the dewy glass in my hand.

"What's the point?"

"The point is you're not stuck in some trap house sticking filthy needles in your arm while the roaches claw at your fingers, and you hope in the back of your mind that it's the last fucking night on this shithole of a planet. But you wake up the next day and wish you'd been like the shithead next to you who's motionless with dried foam all over his face. Don't ever tell me you don't want to be sober. If you're not sober there is no you."

I looked at the Moroccan tile floor, wishing I was somewhere else.

"Let's get out of here."

"Yes, let's."

Gillian put on her jacket and I wrapped my scarf around my neck, we passed through the liminal corridors of the apartment building. I loathed the endless hallways, linked together like a planned community with no street signs. Her rebuke was fresh in my mind. She didn't need to go off on me like that, I was still sober today and that's all that mattered.

We reached the ground level and exited onto the street, leaving the labyrinth behind us. I wasn't paying attention to where we were headed, just kept putting one foot in front of the other, following Gillian's gait. Looking down, I noticed her hand around mine, gently pulling me along.

"Are we passing by my dealer's house?" It was ill timed, but I needed some levity.

"He's dead. Remember?"

How could I forget.

"I need a cigarette."

"Me too."

I'd left my pack at Gillian's flat, so we ducked into a store. I bought a pack, she told me lights were for pussies. We lit up halfway out the door. For a moment, we stood on the sidewalk, neither saying a word, both lost in the city's trance. I wondered what she was thinking. An enigma like Gillian could keep someone wondering forever.

"How about dinner?"

"I've got friends coming over in a while."

"For dinner?"

"No."

"Then let's get a bite, I'm starving."

She rolled her eyes but grinned.

"I know a place with the most mediocre hamburgers in Chicago."

"Mediocre is my middle name."

"If we take Michigan back to your place, we'll pass right by it."

"Lead on, Wimpy."

"You're in luck," I said. "It's Tuesday."

We made our way past Millennium Park and over the DuSable Bridge. The spot was under the next bridge, lit up in neon.

"We're here."

"We're somewhere."

Inside, we ordered and took a seat in the corner. Gillian looked in my eyes for the first time since we left her flat. She was fading into one of her moods.

"You didn't really mean that, about not wanting to be sober, right?"

"I said I didn't like being sober."

"You said it like you wanted me to support a decision."

"I don't expect you to support any of my decisions."

"Same."

"Can we just have some fun? I'm sick of this stonewalling routine."

"I'd like that."

I smiled. In my pocket was a little piece of paper. I folded it into a triangle and began punting it in her direction.

"You're a fucking child."

"You're losing."

She chuckled to herself and extended her fingers as goal posts.

We went back and forth, drive after drive, until the score was tied.

"If I make this, I win."

"You'll still be a junkie," she said and snickered.

I flicked the triangle, but halfway across the table, Gillian swatted it out of the air.

"You can't do that!"

"Show me the rule."

She held the little paper in her fist, extending her arm above her head. I lunged for her hand. The table shifted as I stood up, sloshing her drink into her lap.

I expected frustration, but she laughed without hesitation and so I laughed along. We laughed through the rest of the meal, Gillian making "wet myself" jokes while I faked repeats. Satisfied, we left.

"I hope you're not going to be late for your company."

"Company? It's not that formal. Just some friends."

"I thought I was your only friend."

"You've got it backward. I'm your only friend."

"It's not as funny when it's the truth."

"Come on, they'll be over soon, and I need to make a stop."

"Where?"

"Just a quick errand."

Two blocks down, in the direction of her flat, she stopped me in front of a liquor store.

"You coming in?"

"I guess."

I hadn't been in a liquor store in months and the smell was stark and foreign.

"Why are we here?"

"I told you, just a quick errand."

The bottles lined up neatly, like soldiers on an old battlefield. I read the labels – 40 year Scotch, triple distilled, aged in beer barrels, aged in bourbon barrels, not aged. Memories came back in droves. A drink would be nice, I thought, if only to take the edge off. But I didn't want a drink, I wanted smack. My brain started rushing and I pushed past Gillian to get to the door.

