

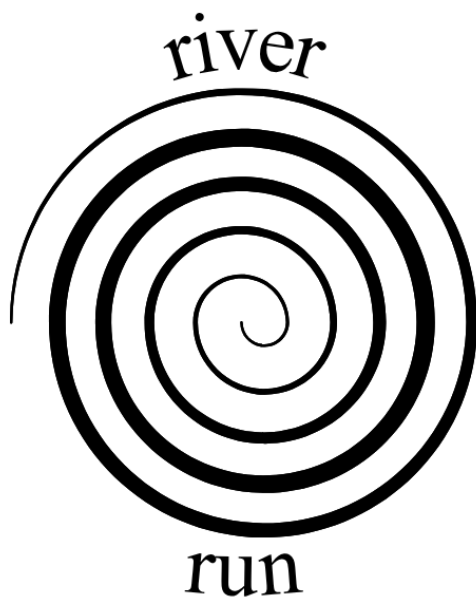
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student run •

visual art

nonfiction

poetry

fiction



volume 53

An avenue through which UCCS artists and writers have been able to express their voices.

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EDITORIAL TEAM



LETTER FROM THE EDITORS



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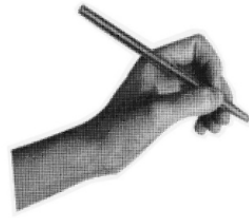


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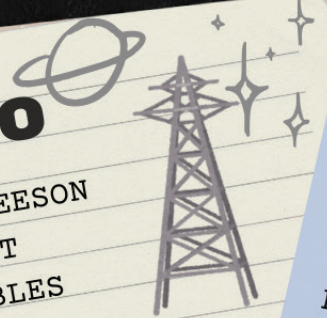
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LED BY:
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SOPHIA KUSTAR
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THE BRAINS.
THE CHAOS.
THE MAGIC.

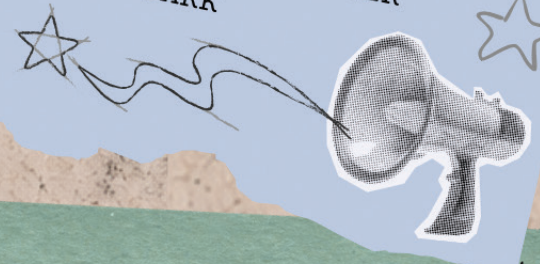
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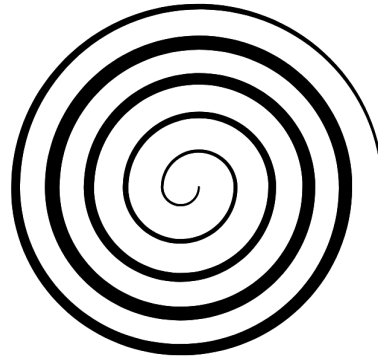
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Dear Reader,

Thank you for taking part in encouraging and supporting the creative minds of the UCCS student and alumni community.

Over the past couple of months, we have collected creative works from you and your peers to create volume 53 of the *riverrun* Literary & Arts Journal.

This edition, as you'll see, draws inspiration from "chaos." We understand that the world around us is chaotic, and rather than resisting the current, we're going with the flow.

We hope the diversity you'll find in this journal offers a different perspective about what chaos means, showing how it can be beautiful, just like a river.

riverrun exists as a confluence of distinct voices, each shaped by its own experience, imagination, and conviction.

The works contained within represent the creative expressions and perspectives of their individual contributors and should not be understood as reflective of the views or positions of the editorial staff, its affiliated committees, or the University of Colorado Colorado Springs. Publication in this volume does not imply endorsement but rather affirms our commitment to fostering diverse expression and the open exchange of ideas.

Sincerely,
The *riverrun* Editorial Team for Vol. 53

LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

Within these pages are numerous creative works from our students and alumni here at UCCS. Each original composition was selected by the *riverrun* editorial team to represent the creativity of our campus community.

riverrun exists to allow creativity and creative expression to thrive. However, we would like to inform our readers that some of these works may contain uncomfortable themes or subject matter.

These may include, but are not limited to: abuse, addiction of all kinds, alcoholism, drug use, sexual content, sexual violence, violence, murder, suicide, self-harm, and death.

By turning to the next page, you acknowledge that you may encounter content addressing the topics listed above. We encourage you to use personal judgment when engaging with material that may be harmful or distressing to you. Content warnings such as these have been provided and/or approved by our published authors, artists, and poets. They are noted throughout the book. Please see the content warning notes on the bottom of the first page of any pieces noted with an asterisk (*) in their titles.

We recognize that these works may not be for everyone. They are presented as expressions of the creative voices within our campus community.

In short, **reader discretion is advised.**



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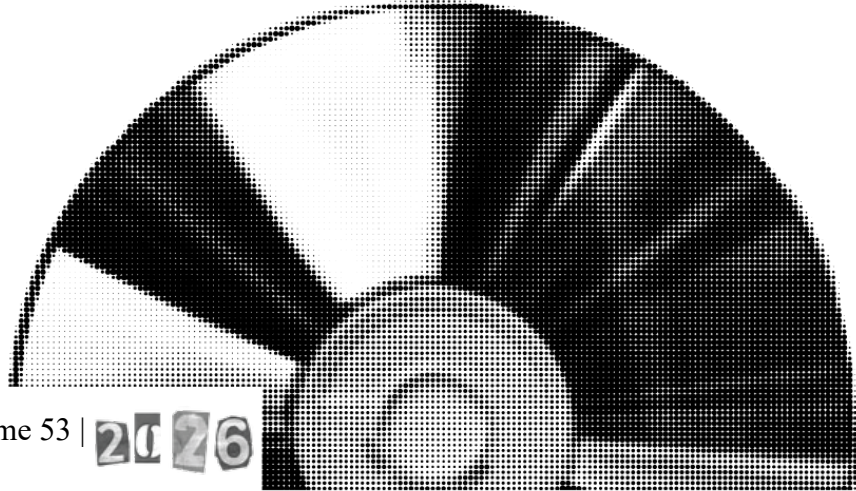
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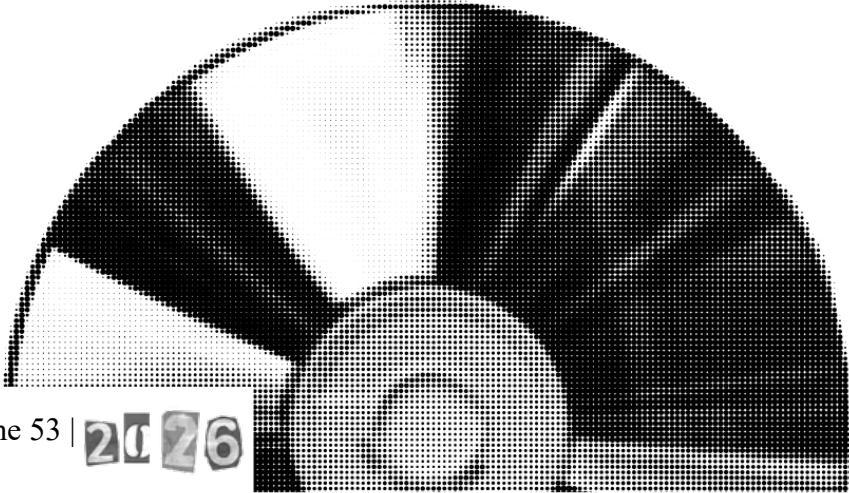
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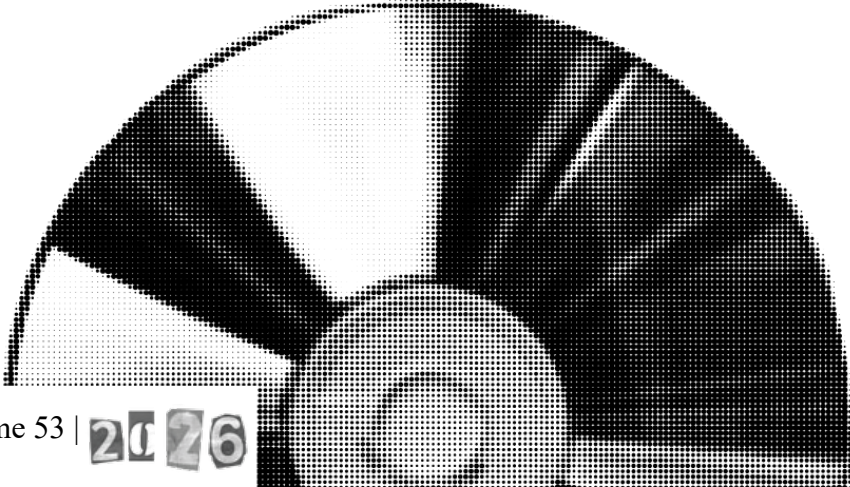
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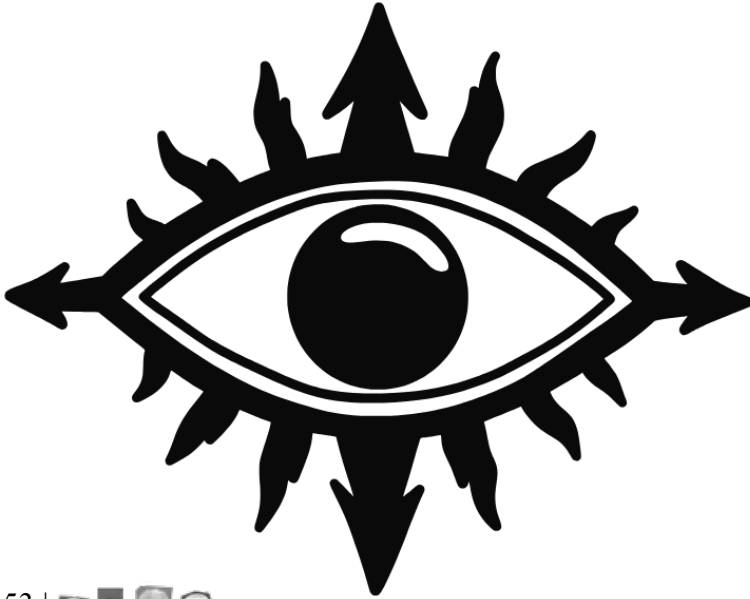
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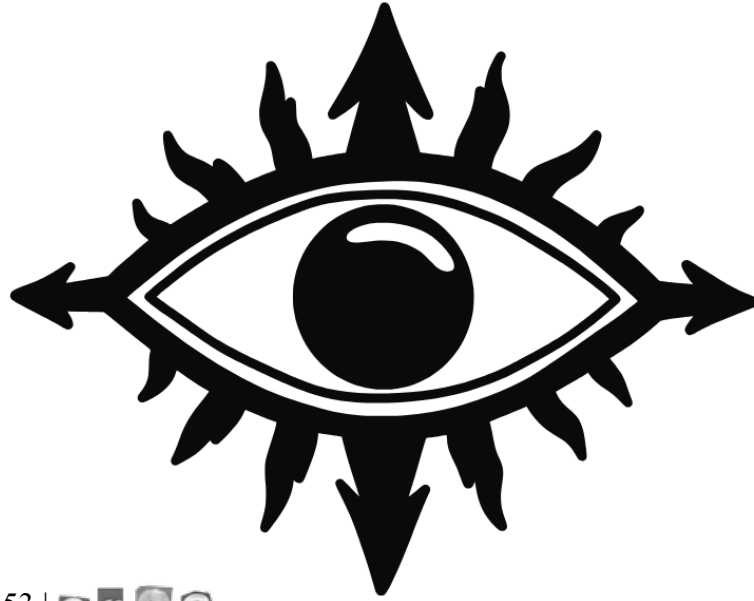
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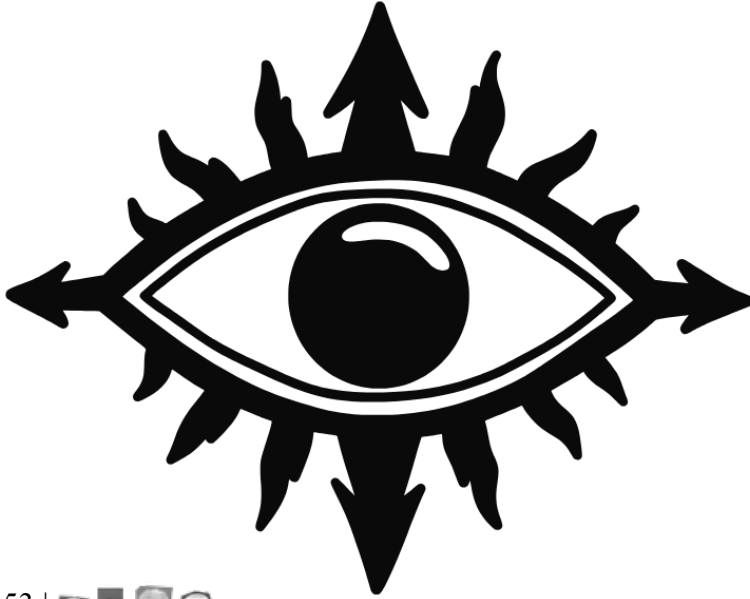
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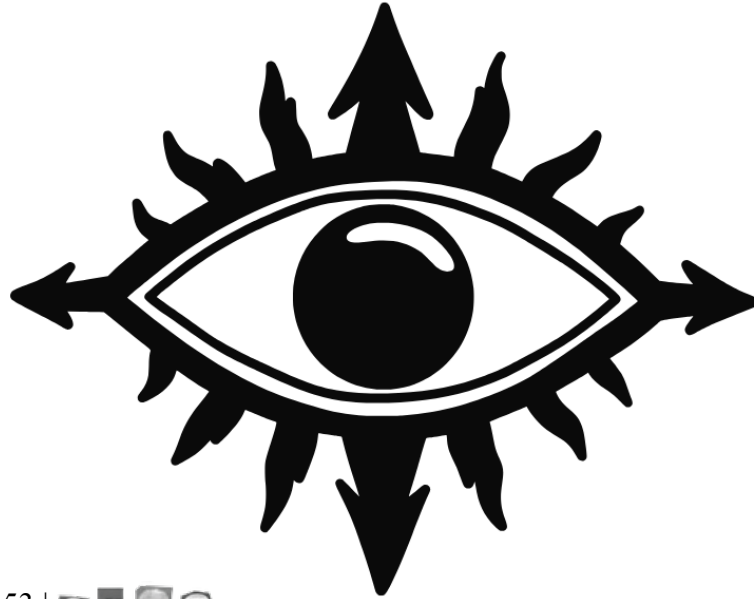
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F I C T I O N

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He said that's where I messed up, that it was too late now. That I did it to myself. Now, I know that sounds harsh. He even said so himself. But that wasn't the point; it wasn't meant to hurt me or make me feel bad at all. It was just a fact. It was just the way it was.

"You kissed her too soon. You got a little excited, and now it's all downhill from here."

"We talk all the time though."

"Doesn't matter."

"We made out for, like, an hour. She put her leg around my waist."

He shrugged and repeated, "It doesn't matter."

"What if she had kissed me, you know, kissed me first?"

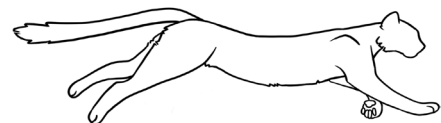
"That might have bought you some time. But you'll never know now." He puffed out cigarette smoke. We both watched the cloud disappear like it was my hopes and dreams.

According to Colin, love was like gravity. What goes up must come down. As soon as feelings start, they start to end. It goes away. Colin was nineteen to my sixteen and even at the time, I understood that in the grand scheme of things this was a mostly negligible age difference and took his life wisdom with a grain of salt. But it appealed to my growing cynicism. And he was correct, when it came to this particular young lady; we never kissed again. Soon we were barely speaking, and I resolved not only to appear unbothered by this to the outside world, but to be unbothered inside too. Though, as you can imagine, my heart ached like a tumor for a while. Colin relished telling me that he told me so, and the light from his accurate prediction was so bright I had to wear shades.

Smiling, joking, taking it in stride, I said, "So what's the answer? How do we get around this?"

"You don't. You just have to accept it."

KISSING TOO SOON
Alex Bell



“No.”

“Yep.”

“How can you say that? You did it, you beat the system. You found somebody great.” Colin had been with his girlfriend for two years.

He said, “I’m not exempt. My time will come too.”

“But if you go in with that mindset—that it’s going to end eventually—isn’t that just a self-fulfilling prophecy?”

He just shrugged again. “You can’t stop time. You can’t force someone to love you forever.”

~

I had my defenses up bigtime during those years, and only later did I understand how harmful that was, how much it slowed down the process of me turning into some semblance of an adult. But I firmly believed then that anyone out of their teens who still believed in true love or romance was an idiot, and in the end got what they deserved for entertaining these delusions. Sometimes I meet someone still in that mode, and it’s like running into a leper from the colony you narrowly escaped; you feel guilty for getting better, but not enough to shake their hand.

Anyway, Colin had a hard time being philosophical when his girlfriend inexplicably broke up with him, not long after my incident of premature affection. She said she was stressed out about life, and their relationship had become too much for her. She hit him with texts about needing space. This reasoning was quickly discarded as a cover for some mysterious hidden girl behavior that was being kept from him. Obsessive analysis and disparaging remarks about her character would surely bring the truth to light.

He drove us to the beach that night after she told him. I was there for moral support. I was worried we would get robbed or knifed or both, but I figured if we stayed in the truck we’d be alright. This wasn’t a tourist beach, just a random strip of grass and sand where I imagine drug deals went down. He was mad, and I wisely left my I-told-you-so’s at home.

“I just can’t believe it,” he said. I nodded but said nothing. He got out,

angrily flinging his door open, and I followed with fearful eyes.

It was September, a tricky month for the beach. The days still got really hot, but the water was way too cold now, at least for me. I stared down with my arms crossed, drawing lines in the sand with my shoe while I listened to him rant. He paced, avoiding the tide.

I said, “Maybe she’s just freaking out about something that has nothing to do with you. Maybe if you give her some time she’ll change her mind. She’ll realize you’re not the problem.” The wind from the sea carried my words away, and I had to repeat myself. It seemed to know they were useless.

There was no moon in the night sky, but a faint glow floated over the gray waves from distant streetlights and the electric current of traffic. We were out there a long time. I did my best to convince him that respecting her desire to be left alone was the best course of action, that it was the mature thing to do. Maybe that would score him some points with her, if there were in fact any points to be earned.

~

It was about a month later that I met someone, or thought I met someone, at that very same beach. A girl my age. I couldn’t tell you why then, and maybe I won’t do such a good job now, but after that night I felt this burning desire to go back to that spot, only during the day. I don’t know what it was about it, just some siren song, but on a Saturday morning my mom let me borrow her car.

It looked a lot different under the burning sun. It was almost as quiet as it had been that night; the ocean drowned out the cars that regularly went by. My gaze was firmly fixed on where the water met the horizon. I occasionally looked at my phone. *No one in the whole world knows I’m here.* I remember thinking that, and I remember how good it felt.

Then I heard footsteps behind me, trudging through the grass and thin line of trees that obscured my car at the side of the road.

“Excuse me? Hello?”

I turned around. It was a girl wearing a swimsuit, with a faded blue flannel over it, unbuttoned. Her hair was damp and flat against her head. She was holding a leash, which made a soft clinking sound as it swung at her side.



“Hey,” I said, still kind of lost in a trance.

“Have you seen a dog run by?”

“No, I haven’t.”

She did a circle around me, as though suspecting I might have a canine stashed on my person. I momentarily removed my sunglasses, gave her a look that she didn’t catch, then scanned the ground for paw prints. But the only tracks were my own.

I asked her, “What kind of dog is it?”

She said, “He’s a Chow dog, he’s a big red fluff ball.”

I shook my head. “Haven’t seen any dogs since I got here.”

She swore, then let out a sigh. “I was swimming, and usually he’s really good about not wandering off. But then I came in, and now I can’t find him.”

I threw up my hands. “I’m sure he’s around here somewhere.”

The girl made her way past me then, saying, “Maybe that guy over there has seen him.”

I turned around to see who she meant, and I flinched. It was Colin. What was he doing here? There’s no way he could have known I’d be at the beach today. I checked my phone; no texts, no missed calls. I ran from the beach before he could spot me and dove out of sight. I’m sure I looked ridiculous, but I didn’t care.

~

A few minutes later the girl found me hiding among the trees and the tall grass. I knew it was her because of the leash. She stood over me with her hands on her hips; still no dog.

“Are you okay?” she asked, in a slightly mocking tone.

I raised my head, the sun in my eyes. “Is he gone?”

“He started walking the other way. You’re safe.”

“What did he say?”

“He hasn’t seen my dog.”

“Did he say anything else? Did he say he was looking for someone?”

“He didn’t seem like he wanted to talk. I’m assuming you know this person?”

I gave her the whole story, starting with the kissing too soon school of thought. Her expression became more puzzled the more I talked, and then there was a gleam in her eye like she wanted to laugh at me but didn’t want to be mean.

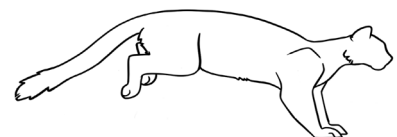
She said she understood. Glad one of us did.

“I’m gonna go swim some more,” she said. Then she leaned over and kissed me, just a quick peck on the top of my head like I was a little kid. “Come out whenever you’re ready. Oh, and if you see my dog, grab him.”

“I will,” I said, smiling and no doubt blushing, knowing me.

I sat in the grass silently for a while. I never caught sight of my friend, so eventually I got up and walked back close to the water. Out of curiosity I reached down, letting the tide run over my hand. It was like ice. I wiped it off on my jeans, shaking my head to myself.

No one was around. I was alone again. Looking back, I wonder if that really was Colin, or just some random guy that I thought was him. Searching up and down the beach, I came upon the flannel, neatly folded into a square with the dog leash resting on top. She must have been swimming still. I stared at the sea but never found her. I finally decided to get going, but first I found a stick and wrote THANKS FOR LISTENING in the sand next to her stuff. I started to make my way to the car, when I saw a curling chain of paw prints looping in several different directions. And then I heard barking, in the distance.



A young boy scrambled through the forest. His feet were bruised and sore and the brambles pulled at his clothes, as if the woods itself wished to turn him back. The boy was not particularly tall, nor especially strong, but he had the look of a youth far more sensible than boys of his age usually ought to be. The trees pressed in around him and thorns pulled at his coat and scratched his skin. Yet, he went on all the same, for there was a quiet determination in his eyes.

Before long, the trees drew back. Rising like a monolith before him was a great cliff of stone. The boy stopped, for anyone, even a grown person, would have done the same. Then he lifted his gaze, peering up as high as his eyes could scan. The rock towered above him. Its face seemed to disappear into the clouds, somewhere beyond the reach of his eyes. For a moment, he stood very still, small and breathless at this great keep's foot. Now, the boy was young. His short brown hair was disheveled, and his rumpled clothes bore the marks of ones well-traveled. What one noticed most, however, was not his appearance, but the look of his face. It bore the sort of steady, thoughtful expression of a child who has already decided to be brave, even if he would much prefer not to be.

The cliff, a stone fortress, stood tall and silent, its sides jagged and its face so sheer that it almost seemed to lean over him. Still, the boy reached out and caught hold of the first sharp rock he could grasp and began to climb.

He had not gone far when his foot found a stone that was less trustworthy than the others. In an instant, the rock slid from under his foot, and he tumbled with a yelp. Desperately reaching for a solid hold, the boy's hand found none, and he fell all the way to the bottom. For a little while he sat, dazed and sore, wondering whether the ground had always been so fond of rushing up to meet him. Then he turned his head this way and that, searching the great wall of stone for some kinder path, some ledge, crack, or corner that might offer another way over. He stood up and began to search along the wall, peering up, testing here and there, until at last he found himself standing exactly where he had begun. Then, he knew with a sinking feeling, that there was nothing. He was helpless with no way over. So, the boy sat down at the foot of the cliff, and having been brave for as long as he could manage, he did the most sensible

thing left to him. He began to cry.

“What am I to do?” cried the little boy. “There is no way over this cliff, and if I do not hurry, night will fall and surely the wolves will have me.”

At that very moment, a small, thin creature slipped out from beneath a plump blackberry bush and propped itself up on its hind legs. It was a lizard-like beast with a body made of smooth sapphire scales. Peering out from its scaled face were a pair of bright amber eyes. It looked the boy up and down and then opened its mouth as if to speak.

“Dear boy,” the creature said, “Are you lost?”

This reptile spoke. Not a squeak nor a hiss but actual words. Its small throat worked, producing a full sentence as if it were the most ordinary thing in the world. One might pause here, and indeed, any careful reader might say, “Surely a lizard cannot speak proper words?”