I sat on the curb and waited to calm down. After I'd chiefed two cigarettes, she came out of the store, holding a brown sack in her hand.

"Since when do you drink?"

"I never stopped."

"So you aren't sober."

"I don't do heroin."

"That's like being a murderer and saying, 'at least I'm not a rapist."

"That's the stupidest analogy I've ever heard – it's just alcohol. No needles in my arm, no whoring myself out for more. You'd be surprised how much some booze and pot helps me forget about the stuff."

"So you're smoking weed too?"

"You can't tell me how to be sober."

"I can tell you you're not sober."

"Agree to disagree."

We argued the whole of the walk back to her apartment building, up the stairs, and through the endless halls. She stalwartly defended her alternatives.

"You haven't been through half the shit I have."

"I've seen enough to know where this leads."

"When? You spent two years in hell. I'd already been there for ten, if you don't count the rest of my fucking life."

"You never even hit bottom, your family came along and bailed you out. Rehab? Paid for many times over. Your apartment? Paid for, so you can sit around and feel sorry for yourself all day long and then drink the night away. I don't think you've even been to hell."

"I didn't have to find hell - I was dragged there."

When we finally reached her door, we didn't even notice her friends already there. They were embarrassed to have witnessed our row, but one managed to speak up.

"Gillian, you made it."

"Against appearances, I have."

She smiled and opened the door.

"Are you coming in?"

"I have to grab some of my things."

Her friends were quick to sit down, pulling the handle of clear tequila from the bag.

"Damn, you're trying to get us fucked up."

"I'm sick of wine, this is a party in a bottle."

They all laughed, passing the bottle around and exchanging quips. Smiles occupied every face but mine. A drinking game began as they revealed secrets about themselves.

I picked up my pack of cigarettes and an unopened deck of playing cards.

"You have everything?"

"Yes, I do."

"You know you're welcome to stay."

"It seems like you have plenty of company."

"Please stay. It really won't be that bad."

"It's already foolish enough. Goodbye Gillian."

"Goodbye."

## Dancing Jets

## Joshua Wright

Trigger warning: Death, Violence

4-6-2018

Bagram Air Base, Afghanistan

"What's your position, Apex?" Kasper asked.

"On your right," replied Apex as he lifted his F-15 beside Kasper's wing. "Have you seen anything on your radar yet?" When Kasper looked down to check it, he let 2 scanning cycles go by. Nothing showed up.

"Negative," said Kasper.

"Nothing at all?"

"Not even a damn bird." Kasper threw his head back against the seat's headrest and glanced around at the passing sky. Thick and thin clouds blocking his view charged toward him and disappeared, like a car driving through fog. It was admittedly a pretty sight for him to look at, as it was the only thing keeping him occupied from the long, boring cruise.

"You think we'll see any enemies this time?" asked Apex. Kasper snapped out of his trance and looked at his wingman. He thought for a moment.

"I have no idea. I know we were told to be prepared in case they arrive and all, but we haven't gotten any of them in a while," Kasper responded. "It's making me forget how to dogfight."

"Pfft, I don't miss dogfighting at all," Apex huffed. "It's nice to have a break from that for once."

"I mean, it's what we signed up for, so there's not much of a reason to complain," Kasper replied in a monotone voice.

"I know, but it still scares me. Like, it doesn't negate the fact that we're always in danger of getting shot down."

"That makes the job more rewarding. High risk, high reward, you see," Kasper said. "Plus, I find our dogfights exciting, in all honesty. Soaring in the sky with your hair on fire, trying to shoot down your enemy before they shoot you down, all while doing your best to stay conscious, it makes you feel... alive, I guess?"

"That goes to show how seriously you take this job," muttered Apex.

"In that case, what do you like about this job?" Kasper snapped back.

Apex thought carefully for a moment before answering. "I enjoy the view of the sky. It's nice being in and above the clouds sometimes, and the land from below is completely different thirty thousand feet up."

"You could be flying commercial planes if that's how you feel. There's a lot less danger for that," Kasper suggested.