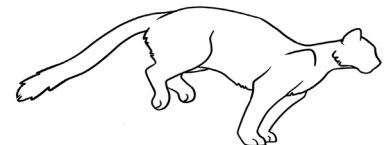
The boy started so violently that he nearly fell backward. A talking lizard, after all, is not something one expects to meet under any normal circumstance, *or any abnormal circumstance, for that matter*. Still, he managed to find his voice and murmured a polite, “Yes, sir. I have been lost for many days.”

“I see,” said the small creature thoughtfully, “and why, may I ask, are you wandering alone? Has your mother not warned you of the dangers that live here?”

“Well, yes,” the boy began, and he might have flushed, as if scolded by one wiser and knowing better, had he not been so utterly bewildered that such counsel came from this little, talking lizard. This forest was full of oddities, he thought, but none so extraordinary as a talking lizard. Yet, at the mention of his mother, all thoughts of absurdity fled, and tears began to fill his eyes.

“M-my mother has warned me,” he said, his voice trembling, “b-but she has been ill for a long time.” He sniffed and wiped his eyes with his sleeve before continuing, “The doctor said the only herb that can heal her is found in these woods, b-but he is too afraid to come find it.”

At this, the creature blinked in surprise, “So,” it murmured slowly, “you came here all by yourself to find this herb for your mother?” The creature



studied him carefully, tilting its head, then asked, “And did you find it?”

The boy nodded shyly, reaching into his satchel and producing three small leaves, each one cloven at the tip. The lizard’s eyes softened, and a warm, comforting smile spread across its face. Calm and thoughtful, it looked at the boy as if weighing the courage he carried in his chest.

“Well then,” it said at last, “I see that you are a boy of a good and honest heart. Do not fear. I shall help you find your home.”

Quietly, the small creature approached the face of the cliff. It paused and glanced back at the boy, its tail motioning for him to follow. Then, turning once more to the rock, it reached out a small claw and touched the solid surface.

Now, dear reader, it is here that we must all suspend our disbelief... for it happens that what occurred next is not something that can take place in any ordinary wood. Like parting water, the rock, dirt, and stone slowly folded back, as if the cliff itself was bowing aside for some regal person, and made way for a silver staircase. One might suspect that a boy of his age, confronted with such marvels, might invent the whole tale to impress someone, or perhaps even to convince himself, but I assure you, what he saw was no invention of fancy nor a sudden fit of childish imagination.

The boy stared, mouth slightly agape. He blinked, rubbed his eyes, and finally reached out to touch the first shining stair, cold and slick. He could hardly believe it was real. He looked back at the creature for reassurance. It merely nodded, calm and patient, and began to climb. The boy hurried after it, half afraid that the stairs might swallow him up as quickly as they had appeared. His heart was pounding with fear and wonder.

As they ascended, the boy looked back; the staircase behind them rippled and shimmered like a pool made of silver as the sun touched it. When they stepped off the final stair, the ground shivered and closed over itself, leaving no trace of the path they had taken. The boy stared in awe at where the stairs had been. A small patch of clovers had blossomed there, but nothing else remained of the silver path.

“Who, or what, are you?” he asked, his voice barely more than a whisper as they moved on through the trees.

“I am a myth,” the creature replied, “or so I’ve heard.” It chuckled with a

laugh that sounded of both amusement and sorrow.

“How... how can you do that with the ground?” the boy stammered, still marveling at what had just occurred.

“I learned it long ago,” the creature said simply, “from others like me.”

“Others like you?” The boy stumbled over his words, eager to ask everything at once.

“Where are they now? Can I learn it too? Can you do other things?”

The creature’s eyes grew distant, and a faint sad smile crossed its face. “To answer your first question, there were others like me. Long ago, in a different time. They are no longer.”

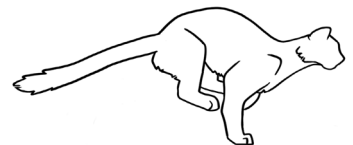
The boy hesitated; a sudden weight seemed to settle on his small shoulders. With concern, he gently asked, “What happened to them?”

“Humans,” the scaled creature began, its voice low and solemn. “They came to the forests long ago in search of magical beasts. They wished for power and sought to learn our secrets. When we tried to teach them, they wished to use it in wicked ways we could not understand. And so, in their anger, they rose up against us. Greed drove them, and they hunted us without mercy. Some creatures fled into hiding, while others were captured. Those who were captured suffered things too terrible for me to speak of here. The ones who fled have disappeared into myth and legend.” The creature drew a slow breath. “I am the only one left.”

“That is awful,” the boy whispered. He reached tentatively with a gentle hand and patted the creature’s back. “I promise I will never hurt you.”

At this, the beast looked up at him. Its amber eyes shone, and a soft, melancholy smile came over the creature.

The pair continued through the trees. The sun had begun its slow descent in the warm, summer sky, spilling gold across the forest floor. A small stream trickled beside them as they followed its winding path downhill. Shadows lengthened across the forest floor, and soon the woods were dim and hushed with dusk. The boy glanced nervously at the brush around him, every rustle making his heart skip a beat. Yet he kept on, staying close to the creature, who



walked with quiet confidence.

“What troubles you, my boy?” the scaled creature asked in its courteous measured voice that seemed to hold no fear.

“I... I am afraid of the wolves in the woods,” the boy admitted, his voice trembling.

“And how did you sleep out here before I found you?” the creature asked gently.

“Well,” the boy said, shivering slightly, “I would climb a tree and sleep in the branches. I would hear them in the night, though they were always far away. But the past two nights... they have been closer. I am afraid they will find me.” A small whimper escaped him.

“Do not cry, my child,” the creature said softly. Its voice was so reassuring and warm that the boy felt its words as if a parent’s hand had reached out and clasped his own. “Come, follow me.”

The boy and the creature walked along until they came to a great oak. Its branches hung low, heavy with age, and its trunk was vast, gnarled, and weathered by countless seasons. The creature led the boy to a small opening at its base. The boy stared at it in confusion, unsure what he was expected to do.

As he stared at the opening, it slowly began to change. The hole twisted and formed into a small doorway. A knot in the oak’s bark, rough with age, rounded into a brass doorknob. When the door had formed, the creature motioned for the boy to open it. The boy did as he was told and gingerly grabbed the knob. The brass was smooth and cool to the touch. His hand turned with a swift motion, and the door opened with a muffled click.

The door swung wide into a dimly lit room. Inside, the room was rounded and small, yet it did not feel cramped. In fact, the room, while enclosed within a tree, felt bigger on the inside than it seemed to be from the outside. The walls were made of living oak, and the floor was covered by a black shag rug. Thin tendrilled branches stretched out from the ceiling and curled down toward the center of the room. From their hooked tips hung small glass jars. Each jar twinkled with a cluster of fireflies, their gentle light drifting lazily about the jars filling the room with a warm glow. On the far side of the room lay a bed. Its polished wood frame and simple headboard were delicately detailed with

small animal carvings. Its sheets were crisp and white, and a dark blue quilt draped neatly over them. The pillows were also white, with the same dark blue trim. Propped against the pillows was a small, stuffed brown bear. Its eyes were a warm chestnut, its fur was neatly brushed, and around its neck, a white, silk ribbon was carefully tied.

As the boy stepped into the room, his eyes grew wide. This was a place he had only ever imagined in dreams... It was wonderful and warm, not like the cold, ordinary rooms back home. He turned to the creature.

“What is this place?” he asked.

“It is the room of make-believe,” the creature said simply.

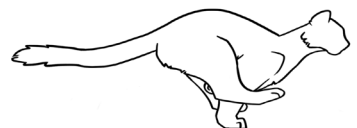
The boy frowned. *Make-believe...? What ever could it mean?*

The creature met his gaze, as though reading his very thoughts. “Imagination, my dear child. This room is held together with your innermost thoughts,” it spoke gently. “But, for those whose thoughts are wicked or selfish, the room can create nothing. It will appear to them as the hollow of a tree and nothing more.”

The boy wandered further into the room, and the door closed softly behind him. His eyes looked in wonder, as wide as two saucers. So, this *was* from a dream. His own dreams. It looked just as he had always imagined it to be. A room fit for royalty where he wanted for nothing.

He padded across the soft black rug, feeling it give beneath his feet as though he were walking upon clouds. His hand brushed lightly over the worn wood walls. The texture was comforting, and although the surface was made from wood, it did not feel coarse or splintered. It was soft, smooth, and felt luxuriant. Looking up, the boy’s eyes wandered to the flickering light above. He watched as the fireflies fluttered back and forth within the glass jars.

He heard a small *flop* as the beast jumped onto the bed, circled like a dog, and lay down to rest. The boy followed, and, with the weight of extreme exhaustion and a deep feeling of peace, climbed into the large bed. He lay back, feeling the ache of his sore bones melting into the soft quilted mattress. The bed seemed to envelop him. The boy could not believe something could feel so comfortable.



Surely, he thought, I must have died and gone to heaven. This must all be a dream... But as he reflected on the day's events, his fascination only grew. *What things could this creature do?* It seemed to him this creature could do almost anything it wanted to. As the boy gleefully imagined the many wonders his new friend might perform, his eyelids grew heavy, his thoughts drifted, and before he knew it, he was fast asleep.

The boy woke in a daze, still half wrapped in sleep. He had awakened to the brilliance of the morning light. Sunlight poured in through a small, round window that he had not noticed before. It shone down into the bed and across the room's wall. Looking down at his side, the boy noticed the small beast breathing deeply in the comfort of sleep. Its scaled chest rose and fell like a gentle tide, and the boy felt a strange, warm reassurance at its presence.

He swung his feet out of the sheets and onto the floor. Standing up, the fatigue of travel yesterday and the hardships of his travel were all but gone. Drawn by curiosity, the boy walked to the far wall to get a better look out the window. He peered out into the dew-covered forest.

The leaves sparkled like morning stars, and a small flock of robins pecked busily at the wet earth. The boy let a deep breath escape him, wishing, as children often do, that the world might always be so gentle and safe. *What a peaceful place,* the boy thought in bliss. *No worry, nor harm... I wish everywhere could be like this.*

And yet... there is always a shadow, dear reader, and the shadow arrived quite suddenly. As the boy mused, he spotted something that made the hair on his arms prickle. Steadily marching through the trees, there came a group of knights. They moved with a strange and terrible purpose, inspecting each tree with careful, mechanical precision. Like clockwork, they would search the tree and, finding nothing, move on to the next. They slowly got closer to the boy's window while he stood there and trembled. Any other knights and the boy would have been excited, maybe even relieved, to see. But these? These were different. Their armor had the appearance of malevolence. The metal was dark, dented, and dull. Their swords glinted with deadly purpose. Turning their heads, a flicker of color caught the light. Like misplaced plumage on a vulture's head, a bright red feather stuck out of each of their helmets.

The boy's heart raced. He knew them instantly from the stories he had heard by firelight, on cold evenings when such tales quickened the heart and chilled the blood... These were not the knights of his town; these were

the black knights of Pavell, a kingdom in the Most North. Known for their murderous reputation and silent nature, Pavell's infamy had earned them names like the Armored Death or the Silent Ones, but the boy knew them by another name... The Wolves.

They surely lived up to this name. Tales of these men were whispered to children as warnings to stay out of the wood for fear the Wolves would eat them. Each one carried himself with a chilling presence and a deadly aim. Northern Pavell harbored these creatures, and they were rarely seen outside its borders. Even so, everyone knew if they were present, death was soon to follow.

Two of the knights rode upon enormous steeds, which were also clad in the same armor. The horses' eyes were cold and unyielding, and the boy had the sudden, terrible sense that these creatures were not entirely living. One knight looked toward the tree's window, and the boy crouched down, pressing himself to the floor, and wished fervently that he might disappear entirely. Clinging to what little comfort it brought, his gaze fell on the bed where the small beast now sat awake. Its eyes fixed on the window. An expression passed over its face, unreadable to him. Its tail coiled like a serpent, and the boy could have sworn he saw two pale ribbons of smoke begin to curl out of its nose.

Suddenly, there came a knock on the door of the tree. The boy froze, terror rooting him to the spot. Again, the knock sounded, but louder this time. The beast jumped down from the bed and moved toward the door with calm purpose.

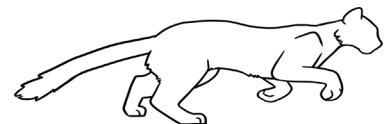
"Come my child," it said in its gentle manner. "We mustn't be impolite. One opens a door when one hears a knock."