"It'll be a cold day in hell before I decide to do that. I don't want to fly those heavy hunks of

junk, and I don't want to be responsible for the lives of multiple people at once," Apex answered. "I already got a soon-to-be wife, a kid, and you to protect. That's all I need."

"So, you have a future family to take care of, yet you chose a dangerous job like this?" Kasper asked with curiosity. "Like I said, probably not the best profession."

"Don't you remember when we promised to fly in the Air Force in high school?" Apex answered. Kasper's eyes slightly widened. "All those times we read books about jets, played around with F-15 toys, and watched Top Gun on repeat?"

"Yeah, I do," he conceded.

"Well, I'm here to keep that promise. Plus, you know how much of a daredevil you are in the air. I'm constantly keeping you out of trouble." Apex had a point there.

"You know I can't help it. It's how I roll... or fly, in this case," Kasper snorted back.

"It may cost you at some point," Apex warned. "I can't protect you all the time."

"Apex, how many times have we survived the dogfights we've been in?" Kasper retorted.

"... All of them," he conceded.

"Exactly. We make a great team; you can't undermine that. You remember the time we were flying in Afghanistan, and I shot that bogey down? He was tailing you hard and I saved you from him."

Apex did recall almost getting shot down, but he had more to say on that than Kasper.

"Yeah, right after I saved you from two other bogeys trying to missile lock you," Apex replied.

"Hey man, that one bogey was charging right at you, and you couldn't shake him off. I had to help you out somehow."

"Which is why you ended up in more danger than me... Look. My point is, you've got to watch yourself and carefully plan things out. You can't always rush in all guns blazing."

"You think they're gonna give me any time for that?" Kasper said. "We should knock them out fast before they get any breathing room to fire back."

"That's why you always end up almost getting shot down. You're so fixated on shooting one of them down before another one is about to shoot you down," Apex replied in frustration. He didn't like having to repeat himself.

"That's where you come in," suggested Kasper. "You get him off my tail while I find my next target, like the times when I chased one down with another following me. You shot down the bogey behind me while I shot down the bogey I was chasing."

"And what if I'm not there to help you? What if I'm already shot down?" asked Apex. Before Kasper could answer, a light beeping noise sounded off in his cockpit, making him flinch lightly.

"Hold on, my radar's going off," Kasper said. Looking down to check, two green dots faded on the top left portion of the screen. "I've got contact. Incoming bogeys, fifteen miles away at ten o'clock." Apex checked his radar to see if he got the same results as Kasper.

"Roger, I've got contact too," Apex said. "We're getting closer."

"We should break left and knock 'em out straight on," Kasper suggested.

"I don't know. We can't make ourselves known that early," Apex replied.

"So? We've taken on pairs of bogeys before; it wouldn't be any different." Kasper had the same amount of cockiness and confidence in his voice he always had. "It's just a simple defense mission like command said. Intercept the hostiles and stop them from attacking us."

"You make it sound less important than it is," objected Apex. "They suspected one of those bogeys to be carrying air-to-ground missiles, so we can't afford to let them drop it on our base."

"And you're acting as nervous as your first time flying a jet. We can handle this, alright?"

Apex couldn't bring himself to object again. They had bogeys to catch, and time was of the essence.

"Whatever you say," he muttered.

"Good. Now break left," ordered Kasper. In unison, they tilted their planes left. Their wings screeched in their ears as they sliced through the thin air and puffy clouds. After they readjusted their planes to be level with the ground, Kasper looked directly ahead of him in hopes of seeing them, but he couldn't make out anything yet. Checking his radar, he noticed the pair of bogeys were directly at the top, closing in quick.

"They're coming right at us. Eight miles out at twelve o'clock," he declared. He was sure to see them dead ahead eventually, so he locked his eyes straight forward. Suddenly, a pair of black, horizontal specks dispersed a horde of clouds before him, splitting them into swirling, white spirals.

"I see 'em," Apex responded. "What type of jets do you think they're flying?"

Kasper squinted to make out the shape of the bogeys through his darkened visor. It was admittedly hard for him to do so due to the clashing shades, but he was used to it.

"Probably F-5s. Typical," Kasper grunted. Both pairs of jets soared to each other, ready to engage in their sky bound firefight.

"Five miles and coming in hot," Apex called out after his radar beeped once again. "Let's bank away from them to throw them off guard. Then we'll—"

Before Apex could finish stating his plan, a rumbling roar sounded off on his right, damn near loud enough to shiver his bones and rock his wings. Out of the corner of his eye, Kasper's jet was careening ahead of him, his afterburners trailing behind him in a bright, orange glow like the sun.

"Let's rock!" shouted Kasper. He whipped his plane up and right, and one of the bogeys began pursuing him. Apex was about to call him back, but the bogey dead ahead of him was charging straight at him. He made the split-second choice to bank left to narrowly avoid crashing into it, and the bogey pursued him. Apex had to scrap his plan for now, for he had little time to think about what else to do besides get out of the bogey's sight. He'll catch up with Kasper later.

There he goes again, Apex mumbled to himself. Dumbass.

"Let's see how much fun I can have with this guy," Kasper said through a smirk. He maneuvered in a serpentine pattern in hopes of throwing the bogey off his tail. As he swerved and banked, he could hear his whirling wings break the wind along with the bogey's. They darted, dashed, and twirled

in the sky, like ice skaters in a dance routine. Eventually, the gas trail of his afterburners formed a white, puffy S chain behind him, and the bogey following him was engulfed in the horde of smoke. *He probably lost me.* 

"What's your status, Apex?" Kasper asked.

"I'm... still trying to... lose this guy, but... he's getting too close," Apex replied through heavy breathing. Kasper glanced up to see Apex rolling up and down with a bogey just a few yards behind him. As Apex gasped and huffed, he struggled to keep his head steady and centered from being pulled and pushed to the side, as if he was being held back by forty-five-pound dumbbells. The muscles in his neck became increasingly strained from their constant flexing; it hurt, and his pumping blood vibrated within him. "He's getting... closer!" The green dot on Apex's radar inched closer to his center.

The G forces must be getting to him. "I'm on my way," Kasper answered. Rising to Apex's position, he positioned himself right behind the bogey tailing him. "I'm going for a missile lock." He flicked his tracker on and kept his jet on the bogey's flight pattern as tight as he could. A green reticle popped up on his visor and navigated slowly to his target, but the jet's constant twists and turns from pursuing Apex made it hard for Kasper to stay on track. "Apex, you've got to stop... turning so much, I can't... get a tone."

"If I stop, he'll... get a missile lock... on me," huffed Apex.

"I'll do it before he can. Plus, the g-forces are straining you too much." Kasper banked left as Apex and his bogey did. "If he doesn't have a... missile lock on you yet... just do a light dive... and keep him on your tail," he said in between gasps. The g-forces were getting to him, too.

"... Alright," gasped Apex. He adjusted himself level with the ground below before dipping into a dive. His chest shot back into the seat, as if he was pushed into a wall, and the deafening whir of the jet cutting into the air struck his ears in full force. The bogey and Kasper did the same. Now that the bogey was still, Kasper would have an easier time getting his reticle to lock on. Time was running out, though; they were approaching the desert floor below quickly. It became increasingly clearer as they broke the incoming clouds.

"Almost... got it," Kasper said, squinting his eyes and keeping his breaths in a steady rhythm. It was mere centimeters away from the bogey at this point. Apex heard beeping and noticed a flashing red light on the left side of his cockpit.

"He's going for... a missile lock Kasper," Apex shouted.

"I got tone," Kasper quickly responded as his reticle glowed red, and a loud beep sounded off in his cockpit. "Firing!"

Kasper pulled the trigger on his control stick and released. A missile blazed away from Kasper's wing, smoking its end out like a cigar and hissing in the air like a wild cat. It collided with the bogey ahead, setting off a fiery explosion in front of him. The shockwave of it was sent into him, rumbling his seat and delivering a powerful boom.