The boy, astonished, stuttered, "B-but... what will we do? What if... they try to capture us?" The boy's lip trembled. "How will we escape?"

"Have faith," the beast murmured.

The boy stood, willing his legs to move, and stumbled to the door. Taking hold of the knob, he twisted it slowly, sweat coating his palms. The door opened with a click and swung inwards.

There, standing before him, was a knight, tall and terrible, its armor a solid, inky darkness. The boy forced what little courage he had to look upward into the knight's helmet seeking a glimpse of a face, something familiar,



something human. But what the boy's eyes met chilled him to the bone. Where the knight's eyes should have been were instead two red points. These red pins were not set in a face but instead peered out from endless darkness. There was no humanity in this thing, it was nothing but darkness. And the boy was afraid...

*Content Warning

I do not know how I came into existence, but I do know why.

I looked down at my darling. My love. My obsession. I held her in my arms, arms that I no longer have. The knife was still in her hands as blood seeped from her heart. I thought that was when the torture began. Oh, how very wrong I was.

An agonizing pain cracked me in half. It was as if oxygen had been stolen from my lungs, my heart ripped out of my chest, my lifeline severed from my soul. I had no means to go on. Nothing anchoring me to this Earth any longer.

So, I pulled the knife from her body, and when I raised it to my chest, I made one last wish to whoever would listen, “Let me remain with her for all of eternity.”

But this isn’t what I meant.

I didn’t mean that I wanted to remain exactly three inches away from her, never able to hold her or choose when I can look at her. “Juliet!” I called out, but I had no mouth to carry the words. My limbs were replaced by a single stem keeping me chained to a thin, crooked branch. The same branch my love was tethered to beside me.

She also had a short, delicate stem that reminded me of her graceful limbs, which I longed to feel now. But I had no hands to do so. At least this life kept the one thing I loved the most about her: The shade of green her eyes used to be is the same shade of green that her thin, delicate body is now. So in the springtime, when the wind was most merciful, it would spin me to the side, and I would be able to pretend I was looking into her eyes again.

She was always nervous, though. Never able to look me in my eyes for longer than a few seconds before looking away. Here, however, she had no other choice when the wind pushed her to look at me.

When the sun was at its highest, it would shine through her, and I would watch in amazement that even in this devastating

THREE INCHES APART*
Kiley Danielle

**Blood, Brief Mention of Suicide, Brief Mention of Homicide*



life, she still managed to be the most beautiful being I had ever seen. But that amazement soon turned to jealousy. I longed to be able to kiss her the way the sun did, its rays hugging her jagged, curved edges.

I watched his hands roam her body. My vision turned red, blinding me, just as the sun did now. No one could appreciate my Juliet's beauty as well as I could. No one could love her as I could. So, no one else should have her like I should. But when the sun kept her company, her beauty was radiant. And when it left her with me, a shadow crossed over her.

Some days, the wind wasn't as merciful. Its gentle fingers ran over my body, tickling my underside and turning me away from my love. I had no concept of time, so I was unsure how long I was forced to look away from her. These days, I felt the loneliest, despite knowing the fact that she still remained exactly three inches away from me. After what felt like an eternity, the wind would push me back slightly, and I'd just barely brush against her. I let out a small sigh when I felt her flat, crisp surface touch me gently, a reminder that she was there.

Although for the single second that she came and brushed against me too, she left even quicker.

Always within reach, never in my grasp. I stepped toward her and she stepped away, betrayal flashing in her eyes. The bewilderment I felt was nothing compared to the pain I came to know when she lifted the knife up to her heart. *Why, my love?* The wind pushed me gently toward her, but the wind pushed her away as well. My fingers curled, clutching at air as the knife sank in.

The wind became stronger, and I was whipped around, rustling against the other leaves that surrounded me. Leaves that, like me, wished to remain with their love for all of eternity. We did not know that such a wish could turn into torture. We swayed and shook together, our bodies crying out in unison, "This is not the life we asked for! This is not what we meant!"

"*Shhh,*" the wind whispered, swirling unseen through all of us.

And then, as if to mock us, heavy clouds formed overhead. Gray as the day my love chose death over me. The wind blew my body sideways, and I held onto the branch, my lifeline. Fat raindrops fell from the sky, softly at first, but worse by the second. The wind blew me so that I could look at my love just as a raindrop hit her, slipping from her jagged edge to the muddy forest floor below.

It was like watching a tear slip down her cheek as she looked up at me, my hands entwined with hers as we were happily wed to one another.

A raindrop shot me, or at least it felt like it. It was large and cold, the coldest I had ever been. We remained strong for as long as we could, but soon our entire bodies were drenched. I watched as my love's body went from sturdy to limp, the rain continuously beating down on her.

I wanted to wrap myself around her and protect her from this treacherous weather. I tried to pull my stem out of the branch so I could reach her, but it was in vain. I became limp and weak, too, so we hung onto the branch, or the branch held onto us, not allowing our torture to be over yet.

We were forced to watch as some of the older leaves were ripped from their branches by the harsh wind. I watched in horror as they flew past us, their screams drowned out by the violent thunder above.

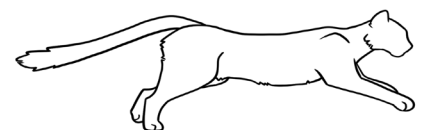
I looked down below at the leaves now resting on the forest floor. The dark clouds in the sky scattered, the sun shining down on them, and I remained hanging limply, feeling beaten and bruised. There were a few more storms like that one, but when there were small breaks in between, the wind would sometimes allow me to look at my love once again.

Every time I looked at her, she was different. Changed. The first glimpse I got of her, I saw that the beautiful shade of green she had once been was now a bright, hopeful yellow.

Proof of the moments she and the sun had together.

When I swayed around, I noticed a few other yellow leaves amidst the dull green ones. A few more storms passed while my love and I managed to survive all of them, our stems keeping us anchored to our branch. When I was allowed to look at her again, I was met with the sight of shocking red.

Everyone else still shone a bright yellow; none of the other leaves had turned red yet. She was the only one. Just like her red dress that stood out amongst the sea of dancing ball gowns. That was the first time I had ever seen her. Although a mask covered much of her face, I knew I had to have her. But the man in a bright golden mask had gotten to her first, and her eyes gleamed with radiance as she looked at him. I quickly stole a golden mask from a nearby table and sauntered over to her, asking for a dance.



She spun around with elegance as she does now, her body gently swaying in the wind. Even after the storms she's gone through, she still amazed me with her beauty. I was turned away from her too quickly.

The leaves on the forest floor no longer looked up at us, their bodies shriveled and wrinkled. I was forced by the wind to watch as two humans walked through, crushing the leaves in a loud crunch.

“Wait! Stop! I am one of you! Help me!” I screamed, my body rustling against the rest of the leaves.

They did not hear me. I could not understand the language that they spoke to each other as the man pressed the woman against our tree trunk. The way she looked up at him with her big eyes and the way he looked down at her with a smile on his face... it was too much for me to handle. This was all that I wanted. They didn't have to stand three inches away from each other, never able to touch.

The man leaned his head down, but before their lips touched, he reached above her head and, with a single movement, pulled a pretty yellow leaf from its branch, separating it from its love. How easy it was for him to tear a soul away from its lifeline, and he didn't even know. A simple snap. A small pull. And it's gone.

He held the leaf in front of her, and her eyes brightened as a smile spread across her face, unaware of what her lover had done. A smile that was similar to one I had seen long ago as my love and I shared a dance. When we were done, she had curtsied, her lips twitching slightly from smiling so much.

The woman below me took the leaf gently in her hands. Looking at it seemed to have pulled her out of a trance, and she turned, admiring the rest of the leaves surrounding her. She marveled at our beauty, but she didn't know the terrible cost that came with it.

She pointed beside me, and I knew what leaf she wanted. I shook violently as the man's hand reached up toward her. *My love. My beauty. Mine* alone. She shook beside me, and I wished for nothing more than for our terrible lives to end. I wished it more than I wished to live for an eternity with her.

Just as his fingers were about to grasp her, a snowflake fell gently on his hand. He pulled his hand away and showed her. The snow began to fall and they ran away together. I watched them until the wind whipped me around and I noticed leaves beginning to fall, too. They left behind crooked, brown branches, the same brown Juliet's hair used to be.

I watched her from below her balcony, wiping my dirty hands on my pants as I hovered in the bushes. Her hair hung over her face as she leaned her head onto her hands, running the brown strands between her fingers, making it as tangled as these branches. Her eyes were disheartened and scared, *but why?*

I loved her. From the moment I laid eyes on her, I never let her go. Her lips twitched when she smiled because she had smiled so often while dancing. Or was it never a smile at all? The wind swayed me back and forth as I thought about it.

A tear slipped down her cheek because she was happy. Or did she never wish to marry me?

She looked at me from her balcony with fear in her eyes because she was afraid her family would see me. Or could she see the blood on my hands that I wiped on my pants?

The wind grew harsher.

When I stepped toward her as she raised the knife to her chest, I saw betrayal in her eyes. Had she figured out what I had done? But there's no way she could have known. She couldn't have known that it was me who killed the man in the golden mask. The only man who could make her glow from within.

I only did it because she thought she knew what she desired. But that man did not love her as I do. That man would not follow her into death as I have done.

But *she* had followed *him*.

The wind stopped.

An agonizing pain cracked me in half as my stem broke away from the branch. It was as if oxygen had been stolen from my lungs, my heart ripped out of my chest, my lifeline severed from my soul. I had no means to go on. Nothing



anchored me to this Earth any longer.

As we fell, our bodies swirled around each other, still unable to touch, only able to watch. The wind slowly dragged her away from me, and this time, I let her go. I had followed her in life and in death for my own selfishness. I just wanted her to love me, but I did not wish to be the reason she lived on in torture, always just three inches apart.

*Content Warning

Daddy doesn't talk to me anymore. I see his fingerprints everywhere, scattered across every surface in the house, his footprints littered like animal tracks across the floor. The signs of life are still here: to-go containers piling on the counter, cigarette butts too close to carpet for comfort, half-empty bottles perched on an end table here, a cabinet there. Sometimes I smell him. The strange concoction of beer and sweat and the lingering lilac of Mama's perfume. But we're ships in the night, missing each other by hours or minutes or seconds, just waiting to crash.

So many times, I've been tempted to bang on his door. Pry it open if it turns out to be locked. Force him out of hiding. But I can't bring myself to.

The house doesn't even feel like mine anymore. Like it's the same walls, the same bones, but with a filter over it, casting my home in shades of gray and black when it's always been technicolor. A thin layer of dust blankets the record player on top of the bookshelf. The fridge sits barren of everything except expired milk, a single cucumber, and some eggs just this side of rotten. Checking it over and over doesn't make anything new appear, and it doesn't make any money appear in my wallet. I don't know how much longer I can subsist on stale crackers and canned soup.

My spoon scrapes the bottom of a can of tomato, and I sigh as I set it on the side table next to me. My back is to my bedroom; right across from me sits Mama and Daddy's room. The house never felt this big before. Now it's an ocean of hardwood between the two doors. Next to their room hangs a framed portrait, Daddy in his finest suit and Mama in a long, white gown with pink roses sewn in. They're set against a backdrop of the same corn fields that stretch beyond the porch. They'd told me they didn't have the money to go somewhere else. Mama's got her mouth open wide like she's shouting, and Daddy's got his head turned toward her. He's never been much for smiling, but his smile is so big I've always been amazed it didn't rip at the seams. I don't know if he knows I know, but for the longest time, I'd catch him kiss his palm and raise it to that portrait before he'd follow Mama to bed.

What I'd give to see him do that one more time. To see him smile like that. The only time he ever came close, he was looking

Rachel Davidson
BEAUTIFUL NOISE*

**Alcoholism, Death of a Parent*

riverrun | volume 53 | 2026



down at me from the driver's seat of his old, beat-up truck, and I was about to leave Nashville behind me for good.

~

The orphanage was what I thought a home was supposed to be. Gray wallpaper and a twin mattress in a room with eleven other twin mattresses. A headmistress and a tidy schedule and nights spent hiding under my covers and hoping to God none of the other boys remembered I existed. For years, I believed I deserved it, somehow. All their torment, all the years of watching them get chosen, plucked off one by one while I stayed still.

Until Mama and Daddy. They'd ignored the warnings from the headmistress. They'd ignored her claims of "He doesn't speak" and "He doesn't play well with other children" and "He's defective," and they'd chosen me. A boy smaller than all the others, who couldn't get a word past his lips, deemed unworthy of a name.