"Splash one," he called out as he and Apex pulled up beside each other. "That was close. I told

you I had your back." Apex took a second to catch his breath and re-coordinate himself.

"It's been a while since I got to—"

Before Kasper could finish, another loud beeping noise filled his ears. "What the hell's that?" He looked in his mirror to see a bogey closing in behind him.

"There's one on your tail! Break!" shouted Apex.

It must be the one from before, thought Kasper. He's going for a missile lock. Kasper wouldn't let that happen, so he bolted the nose of his plane upwards and let the bogey fly under him. Kasper whirled his jet around, preparing for another missile lock of his own as he hovered up. Apex was about to tail him, but a familiar beep sounded off in his own cockpit as well. It wasn't his missile lock alert since he didn't see anything behind him, so he checked his radar instead. Much to his surprise, another green dot showed up at the top of it.

"We've got another bogey incoming! Dead ahead at ten miles," Apex called out.

"Roger," replied Kasper. "You can take it on... I've got unfinished... business with this guy." The g-forces affected Kasper's breathing again.

"Don't you need help?" Apex asked.

"No time... for that. We should shoot them... down quick."

"The new bogey has a while before it gets here. I can help if..."

The beep went off in Apex's radar again. The bogey was much closer to him now, five miles in front of him. *Already*, Apex thought. *If the bogey is approaching this fast, it can't be an F-5*. Apex squinted to get a better look at what was approaching him. The only detail he could make out was its size; it was certainly larger than an F-5. *Have we seen one of these before?* Apex was going to study it more, but it suddenly tilted right and barreled past him. The roar of its afterburners squalled close behind, blasting an ear-splitting tremble that rocked his F-15 like an earthquake. Apex grew dazed, but only for a short while. He looked towards his mirror to see where the mysterious jet was headed, and noticed Kasper was still pursuing the F-5. A nerve of realization struck him like a brick. *He's going for Kasper!* With no time to waste, Apex made a beeline to Kasper's direction.

"I've got a tone," Kasper called out. He was still chasing the bogey, unaware of the unknown bandit rapidly approaching him. They were both climbing in altitude, the force of the soaring jet throwing Kasper into the back of his seat again.

"Kasper... you've got an incoming bogey. You've got to move," Apex warned. Kasper maintained his position on the bogey.

"Firing!" Kasper shouted. Another missile released itself from the wing and struck the bogey dead center, the same way it destroyed the previous bogey. "Splash two," he said. Its flareup rang so loud that Kasper failed to notice his missile lock alert go off. The unknown jet was closing in faster on Kasper. Apex activated his afterburners and thrusted to their position as quickly as he could; he knew what the new bogey was doing.

"Kasper, he's locking on to you," Apex exclaimed.

With those words, Kasper caught on to his beeping alert. He looked to see what was tailing him on his radar, and saw the mysterious gray bogey stuck behind. Apex kept firewalling his way to them, trying to get a better look at what chased Kasper. He was five miles away from them when he could finally make out the shape of the aircraft. It had vertical stabilizers on its afterburners, two intake engines at the bottom, and missiles attached to the very edge of its wings; a Su-27 Flanker; one of the only planes he had a close call with.

"Get out of there, Kasper!" The Flanker hurled its own missile out, careening towards his wingman. The plane then tilted up and left, out of Apex's sight.

"Woah!" Kasper barked. He dove and banked, hoping to juke the inbound projectile, but it stuck with him. "I can't... lose it!" The missile was inching closer to Kasper.

Then Apex thought of something. "Kasper! Pull up now."

"What... are you planning?" Kasper grunted, the static in his radio scratching up his voice.

"Just do it," Apex replied.

Kasper did as he ordered, arching his jet up to the sky. He felt his chest collapse on the back of his seat again, weighing him down. As the missile did the same, Apex bolted to his position, aiming his jet as close as he could to the tailing rocket.

Mere miles from Kasper, Apex pulled up lightly, shouting, "Launching flares!"

A series of shining, glowing spheres bolted from the bottom of the plane, causing Kasper to whip away from them. The missile attempted to follow suit, but it was caught in the barrage of Apex's flares. It detonated from within and grew into a brief puff of flames and fumes. The rest of the flares haphazardly disintegrated in the clouds.

"That... was close," huffed Kasper. He banked around, making his way back to Apex.

"Thank me later," Apex replied. "Now we need to—"

The cockpit buzz sounded off again before Apex could finish. He looked behind him and saw the Flanker on his tail now, much closer to him than Kasper. Within that moment, he noticed its hatch open on its left wing and something drop and speed right towards him. Fright ran down Kasper's spine.

"Apex, move it!" Kasper shouted as he activated his afterburners.

"He's got a missile lock on me!" Apex bellowed.

"Get out of there goddamnit!" Kasper ordered.

"I'm trying!" Apex shouted before making a dive, but it was too late. The warhead pelted him, igniting his jet in blazes. An onslaught of fire and thick black smoke engulfed the sky like a volcano eruption, plummeting the dwindling plane to the ground. Its remains shimmered in flames and flailed about aimlessly.

Kasper could only watch as the burning debris kept smoking itself out. "... Apex?" he called out. The other end of Kasper's radio was a silent static.

The same buzz in his cockpit sounded off, snapping him out of his momentary grief. His radar detected a green dot closing in on his right. Glancing that way, he saw the Flanker speeding towards

him, ten or so miles away.

In that moment, Kasper's heartbeat sped up and his breathing grew heavier. His face heated up, and he tightened his grip on the control stick. In a rage, he jerked the plane in the direction of the Flanker, rushing straight towards it like a baseball to a catcher's mitt. He was head-to-head with the enemy. Kasper didn't know what that bogey was thinking, but he didn't care to find out. He just killed his wingman, his friend, and he wouldn't let him get away with it.

Once the radar locked on to the bogey, he grunted, and released all his weapons at once. A barrage of bullets and missiles launched from Kasper's plane, the exhausting smoke engulfing his line of sight. The longer he held the trigger on his guns, the louder he screamed, as if he was channeling his wrath into his weapons. He was so caught up in his fury that he failed to notice the black smoke cloud ahead of him, or the explosion that sounded off. Flying straight through it snapped him out of his enraged trance. Letting go of the trigger, his blood red hands cooled down and the aching pressure subsided. He took a deep breath and circled around to see what was left behind. The fiery carnage had grayed out; nothing was left of the Flanker. It was completely obliterated.

*Splash four*, Kasper thought to himself. He checked his radar once more, but nothing else showed up. No more bogeys, surprise enemy jets, or allies in the now smokey sky with him; he was all alone.

+\*\*

Kasper knelt and studied the tombstone. "Alexander Pilton. 1994 -2018. The land is gorgeous from up here. RIP." It hasn't changed since then; the Air Force label was imprinted above the name with American flags on both sides.

Hey buddy, he thought, speaking to his Apex. I know it's been a while and all, but I just want to uh... check on you again and... tell you how things were going on my end. I just got back from another defense mission from Afghanistan; we didn't shoot anything down, but we blew some stuff up. It was exciting.

Kasper's face contorted and his voice shivered. His hand grinded against his forehead like he had a migraine. The same words kept echoing in his mind: It may cost you at some point. I can't protect you all the time. And what if I'm not there to help you? What if I'm already shot down? He could never shake them away, no matter how hard he tried.

Suddenly, he felt something warm caress his left shoulder. He looked up slowly to see a woman standing before him. She had an all-black dress with a sunhat. Blonde hair hung beside her cheeks and curled under her chin. Kasper recognized her through her familiar smile. "Jane?"

"You alright?" she asked.

"... Yeah. I am," Kasper responded, standing up to meet her eye to eye. "You?"

"Never better," Jane said. She nodded hesitantly though her smile. They both shifted their attention to the grave.

"He always loved flying with you," she admitted softly. "I don't think he would have wanted any other wingman."