The first time I saw Mama, she was floating. I know it shouldn't have been possible, but I swear to God, she was floating. An inch, two inches off the ground, it didn't matter. She had on this long, pink coat that should have brushed the ground but didn't—it was perpetually in motion—and jeans. I'd never seen a woman wear jeans before. All the women at the orphanage wore dresses down past their knees and their hair up. But her hair was loose, cascading in long waves down her back, blonde speckled with gray she seemed too young to have. She was like no one I'd ever seen before, and the light bent around her when she crouched down, like an angel sent to retrieve me. She shook my hand that day. No one had ever shaken my hand before. No one had ever even spared me a second glance.

Daddy walked in her shadow, even then, and I don't think he even minded it. He was the quiet, calm presence who followed in her wake, the one who made me believe I was still on earth and not somewhere else entirely. He was the one who helped me into the truck that day. It was bright teal, its long backside sagging low to the ground, its entire front rusted over so it looked like a penny. It could have been inches away from death, and I wouldn't have cared. I knew enough from watching the other boys leave. I knew what it meant.

Daddy slid into the driver's seat and shut the door, and I watched as Mama exchanged her final words with the headmistress. I felt his hand on my shoulder, a quick and gentle squeeze. "You ready to go home, kid?" Before

that moment, he'd let Mama do all the talking for the both of them. His voice was a soft hum—if you weren't paying close enough attention, you might have missed that he'd spoken at all. Sometimes he reminded me of a giant, black-haired mouse.

I looked up and met his soft, crinkled brown eyes. His smile was inviting, as crooked as it was endearing. Even through my shirt, I could feel how calloused his hands were. I considered his question. I considered the past seven years, and I considered the woman who floated above the earth and the man in front of me with dirt clinging to his pants and his boots. And I nodded.

Daddy's smile widened a bit, and his hand fell onto my head. I'd seen people ruffle kids' hair before, but he didn't do that. He just let it sit there.

When Mama finally came over to the truck, she knelt on the dirty ground in front of the passenger side. She cupped my cheek in her hand, and her palm was nearly as rough as Daddy's but warm, so warm, and it made me feel like she'd put the sun inside me. "We'll be just fine now," she said. Her voice was honey, the words softening in her accent. "Won't we?"

I nodded again. It felt like the start of something way bigger than me.

As we drove, Nashville became nothing but a speck in the distance, the narrow city roads giving way to sprawling green fields. Mama tried to talking to me, tried to asking questions, but I had no way to answer them. And I was only half listening anyway, my eyes taking in the horizon stretching before me. I dimly registered the mention of someone named John Doe, and Mama saying they couldn't possibly continue to call me that. The radio played softly in the background, cycling through a handful of Beatles songs that sometimes played at the orphanage. And then John Lennon's voice faded away, and from the speaker emerged this charging, upbeat rhythm, all fast-paced guitar and hard-hitting piano. A man started to sing, "*Baby loves me, yes, yes she does,*" and I sat up straighter.

Mama noticed before Daddy did, looked down at me wedged between the two of them. The song didn't slow down, only seemed to ramp up in energy. When Mama turned the radio up, I felt it in my bones. Rattling, vibrating. I was hot. Flushed. The man sang, "*She got the way to move me, Cherry.*" A chorus sang back to him, "*She got the way to groove me.*" I'd never heard anything like it. The man was shouting, clapping.



“Neil Diamond,” Mama said. “You like Neil Diamond?”

I turned my wide eyes up to her, and her face split open like the sky giving way to sun after rain.

“I guess that’s a yes,” she laughed, and she wrapped her arms around me and pressed her face against the top of my head. Her laugh trickled through me, warming me through. I wanted to bottle it, wanted to bottle this moment. I wanted to play the song over and over again, even though I knew enough to know that wasn’t how radios worked.

Something had shifted within me, I could tell. Something had opened up. Something that couldn’t be closed again.

~

The farmhouse was always so loud. Loud with Mama’s voice, her laughter, her music. So much music. Her collection was modest but ever growing, records spinning like dancers switching off seamlessly between songs. She’d let me help her in the kitchen while Daddy worked in the fields—pulled up a step stool for me and everything—and each time I washed strawberries at the sink or peeled potatoes over the trash, I was introduced to someone new. Johnny Cash. Bob Dylan. Simon and Garfunkel. Elvis.

Neil Diamond was my favorite, though. This man from New York, a world so different from my own, who sang of love and happiness and *fun*. He was the one who gave me my name. Mama had been calling me baby, honey, sugar, sweetheart, and I liked those well enough. Daddy mainly called me kid, and I didn’t mind that, either. But Mama seemed to think there was a name out there waiting for me, and we’d know it when we heard it.

The record was a gift for Mama from Daddy. He came home from town one day with an arm full of groceries and a flat, square, paper-wrapped package behind his back. And the way Daddy’s eyes lit up when Mama shrieked, you’d have thought she’d given him the present.

When Mama showed it to me, I only caught a glimpse of yellow, a man with a guitar, a woman peering over his shoulder. “Oh, sugar,” she cried, all but racing to the record player, “this was *made* for you. *Just* for you.”

I didn’t know then that that’s what the record was called, *Just for You*.

It had just come out a couple weeks ago. As soon as it crackled to life, Neil Diamond crooning, “*Girl, you’ll be a woman soon,*” that same bone-rattling feeling flooded through me. This record was expansive, sprawling, with piano and guitar and drums and harmonica and trumpets and instruments I couldn’t even name. I’m not sure I blinked the whole time, even as one song gave way to the next, even as Mama laughed in delight and twirled Daddy around the living room. I turned the record over myself, delicately set the needle back on, and sat back on my knees. I watched the record spin round, a blur of black through my vision. The singer’s listless energy was all around me. *Electric*. I was *electric*.

And then he spoke to me. He really did.

“*Young child with dreams, dreaming each dream on your own.*” He sang it effortlessly, gently, but there was something buried in his voice. This thick heat that nestled itself deep in my own chest. “*When children play, seems like you end up alone.*”

I think Mama felt it, too, because she came over and took my hand and brought me to my feet. I was dancing with her and Daddy both now, and Daddy’s smile was on the verge of breaking through.

“*Shilo, when I was young, I used to call your name. When no one else would come, Shilo, you always came, and we’d play.*”

“He likes it,” Daddy said in that soft voice of his.

“He *loves* it!” Mama cried.

The verse went on, and the drums sounded, and Neil Diamond’s voice swelled to a peak. “*Held my hand out, I let her take me blind as a child.*” Mama twirled me in a circle. “All I saw was the way that she made me smile, she made me smile.”

I was breathless by the time the song came to a close, and my chest tightened so much, so suddenly, that I couldn’t bear it. The word burst up out of me, scratchy and raw and cracking down the middle: “Again.”

Mama and Daddy both froze. And then Mama made a sound like a strangled horse, and she ran at the record player, and it took me a second to realize she wasn’t upset. The needle scratched the vinyl, Neil Diamond’s voice warbled horribly, and then the song was starting over, that gentle chord and his



gentle voice swelling to meet me again. Mama knelt in front of me, her eyes overflowing with tears I didn't know what to make of.

"You really are my son," she whispered over the music, smoothing my hair with her hand. I had never been anyone before, let alone anyone's anything. "My little Shilo."

And oh, how I loved it. Something that belonged to me, the first thing that was mine and all mine. Warmth bloomed in my chest. I loved the way it sounded in her accent, all drawn out and buttery. *Shaah-lo*. I nodded so rapidly it made my vision spotty, and Mama laughed and sniffed and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. She scooped me into her arms and pressed a kiss to my forehead, and Daddy was laughing this low, sweet sound, and we danced round and round and round the room 'til the record played itself out.

The name stuck after that. I was still baby, honey, sugar, sweetheart, kid, but I was also Shilo.

~

Mama started speaking in song lyrics, a language she said was just for the two of us. She was fluent; I was slowly catching up. It took years for me to find my voice, but with each year, my throat felt less and less scraped raw by every word I spoke. With each year, our vocabulary expanded until we had a song for every occasion.

Instead of "I love you," it was "*I thank the Lord for you.*" When I was upset, she'd be ready with "*The boat that I row's big enough for two.*" By the time one decade bled into the next, I wasn't just Shilo, I was also her Rosie child. And every day, without fail, she'd hum "Shilo" or sing it to me in her too-loud voice, and I'd sing it back. The music was a part of me, settled deep within my bones, my muscles, my veins, every part of me overflowing with lyrics.

"*You are the sun, I am the moon,*" she murmured now. "*You are the words, I am the tune, play me.*" She knelt in her garden, the knees of her jeans coated with a thick layer of dirt, her blonde-gray hair pulled into two long braids down her back.

I crouched beside her, wrestling with a stubborn carrot until, finally, the strength of both arms managed to wedge it free and send me careening flat onto my butt. I blinked down at the vegetable I had a chokehold on while

Mama descended into a fit of laughter. “Your garden’s attackin’ me,” I told her in a daze.

“Ain’t no such thing.” Another laugh trailed her words. She plucked the carrot from my hold and then cocooned my hands in hers. They were almost the same size as hers now, and my callouses were steadily building up from all the yard work. “You got to have a gentle hand, Shilo, honey.”

“They’re too stubborn!” I protested.

“They need to be coaxed out, not yanked.” She let go of me and turned to the row of carrots beside us. She didn’t believe in using garden forks, but that was only because she didn’t need to. Her hands buried themselves deep into the soil, rooting around until they wedged the vegetable free and pulled it gently from the earth. When she held it up to me, she presented it like a trophy.

I folded my arms and let out an indignant hmph.

Mama’s garden was like her. Beautiful, colorful, tougher than it looked. It was one of the only places on the farm that wasn’t meant to turn a profit, and every Friday, we’d collect enough vegetables to make a giant pot of stew. The garden wasn’t like the corn fields Daddy was spending more and more time in. A sea of green and brown, just waiting to be mowed down and loaded onto a truck. There was no care in the work he did. No gentle hand.

I watched Daddy on his tractor, way off in the distance, cutting lines through the field. Back and forth. Back and forth. I wondered if he ever got bored, out there alone. “Shouldn’t I be workin’ in the fields by now?” I thought aloud.

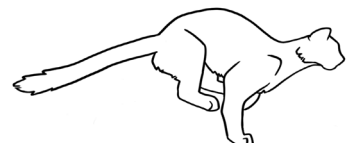
Mama stopped working, just for a second. A tiny lapse. “What do you mean, baby?”

“I’m twelve. Isn’t that what I’m s’posed to do?”

“You don’t have to do anything you don’t wanna do.”

“I want to, though.”

She faltered again. Her hand slipped. A tiny frown coaxed the edges of her mouth down. “How come?”



I shrugged, tracing a line in the dirt with my pointer finger. “Dunno.”

“Maybe in a few years,” she said. “You don’t belong out there, not yet. You belong here. With me.”

It was a reiteration of what I’d heard countless times over the years. “*It’s you and me, Shilo. Always. We were meant to be. The two of us.*”

I opened my mouth to keep pressing, but I hesitated when I saw her face. “Mama, you’re bleedin’.”

She pressed her fingers under her nose, and they came away wet. She was pale, too, I realized, paler than she’d been a few minutes earlier. Paler than she should’ve been under the summer sun. Her hand fell to her jeans, wiping a smear of red across the soil-streaked blue. Her smile was strained. “I’m fine, baby.”

“But—”

“It’s nothing.”

“Should I go get Daddy?”

“I said I’m fine, Shilo.”

Something cold and heavy settled in my gut. “Okay, Mama,” I said. “Okay.”

~

The record store was empty. It was a Sunday morning, and most of the town was at church. But in those days, Mama hated sitting still for that long, so we left early. She was leaning against the wall, her head tilted back and a lit cigarette perched between her fingers. Her eyes were closed, and her head was wrapped in a swath of hot pink fabric.

The cashier was watching me thumb through alphabetized shelves. I’d started where I always started, on the off chance a new record had somehow been released without my knowledge. Now I was working my way backward, my fingers brushing over the multitude of records shelved under B.

“I don’t know *why* you’re so enamored with that man.”

I glanced over my shoulder. Mama was looking at me now, her chin tilted down like it weighed too much to keep up, her eyes hooded under heavy lids. The smile playing on her lips didn’t do much to dislodge the uneasy feeling in my stomach—the one that greeted me every time we diverged, no matter how small. She was my best friend. My everything. I hated disagreeing with her.

Without a word, I slipped *Young Americans* back onto the shelf and offered a silent apology to Bowie. I turned to Mama, tucking my fingers into my pockets. My thumbs hooked through my belt loops and drummed against the denim. My energy was restless, and I needed somewhere to put it.