"I don't know. I still can't help but think it was my fault," Kasper muttered. "I could have had his back, but..." Kasper blinked hard and looked up. "I was so caught up in—"

"Hey, no," Jane interrupted. She placed a hand on Kasper's cheek, wiping away another tear of his. Kasper looked back at her, confused yet eased. "You did what you could, and that's all that matters. It could have been too late for him, but he protected you. That's noble of him." Kasper hung his head in realization of that. He remembered Apex helping him avoid that missile, banking and diving about before Apex shot it down. He had to come to terms with it—he couldn't save his partner.

"I know." Kasper let out a sigh, and Jane pulled him in for a hug.

"Don't be afraid to keep flying," she whispered. "But keep him in your heart, okay?"

"... I will. Thanks."

"Of course."

Kasper and Jane held their pose, taking in each other's warm embrace.

## Oh, To Be A Bee

## Hannah Lovelace

My fingertips round the cement wall as I press up against it, leaning to see over the parking lot. The sun is gone, hiding behind the horizon, only its rays peek up in a haze of purplish-pink. Here on the roof, a warm breeze ruffles through my hair. The hot summer sun from earlier in the day is still pressing on in the air-conditioned room. But the air up here... I fill my lungs with the hazy atmosphere, clearing the cold hospital air out of them.

I peer down at the empty parking lot, glowing under the shine of the waves. A single car swims in the hot asphalt. A sea-green car. Never knew the names of cars, maybe it was a Toyota, a Sudan, or probably neither of those. But it smelled new all the time. Vacuumed, wiped down, and a fresh scented tree to hang from the rear-view weekly. It wasn't my own and I never got to drive it, but I loved that car. Until it was no longer ours. I lift my fingers to my lips, a lit cigarette, the pack slightly crumpled in my other hand. Camel. I gag a little as I breathe it in, not even an attempt to hold it in. First cigarette, and probably my last.

Maybe I'll hop down and go for a swim? No. Harry would be annoyed with me. I don't even have the keys. Plus I need a diving certificate to jump this high from the roof. How did I even get up here? I'm sure that there must be a restricted access sign on the door. To be honest I'm doubtful there's a door to get up here. My eyes train down to my feet, snug up in some slippers that I don't remember borrowing from Harrison's mom. She doesn't even live in the States. How did I get them? Oh. Mail.

My eyes close in delight, feeling soft hands smoothing out my shirt and making their way around my waist. A small smile forms at my lips as he pulls me closer to his chest. His heart beats strong and loud. The thunder cracks in the distance, but his squeeze brings me back to that strong heartbeat. Pounding loudly, in my ears.

I let out a sigh of relief, feeling it against my own. Familiar with the countless nights we spent holding each other in our bed. His lips press against my scalp in a soft smooch.

"Whatcha doing out here?" He whispers, his voice coarse from un-use. My own heart jumps at this. The same tone of voice for morning breakfast or late-night conversation.

"I don't know." I shrug, sliding in his arms to face him. He smiles, pressing his forehead into my shoulder. Just happy to be in his arms I run a hand into his hair, always clean and conditioned, long enough to cover his eyebrows if he didn't style it. The days where he left it free were often the sweetest. The days of hair falling over his eyes in bed, watching the hours lazy by.

"Ah," He lifts his head up, bushy brows relaxed in a low glance to the horizon, "guess I just missed the sunset." I nod, searching to meet his eyes. He finally shifts them to mine. A misty blue, I wouldn't want to forget. The sweater he's wearing matches them perfectly. A sweater that often-times I would pull out when he asked what to wear on date night. Frayed at the sleeves, it usually didn't fit the

occasion. But I didn't mind.

The first time he wore it was on a picnic date we had on a particularly cool summer. Unlike this one. We lay on a blanket green like the grass. His blue attracted many bugs and to his dismay, the bees were attempting to pollinate him.

"It's a shame." I giggle, peering out from his arms back to the horizon. The stars had come out from their game of hide and seek with the sun. The sky was black, and the waves below shone with the streetlight. A frown finds its way on my face, realizing I don't remember the sunset either.

"What time is it?" He mutters, pulling his arms away from me, with a sudden attitude.

"Uh," I start, looking at my wrist. There isn't a watch, so I look to the clock in the floor. He scoffs in annoyance, grabbing my wrist, and looking at the watch his dad bought me a few birthdays ago. I've never worn it. It's a bulky watch. I can check my phone anyways. My head shakes, turning my back to him. He sets a hand on my shoulder, attempting to get me to face him again.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have been so rude." My cigarette sticks from his lips, lips that were once mine. He takes a smooth drag, not his first, and... probably his last.

Once more I sigh, leaning back into his embrace. Meeting the soft blue sweater and a strong heartbeat. He's easy to forgive. "I love you," I speak into him pulling him close as can be, my face draining in color.

Oh, to be a bee. Cold air-conditioned tears slip from my eyes.

"I love you too," he mutters into my hair, before pushing me away. "But you have to listen very carefully." I nod as he continues voice distant though he stands next to me, "It's time for me to go, okay?"

"Go where?"

"Come on Dexy, put on your running shoes it's midnight."

"What?" I squint, but he only shrugs in response. "Okay." I huff, rolling my eyes knowing he's safely in bed next to me. Right?

"No." a heavy breath falls from him, as he lifts his hands to my face. My eyes well up as his thumbs press against my nose. Slowly he traces them over the bridge, curving around the brows, and running through the hills, a pink blush of roses planted in my pores. Oh, to be a bee. The thumbs, Jack and Jill tumble down to my lips, hovering there a moment before he speaks again, "I really must go."

I grit my teeth, "Harrison." My fingers claw at the hospital gown flowing over his body. It's far too big on him, he hasn't been eating. He can't.

"Yeah?" He gargles, blood pooling out from his mouth and dribbling onto his chest.

"Don't go." I cry, pushing my palms into the blood soaking from his sweater, The thunder in the distance hasn't been rumbling. His heart, I can't feel its strong beat.

"One last wild waltz?" his eyes soften, running a hand back through my hair.

I sob, "I can't understand," But he's not listening. I can't speak. My hands tear at the cement wall, blood forming underneath my nails. "Don't go," I squeeze out a whisper, staring out as the sun sets

in a heaping mix of color. Yellow, pink, red, and orange. But not blue.

My eyes open, lids peeling away from each other. My heart thuds loudly, and my breath is heavy. After a few blinks returning moisture to my tear ducts, I shift over to the clock on my bedside table. 1:03 it reads. A few more blinks and I raise under the covers, the sheets underneath me damp from my nightmarish sleep. The moon glows over the white covers, lumped over my body, and folding over his sleeping body.

"Too rye aye?" I barely catch Harry's muttering. His head is pressed into the pillows, soft snores dropping from his mouth. My eyes widen at the familiar phrase, but the memory escapes me. In an attempt to slow my heartbeat, I take a few deep breaths. Another dream? I hop out of bed, tiptoeing over the desk on the far right.

Praying not to wake him, I flip on the desk light and pull out a yellow legal pad and pen. I scribble it down, each moment. Remembering not quite as vividly as I would hope.

"One last wild waltz?" I whisper in thought, tapping the eraser on my lip. We've never gone dancing, let alone waltz. Somehow still, it sounds familiar. Distant song lyrics. I bite my inner lip. This dream was different than the rest. More clear, and easier to remember. I crawl over my words again, searching for any missing pieces I might recall.

The clock in the floor. Damn it.

"Another dream?" I jump at his voice; my body still tense from dreamland. He's sitting up, eyes barely open, but still looking at me. I flip the light off, squinting in the darkness to see him.

"Yeah," I nod, setting the pen aside and facing him. In a moment of silence, the air conditioning kicks on, humming loudly above me. His hair shifts in a cold breeze from the vent above him.

"What time was on the clock?"

My eyes fall to the ground, searching for an answer. Had I lost the memory of it? No, in each dream the clocks were always so vivid. I could always see the time. 1:00, 5:00, and several other times. There was nothing to indicate a full circle. This time....

I swallowed, glancing back up at him. "There was no time."

fin.

thank you for reading.

submit your work for consideration at *riverrunjournal.com* 