“We can go,” I told her.

“Done already?” With effort, she pushed away from the wall and glided over to me. She didn’t float so much as hover those days. Several inches off the ground, like she was too light for gravity to put up much of a fight. She peered curiously at the shelf behind me. “I’ll buy you the record if you want it.”

“It’s fine,” I said. I wanted to get out of there. It was too quiet. There should have been music, customers. It made me want to go back to church.

So we left. I used to walk this street sandwiched between Mama and Daddy, hanging onto both their hands so I wouldn’t disappear into the crowd. But the street was nearly as empty as the store, and it would’ve been impossible to get lost in a crowd, anyway. I towered above Mama now. I towered above most people. The street was lined with little shops, brightly colored awnings pulled out to fend off the sun and handmade signs in the windows.

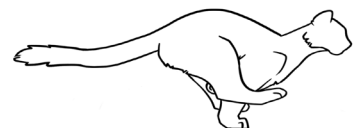
“Why didn’t Daddy come today?”

Mama blinked. “Hm?”

“It’s Daddy’s day off, too.”

“So it is.”

“Did you ask him to come with?”



She made a little humming noise. “Slipped my mind.”

I ran my tongue over my teeth, my fingers keeping up a drum beat in my pockets. “When’s the last time he came to church with us?” I really couldn’t remember.

Mama blew out a breath. “I don’t know, Shilo. You can’t expect me to keep track of him and myself *and* you, now, can you?”

I bit my tongue. I said, “I’m sorry, Mama,” and she softened.

“No, baby,” she said quietly, “I’m sorry.”

That was usually how things went. I found out real fast that when fear gets wrapped up in love, things have a way of coming out that should have stayed in.

We went back to the quiet. The quiet followed us all the way back to the truck, back home, back to Daddy in his empty house. It followed us like it was just waiting for the right moment to strike. And when it did, the whole world went silent.

~

“I am, I cried. I am, said I. And I am lost and I can’t even say why, leavin’ me lonely still.”

The words ring through my head, over and over like a scratched record, the echo of a song I haven’t heard in months.

I rinse the tomato soup can out in the sink, then toss it into the trash. I’m washing the spoon off with a sponge when a light outside the kitchen window flickers. The porch light. Daddy said he was gonna fix that months ago, but he never did. It’s so intermittent that sometimes you forget it’s broken, but it still does its best to remind you.

I don’t care about the light so much as what I see underneath it. Daddy’s sitting on the back steps. It jars me, the sight of his hunched form huddled in the late-night chill, even though it should be something I’m used to. Daddy, out there alone. Daddy, nursing a beer bottle from the half-empty six pack beside him.

I turn off the faucet and head outside.

The door creaks slightly when I open it, but he doesn't move. I see now what his gaze is trained on. Before him lies a pile of broken glass roughly the size of a large puddle, bits and pieces of red, brown, green, gray—and a label here and there. All the empty bottles that have made their way outside the house only to be cast into this dingy cemetery underneath the flickering porch light. Weeds from the garden creep in and among the gravestones.

“Daddy.”

The sound of my voice startles him. He turns, letting the bottle that'd been resting against his forehead fall to his side. His shoulders slump at the sight of me, and he doesn't say anything. Just turns back toward the corn fields.

I sit down next to him on the porch step. Even sitting, I'm nearly a head taller than him. I have a hard time with quiet, but Daddy doesn't wanna talk, so I don't talk, either. My leg bounces up and down, creaking the splintered wood. I slip my lighter out of my pocket, thumb flicks it open, closed, open, closed. *Creak, flick, click, creak, flick, click.* Yeah, I have a hard time with quiet, and Daddy has a hard time with me.

The sigh he lets out disappears into the mouth of the beer bottle, and he tips his head back, downing the last of it. His fingers let go, one by one, and I watch it roll its way down the stairs—*creak, flick, thump, click, creak, flick, thump, click*—and come to rest in the sea of bottles just like it. And something about it sitting there, wholly unbroken in a menagerie of jagged edges, makes me pick up another bottle from the case and hurl it into the fray.

Daddy winces as it crashes, shattering both bottles and some of the surrounding shards into smaller pieces. The alcohol leaks out into the grass, into the tendrils of weeds. “Jesus, Shilo.”

That's the first thing he's said to me in weeks. And it doesn't sound right, no drawn out vowels, no “*Shaah-lo.*” It falls flat. He's looking my way, but he isn't looking at me. I never see his eyes anymore. They hold steady on my lighter.

“That's hers,” Daddy says. “You took it.” It doesn't sound accusatory. It doesn't sound like anything, really.



The flame dances in my vision as I flick the lighter open again. Pink. Mama's favorite color. Mine, too.

"No one else was gonna use it," I tell him. But he must know what I really mean. He wasn't gonna use it. I dig into my jeans pocket and fish out a pack of cigarettes, tuck one between my lips and offer a second to him.

His gaze has returned to the grass swaying in the darkness, the horizon stretching on into a sea of gray clouds. There's a set to his shoulders, a rigidity in his back that makes it seem like he's thinking or trying real hard not to think.

"Daddy," I say, nudging his arm.

He flinches. It's slight, so slight, but he winces the moment my hand brushes his skin. And it sinks in, then, what's happening. He isn't anchored to the porch, he's drifting—already a foot, maybe two, off the ground. Mama had always been drifting, I just hadn't known it then. I guess Daddy was bound to follow.

The unlit cigarettes fall to the ground as the air stretches like taffy, as my throat fights to suck in air like it used to fight to speak. "You can't leave," I say, but the words are distant and wet, pulled from somewhere deep behind my eyes where it stings the worst. "You can't leave, too."

Daddy shakes his head, and he still won't look at me. I want to grab him and yank, pull him back down, plant his feet on the earth and tell him he belongs here. With me.

"Come back. Come *back*."

Tears draw lines down Daddy's cheeks, and he's smaller than I've ever seen him. Gaunt and gray and older, so much older. His black hair is thinning, deep circles gouged under his eyes. Sweat beads along his forehead, along the neckline of his raggedy shirt. He's been wasting away for a while now. "She took everything with her." His voice is a rasp, grating against the distance between us.

"She didn't."

"She took the music—"

“She *didn't*.”

“—the sun, the stars, she took the world with her, and I don't—I don't...”

“The world's still here,” I say. *She made it for us*, I think desperately. *She wouldn't take it away*. “*You're the one who's not here. You're the one letting her records collect dust.*”

He shakes his head again, and this time I feel the tether holding him here pull taut. My stomach is going to leap up my throat.

“Daddy, please,” I beg. “It's all still here. *I'm still here.*”

Finally, *finally*, his eyes meet mine, brown and desperate and swimming. “You're just like her, Shilo.”

An image fights its way to the surface of my mind, one too recent and too painful to be a memory just yet. A hospital room. A bed. Her words echo in my head: “*You're the best part of me, Shilo.*” Sometimes I wonder if she'd done that on purpose. If when she put her hand over my heart that very last time, she pushed the pieces of her soul into mine. Is that why there's nothing left for Daddy? Had she really left it all for me?

“I'm not her,” I whisper.

I watch Daddy's throat bob as he swallows. “I know.” His eyes fall. The tether snaps as he pushes to his feet, nothing but a frayed end left in my hands.

You can't do this, I want to scream as he walks back inside. *You can't leave me, too. I still need you.* But my feet won't let me move, or maybe it's Mama who holds me down. I can't tell what's me and what's her anymore. I hate every part of me that's her just as much as I love it.

The night is quiet again. I flick Mama's lighter open. Closed. Open. Closed. The flame flickers in the breeze, carrying with it the sweet hint of rain. The clouds shove in, distant lightning fighting its way toward me across the corn fields. I snap the lighter closed.

I stand. My feet plant themselves on the bottom step. *Creak*. Daddy's



cemetery lies in front of me, long necks casting long shadows in the flickering light. *Flick*. He's wrong. Mama didn't take the stars with her. *Click*. The shadows dance in front of the little flame like they're putting on a show to some unheard music, bits of broken glass glittering and winking amongst the weeds. The night sky, bottled up, then strewn across the lawn.

I speak it into the night, but there's Mama's voice in my head, right alongside my own: "Let him find his way back." *Please*.

And I throw the lighter in.

*Content Warning

“There she is.” Valerie stood at the window of the shuttle.

The vivid planet laid silently across her void canvas, blotting out the stars with its magnificent light. The star acted as a spotlight, putting the rest of her neighbors to shame with her vibrant green and blue glow. The light of the astral body gifted the otherwise dark shuttle a rather calming atmosphere, its colors refracting off the metallic paneling.

“Mrs. Carmine, nice to see you’ve woken alright.”

“Oh, Dr. Hayden,” she accepted the cup of coffee he handed her as he approached, “glad to see you too.” They stood next to each other for a moment, admiring the giant awaiting them in silence. “Everything you hoped for?”

“Well, we have yet to see.” He turned, “Come on, the colony should be expecting us anytime now; it’s killing me to see what kind of life they’ve found down there.” The pair moved to the opposite side of the room where their gear had sat for several decades, waiting for their time of need. The shuttle was cramped, offering only two rooms and a cockpit to minimize weight while maintaining necessities.

“Had any contact with the other shuttles yet?” Valerie slipped into her suit and pressurized it, giving it a tight seal.

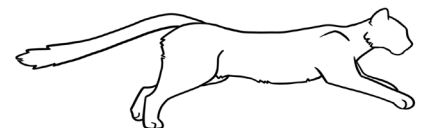
“Yes, it seems we were actually the last to come out of cryo.”

“Hm, guess we’re the lucky ones then, huh?”

He let out a small laugh, “Last of the last. Yeah, it sure seems that way.” He lowered the helmet over his head which clicked into place as it locked to the suit, encasing him in a veil of thick fiberglass and heavy plastic. He followed up with attaching a small pad to his wrist, the screen flickering on to read: *Personal Digital Assistant active.*

Valerie grabbed one of the rifles that was locked onto the wall. She studied the weapon, checking its chamber, magazine,

*Violence, Implied Suicide, Guns, Strangulation



and sight. She looked up and held the rifle out for the doctor. “Here. I’ll take the other.”

“Oh, that won’t be necessary. Thanks.” The words spilled from his mouth.

“C’mon, you’re probably gonna need one of these down there, who knows what kind of wildlife could be aggressive.”

“I’ve never handled one before, and I won’t start now. Thanks.” Hayden sat and pulled a bar over himself. Valerie shrugged and threw the gun strap around herself, leaving the other where it stood. She then sat in the seat adjacent to Hayden.

“The fleet’s artificial intelligence should bring us down in a moment, I’m hearing the others have already begun descent.” He tapped his ear. The weight of the ship shifted as the giant through the window drew ever closer.

Hayden’s wrist pad flashed and a new, automated voice rang from the ship’s speakers. “*Atmospheric entry commenced. Please, lock your safety bar over your person and remain seated until touchdown.*” Loose items in the ship slid further to the back of the shuttle. Larger objects began to shift too, only slightly.

“Shit,” Valerie barked, yanking the bar above her to no avail. “This fuckin’ thing won’t budge!”

“Calm down, the only thing you’ll really have to worry about is some minor turbulence, just hang onto it and you’ll be okay.” He reached a hand to her, patting her shoulder.

The planet now invaded the entirety of the window’s sight, which was promptly removed by the lowering of the shuttle’s heat shield. For a moment the room was engulfed in darkness, quickly broken by a fluorescent hail of over-tuned ceiling lights. The silence of space seeped away, replaced by an ever-growing roar of the atmosphere consuming the vessel. The loose tools and machinery bobbed. Valerie grasped the top of her seat’s bar, her helmet hid her expression, but her head was lowered and bracing.

“This should be the worst of it!” Hayden attempted to gasp above the noise to reach Valerie. A sickening bump followed by the flickering of the lights

dismantled that perception. Valerie shifted her body and looked to Hayden. The lights flashed further, static erupted from the speaker, and the objects began to throw themselves around violently.

For a moment, the gravity shifted. The tools took to the air, bouncing off each other, then the walls. Valerie followed. Hayden reached out again, this time she reached back. In another harsh roar against the shuttle, she was thrown to the opposite wall, then back, as if the ship was juggling anything not stuck to the interior.

Valerie's screams were muted by the chorus of noise that mocked her. Hayden managed to grab her hand, his reflection shown back at him through her helmet's lens. For just a moment in time that felt longer than the entire journey, longer than life, they looked to each other, searching for their eyes hidden behind the veil of their helmets. All Hayden found was helplessness

~

Hayden shoved the metal debris off himself, sat up into a kneeling position, then used his PDA to turn on his helmet's flashlight. The soft light pushed through the darkness, scanning across the interior of the room. A new web had sprouted across the lens of his helmet. Through the damage and darkness, he observed the ship. Tools, bolts, and panels were scattered across the floor. Among them, Hayden spotted the body. Only half of it was visible under one of the heavy supply crates, which had been ripped from their paneling. He sighed, studying her for a moment as he ran a hand over his helmet as if it were his real scalp.

Hayden put his hand over his ear, "T-This is shuttle Foxtrot, does anyone copy? We crash landed off course. Carmine..." He sighed. "Carmine is gone." He paused for a moment, unable to peel his gaze from her. "I'm stranded. If anyone is receiving, please respond." Not even static met his ears; his message hadn't gone through.

The PDA flickered on, "D-D-Distress signal detected." The device sputtered, "Marking c-c-c-coordinates." Hayden continued to peer at the body, only able to bear the motionless bottom half that remained intact. Next to it laid her rifle. After a pause, he reached for it, grabbing onto the body of the weapon, feeling the sharp exterior, observing its printed matte skin. Slowly, he unclipped the strap, which was strained under the weight of the supply crate as if it were being strangled. Freeing it, he took the weapon under his arm like a small companion before proceeding to move to the bay door at the opposite side of



the shuttle.

The door shot from the ship's hull, launching into the ground with a heavy thud. Hayden let go of the emergency release handle and stepped out, the white star in the sky stabbing his eyes as he exited, even through the tinted lens. The trees stood monstrous, the deep green and blue leaves covered most of the skyline like a patchy ceiling, sunrays poking holes through the various gaps. Instead of bark, the body of the trees appeared smooth, like the stem of a flower. The shuttle had broken through the veil of brush, revealing the infinite blue sky. It had wound up on its side, smoke barreling out of its vents; the dark monument an eyesore amongst the world's vibrancy.

"The a-air is b-b-breathable." The PDA continued to flicker, prompting Hayden to give the wrist pad a few heavy taps with his finger. He proceeded to unlock the helmet from the suit. The air hissed and he slowly lifted it from his head. The overwhelming light that met his face forced his eyes into a squint. As they adjusted, he looked around his new environment. The jungle was dense; several different plants had come together, forming a perimeter like barbed wire. The shrubbery was like home, just sporting more vibrant colors that invited the doctor's gaze. Hayden crouched to study the plants, but before he could observe anything significant, his PDA lit again. "Shuttle Echo, d-distress signal received." A distance formed on his wrist pad: *3 kilometers*.

Hayden briefly returned to his own shuttle, peering in one last time. Valerie's body was only partially illuminated by the outside light, but it had remained motionless. Hayden gently and neatly set his damaged helmet on the interior of the ship, the front facing toward her. Taking one more glance at Valerie, he sighed and diverted his gaze downward. Holding the gun close, Hayden turned and departed into the jungle in search of the next shuttle.

~

Only the sound of his own footsteps accompanied him on his venture. Sweat clung to his skin. The heat pulled on him, like shackles around his legs, slowing him down. He stopped at a rock that jutted out of the ground, checking his PDA. The screen glitched about as it turned on before stabilizing.

"Your heat level is a-a-alar-r-rmingly high. T-Take a moment to rest-t-t-t." Hayden leaned against the rock and slumped onto the ground. He stared at the leaf sky that had been trapping the heat beneath it. The tension in his shoulders loosened, allowing his arms to fall limp next to him. Next to his hand,

he noticed a small flower, petals of cream white and soft yellow speckles, sat next to him, like a curious animal studying him. He pulled it from the dirt and held it up to his face. It appeared to have recently bloomed; the stem was a ripe collection of greens and hints of teal. Hayden tilted his head, caressing small strands that were drooping off of the stem like adolescent thorns that hadn't quite reached their full strength. The roots began to move, which forced Hayden's attention. They gently felt around Hayden's glove, one root even reaching toward his face; the rest trying to reach back to the ground. He returned the flower, digging a small hole that was deep enough to hold it upright, leaving it with a parting stroke to its petal.

Hayden shifted his attention to Valerie's rifle. He ran his finger across the rail, then inspected a flashlight attached to its side. He noticed small red speckles dotted across the weapon. His expression drooped upon spotting the remnants and held it close. Holding it, he closed his eyes and leaned his head back once again. His face was tense with held-back emotion.

Static once again erupted from the PDA, shattering the silence and any semblance of comfort. No words surfaced, but it ushered Hayden back on his path. He wiped the condensation from his face, lowered Valerie's gun back to his side, and continued on.

~

The nose of this shuttle had kicked up a mound of dirt, and by the time Hayden arrived gravity had pulled the rear to the ground as well. The only aspect separating this shuttle from Hayden's was text on its hull simply reading *Echo*. Fuel and smog hung heavy in the air, polluting the smell of the jungle.

Hayden, seeing the crash, hurried to the opposite side of the ship. The bay doors had been opened already, the light from the opened sky poured in. An astronaut sat against the wall next to the ship's intelligence monitor, chunks of thigh, bicep, and hip missing from the body. Hayden readied the rifle, pressing it against his shoulder and using the magazine as a grip. The silence grew louder than it had before, broken only by Hayden's steady but shaky breathing. He backed into the shuttle, surveying the jungle ahead. A soft squish seeped from under his foot. He turned. A trail of red led to the back of the ship, the potential source hidden behind a barricade of metal debris, seemingly placed deliberately.

His throat went dry; any semblance of moisture on his face had recessed. The deep red pathway led into the side of the makeshift fort. Hayden approached,



each step precise and calculated. His weapon shook subtly, as did its attached flashlight, which he had turned on as he approached. He leaned against the corner of the entryway, pausing for a moment that turned into minutes. His hand flexed around the handle, loosening and tightening repeatedly. His knees felt as if they were ready to give out. His eyes shut and he focused on his breath. Gripping the weapon tight, he threw himself around the corner, the gun raised to his eye.

Nothing. Nothing was left aside from remnants of fabric, plastic, bone, and a single hand limp on the floor with its palm facing the ceiling. Hayden's knees finally gave way, the rifle hitting the ground before his knees. Liquid had returned to his face, this time in streaks down his cheeks.

The outside of the ship grew into nothing but void, as if the ship had been breached in deep space. Before the darkness had fully engulfed the room, the ceiling lights flickered, blinking almost like runway lights. Hayden followed the flashing with his eyes, which stopped above the other astronaut, still slumped and unmoving. The monitor beside him followed the ceiling, sprouting to life as well.

“Attention to any survivors out there,” a voice called from the machine, “This is Jenkins, from Shuttle Bravo, we’ve gone down and... Mendoza... he didn’t make it. Power to everything has been fluctuating and I haven’t been able to contact anyone at all for the last several hours. This is a one-way transmission and I don’t know how much time I’ll have to get this out, so I’ll keep it brief.

“To any other survivors, I managed to salvage the coordinates to the colony’s laboratory from the Cap’s shuttle and I’ve just dispatched it to everyone’s PDA... it doesn’t look like he or Keyes made it either. We’ll rendezvous there and figure out what’s going on. Godspeed.” The voice cut off in a flash of static, then Hayden’s wrist lit up.

save us, it first flashed, followed immediately by the coordinates:
39.7294° N, 104.8319° W – 32 kilometers.

Hayden clenched his fist and leaned against the wall. The lights flickered again, one going out completely. He stared into the darkness that ate the jungle, then back down at the PDA’s coordinates. *32 kilometers.*

Hayden retreated, huddling into the corner of the makeshift fort, past the

remains, and readied his rifle to the only entrance.

~

The light of the star leaked through the open doors of the shuttle, catching Hayden's eyes. He tiptoed around what remained of his peers, avoiding making eye contact, and embarked back into the jungle. Various greens and blues dominated the scenery around. No animals or creatures greeted the morning; the silence hung heavy in the air.

Hayden forced his way through the thick plants that stood in his path, making his way through as if pushing his way through a crowd. Vines and roots caught on his legs, attempting to pull him back, but gave way as he ventured onward.

~

The star had shifted direction. He saw what looked to be a clearing, only a few hundred feet ahead. His stomach churned and thrashed.

"C-c-calorie intake recommended-d-d-d." the PDA sputtered. He looked down to it, now reading: *20 kilometers*.

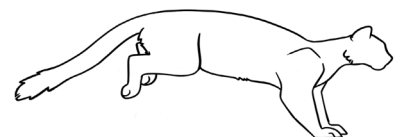
Stumbling through the remaining plants, he found his way into the clearing before throwing himself on the ground. His head pounded, as if it were in the clasp of a giant's closing fist. Hayden breathed heavily through his mouth, which had grown dry. His eyes were closed, but when they opened he could hardly focus. He put a hand to his forehead, attempting to steady his breath by breathing through his nose incrementally.

A rustling in the shrubberies disturbed the jungle's silence. Disregarding any semblance of rest, Hayden jumped up, rifle in hand. Through the brush, stumbled another man. Another astronaut, also helmetless.

"Oh my god, hey!" Hayden called out, lowering the gun to his hip. The astronaut spun to face him, his stance relaxing as soon as his eyes met his ally.

"Y-you?" He stepped forward. "Are you—"

"Sit, we need to rest for a second. Did you get that message too?"



The man inched backward. “No... No, no, no, no.” He continued. Hayden backed away as well. “I *tried*, I really did. I’m *sorry*.” The astronaut began weeping and knelt.

Hayden stepped toward him, treading as if he were on a lake of ice. The man continued to weep, holding his hand over his brow. Hayden reached out a hand, “Hey—”

“*No!*” He sprung up and shoved Hayden to the ground, throwing the weapon aside. The man pounced and clawed at his face, his eyes full of a predatory rage. “It wasn’t my fault!” He spat through gritted teeth. Hayden held him away with his forearms.

“*No*, stop! Please!” Hayden’s arms buckled, his eyes were wide and his jaw clenched as he fought against the man who continued forcing his weight downward relentlessly. A fist collided with Hayden’s nose, causing a splatter across his face followed by an eruption down over his mouth and onto the collar of the suit.

With his resistance fading, Hayden shouted, followed by a knee to the crazed astronaut’s pelvis. The impact shifted his weight, allowing Hayden to throw him off. Hayden stood up and held his nose as blood began to clot at the nostrils. The astronaut thrashed on the ground before throwing himself back up like a rabid animal, grunting violently. Hayden stared wide and innocent eyed at the man, holding out his hand gesturing for him to cease.

The man ignored the visual cue and rushed at Hayden, who instead of bracing, parried the charging psychopath, pushing him to the side. The astronaut stumbled, pausing for a moment and looked at Hayden, also wide eyed, but rather than innocent, his gaze was malevolent.

“What *happened* to you?” Hayden yelled at the man, who stood, staring, panting, drooling now. “Why won’t *you just stop?*”

“You won’t fucking trick me again! You won’t get me!” the astronaut roared. “I won’t save you!” He proceeded to clumsily charge, giving Hayden the opportunity to shove him away again, this time forcing him to the ground.

Hayden took the opportunity to jump onto the man, pinning him down by his shoulders and using his body weight. The astronaut continued to thrash under the pressure of Hayden, spouting nonsensical insults in tandem with pleas

of forgiveness.

“Stop it! Please!” Hayden cried back. The crazed astronaut now had tears flowing down his face, but his eyes were still wild, pupils dilated. No discernable emotion could be read. The man made a harsh shove under Hayden, which threw off his balance almost enough to mistakenly release him. He was relentless.

Hayden noticed the rifle next to their scuffle, and snatched it off the ground, then threw it onto the man’s neck. Both hands applied pressure to the weapon, the astronaut continued his thrashing. He still shouted at Hayden, but the rashness in his tone had begun to recede.

Hayden continued to apply more pressure. The man stopped his thrashing, now squirming under the slab of metal forced against him. He gained no leverage attempting to push Hayden or the gun anymore. The grit in his voice turned into a congestion of air and cries held hostage.

Hayden pleaded back, continuing to beg the man to stop. The gun sunk deeper. The man’s begging ceased, any words becoming stagnant in his throat, only small unintelligible fragments escaped. Hayden’s knees raised off the ground. The gun sunk deeper. The kicking slowed.

The astronaut’s eyes softened, water still running down his cheeks.

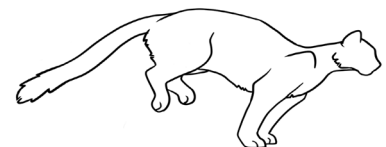
The resistance ended.

Hayden’s weight redistributed throughout his body, the gun, now released, fell to the side.

Hayden lowered his head. His muscles felt tight, as if being tied and pulled by strings. He felt the man’s neck, its inner contents dislodged and rearranged.

His face compressed as he saw what he had done. He screamed into the man’s still chest, pleading, questioning. Only the trees heard, but they paid no mind.

“Why? Why did you make me do that?” He begged the man for an answer. He lifted his head, his eyes covered in a veil of water, his mind sporadic and unraveled. He threw a fist into the ground next to the body’s head. The



dreadful quiet had returned to the air.

Hayden stood and paced around the corpse.

He continued to question under his breath, “Why? Why did you do that?” He sat next to the body and pressed his fist against his forehead which was still drenched in sweat. He looked at the rifle, lying next to the body.

He grabbed the gun from the ground. He held it for a while, sobbing to himself, staring blankly into nothing, only acknowledging the weapon through feeling. He brushed his hand against its flat side, feeling the ridges of the rail.

The light rays breaking through the leaves faded into nothingness. The jungle once again fell into darkness. Hayden stopped his movements; only his breathing was present. The air around him felt as if it froze in place.

He moved the barrel under his chin, caressing the trigger. He closed his eyes and waited a while. Then he pulled.

The trigger didn’t budge.

He waited for a moment, but the silence never broke. His eyes shot open and he looked down, frantically searching around the weapon. He discovered a dial, an arrow pointed to the word *safety*. Hayden laughed.

He laid down next to the body, clutching his gun to his chest, staring at the floral cover sheltering the sky and hiding any stars that would now be out. His eyes started to fade again and his hands shook. His stomach felt as if it were collapsing in on itself. He looked at his PDA, still reading *20 kilometers*.

20 more kilometers.

~

Hayden shuffled through the jungle as if he were undead. He flinched frequently, reacting as if he saw things in the jungle moving around him. His once pale suit had now sported a musty yellow with accents of red now around his hands and collar. His nose was crooked, deep red stained the surroundings and had found its way over his mouth and teeth. His eyes were red and pupils dilated. Hayden’s legs shivered under the weight of the heat and his mind. His gun hung lazily at his side. He looked down to his wrist pad, dragging his arm

up into view.

200 meters.

“Congratulations, you have reached your destination,” it stated.

The laboratory was hidden behind another outcrop, glowing under the star’s light as if it were a beacon. The facility was overgrown on the outside, vines and moss caressing it as if preparing to drag the building into the earth. A body sat against one of the trees outside, a rifle sat at his side. A deep brown splatter tainted the trees vibrant color. Hayden ignored it completely and treaded past toward the building. The door of the facility was locked, which Hayden haphazardly responded to by throwing the butt of his rifle through a neighboring window, crawling inside.

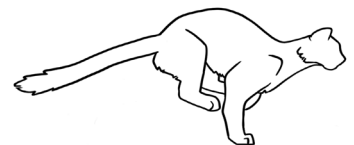
The room opened into an office, adjacent to the type that he had worked in back home. The silence persisted even in the facility. Hayden continued to flinch slightly towards dark corners of the room and the shadows under the metallic cubicles. The walls sported a grayed blue, the office was illuminated by the natural light through the surrounding windows. A single door stood on the opposite side which hung slightly opened.

“welcome,” the PDA announced, “you have arrived.” Hayden shuffled towards the door, lifting his weapon into an alert position, remembering to click the safety off. He leaned against the door, creaking it open.

It opened into a wide room, revealing a statue that stood in the center.

The monument was dark, appearing to be made of some sort of rock, but darker than anything Hayden had ever seen. It absorbed the light that spilled in from the open ceiling, refracting only enough to reveal its rough texture. The oppressive monument made the already dull room seem unsaturated. The center of the statue pointed outward, dropping into shadow. Like a bottomless pit flipped on the wrong axis.

A bouquet of limbs reached for the center of the statue. Skeletal hands clawed at the base, the bodies hopelessly crushed by one another. Grey flaps, what was left of skin, hung off some of the arms. The ground was natural; grass covered the floor but turned to dirt as it neared the object, like it had risen from the ground or at least had remained there some time. The computers sparked on.



“we see you.” The PDA was echoed by the other machines; the automated voices varied but united. Hayden’s muscles tightened; his hand clenched his rifle. He felt as if his soul had been gripped by the statue. “we have watched you for some time, Gabriel Hayden.”

He backed to the entrance of the room, his eyes keeping contact with the statue. He was halted, colliding with the now closed door.

“you prove yourself persistent, capable, dangerous.” The words were distorted under the many mechanical speakers. “you are fit to be our guide. our guardian. our savior.” A small shockwave burst from the monument, disrupting the machines for a moment. “save us.”

A shadowy hand began to emerge from the statue’s center. It flexed its fingers, spreading, compressing, clenching, as if it was learning how they worked. The hand proceeded to move forward, the arm’s length never ending. Unaffected by weight or gravity, it cut through the air like a scalpel through flesh. More hands crept out, pulling themselves in every other direction, the arms attached also impossibly long. Within seconds, a clutter of arms emerged from the pit of the statue, the hands clawing up each other, moving like a tide across the room in every direction.

The cluster of dark fingers resembled a generation of spiderlings, scattering from the corpse of its crushed mother. A branch of the limbs made its way towards Hayden.

Hayden stood frozen, staring at the impossible entity that moved toward him with haunting grace. The limbs ceased movement in front of him, the hands settling together, while the rest behind the branch continued to feel around the room, collapsing the skulls and machines they clung to. The silence that followed was oppressing.

The hands waited in front of Hayden, unmoving; as if they had become miniatures in a set piece. The hands peeled back, revealing a significantly larger fist. It unfurled, blooming like a flower. Long spindly fingers unfolded from too many joints, easily long enough to wrap around Hayden’s entire head. The palm faced the ceiling. The conglomerate of limbs offered its hand.

“save us.” The voices whispered, “our guide. our guardian. our savior. save us.” The request felt like it echoed across the room, digging its fingers around Hayden’s brain. The mess of limbs across the room had also come to a

pause, as if anticipating Hayden's response.

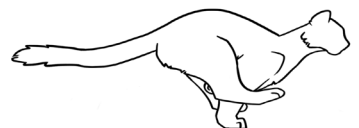
Hayden shifted slightly, correcting his posture despite the deterioration of himself. The hand hadn't moved, like they were paused in time.

Hayden pried his breath free, breaking his silence. His arms rested at his sides; one hand remained open, the other gripped his rifle, finger around the trigger.

The tension in his muscles wavered, his eyes wanted to fade, his hands to release, his brain to rest. But a decision had to be made.

Gabriel Hayden lifted one of his arms toward the entity. His eyes were focused, defiant, prepared.

And a savior he became.



*Content Warning

The jagged tones of Joplin filled the Hotel as Lydia and her friend, Mary, arrived at the farewell party. Lydia's gaze drifted over to the old piano in the corner where a young man sat, like he did every night, his fingers flying across the keys. She smiled as she watched him play, admiring how smart he looked tonight in uniform. In uniform...

"I've got to talk to him tonight!" Lydia said, jerking into realization.

"Hmm..." Mary acknowledged as she stared at Billy Richardson in his uniform.

"The pianist. I have to speak with him tonight," Lydia repeated.

Mary turned her head towards Lydia before asking, "Who?"

"The pianist who plays at the hotel piano every night. I've got to speak with him or..."

"...or you'll never get the chance," Mary finished, drawing the same conclusion Lydia had moments earlier. Lydia nodded, pursing her lips. "Lydia, the night isn't going to last forever," Mary continued.

"I know," Lydia said, quietly glancing back at the pianist. His parted blonde hair was incredibly handsome.

"Then what are you waiting for? Go."

"I..." Lydia paused and looked between Mary and the pianist, brushing a strand of caramel-colored hair off her face, and said, "You're right, I should just go talk to him."

"Lydia, go!" Mary exclaimed, nudging her friend toward the piano. Lydia took a deep breath as she meandered around sobbing mothers, proud fathers, and eager schoolboys ready to answer the President's call to arms. She twisted around the room, keeping her eyes on the pianist and savoring his music that had lifted her spirits for the past two years. His music was so full of life and her

THE PIANIST*

Emily Johnson

*Discussions of War

homesickness for the city, mama, and her brothers disappeared as she let the ragged notes consume her. It would be enough just to thank him for everything, but she had to get past this crowd.

“Lydia!” Lydia whipped around to find Mrs. Richardson towering over her, a deprecating smile draped across her large face.

Lydia closed her eyes before replying through partially gritted teeth, “Mrs. Richardson, how may I help you?”

“Those socks for the Ladies’ Aid Society, dear. How are they coming? Our poor boys are going to need them if they’re going to win the war, but I’m sure you’re aware of that.” Mrs. Richardson stared her down, and feeling guilty, Lydia looked away.

“I... well, you see, Mrs. Richardson, I’m not that great of a knitter and...” Lydia’s voice petered out as she watched Mrs. Richardson’s face melt into a disapproving frown. No doubt she thought that a city girl, such as Lydia, was capable of such a menial task. Then, putting on her biggest fake smile, Lydia continued, “My mama was a great knitter, and she taught me all her tricks, so I’ll have them ready by next meeting. If that’s all right?”

“That’s perfect, dear. Glad to know you’re just as eager to help as the rest of us,” Mrs. Richardson replied with her smile right side up again. Lydia nodded, muttering an excuse as she tried to move past Mrs. Richardson, but the older woman wouldn’t let her through. “Oh, you young people, always moving on to the next big thing!”

Lydia turned. “Mrs. Richardson?”

“Yes, what is the world coming to! All these young people are gallivanting about with who knows who to who knows where!”

Lydia quietly nodded her agreement, not sure how to respond.

Mrs. Richardson continued, “My own son is caught up with it too! Did you know that he’s been walking Mary Cooper home?”

Lydia shook her head and feigned disbelief, despite knowing exactly what trouble Billy and Mary had been up to. “No, I didn’t know. But isn’t Billy heading off to war tomorrow?”



“Yes, he is, and I couldn’t be prouder of him. Should help straighten him out too, I think,” Mrs. Richardson said.

They were quiet for a moment, and Lydia thought she could slip away, but Mrs. Richardson asked, “How old are you, Lydia?”

“Nineteen, but I’ll be twenty in August.”

“And you’re not married?”

Lydia shook her head and Mrs. Richardson moved on. “You’re still young, that’s for sure, but sensible to not get yourself into too much trouble. Oh, there’s Mrs. Thomas. I’d better go ask how the new baby is.”

Mrs. Richardson hurried off and Lydia breathed a sigh of relief before looking over at the piano. The pianist was still sitting there, playing his ragtime tunes. Lydia began to shuffle through the crowd again muttering “pardon me” and “excuse me” as she moved past people. However, she had only moved a couple feet before she heard her name called again.

“Miss Morgan!” Lydia inclined her head towards the voice and sighed inwardly upon seeing her employer striding across the room towards her. She had hoped to avoid any mention of work tonight, but it seemed she had no such luck.

“Mr. Olsen?” Lydia questioned when he reached her.

“The letters from the train station—they got delivered all right?” Mr. Olsen asked, searching his pockets as if he had forgotten something.

“Yes, sir.” Lydia nodded as she tried to look over his shoulder to see if the pianist was still there.

“And the telegram for—”

Lydia cut him off. “All done and delivered, Mr. Olsen.”

“Good,” Mr. Olsen said. He stopped fiddling with his pockets and made eye contact with Lydia for the first time that evening. “You seem distracted my dear. You really shouldn’t bother yourself with work tonight, you know. A young

person like you should be enjoying herself.”

Lydia blinked slowly before responding, “Yes, I’ll... I’ll go do that right now.” She turned away from Mr. Olsen after bidding him a short farewell.

She had a straight shot of the piano now and began striding towards it. The pianist was still sitting erect at the piano as he hit the keys. His army brown uniform accented his robust figure and strong jawline. His eyes were closed, and it looked as though his whole soul had been absorbed by the music. Lydia paused and let the bouncing melody wash over her. Then, as the end of the song neared, the pianist opened his eyes, and Lydia, taking her cue, began to close the short gap between them. She was only a few steps away from him when a towering figure blocked her view.

“Would you like to dance?” Lydia directed her gaze towards the voice and found herself looking at a young man with emerald green eyes and close-cut dirt brown hair.

“Travis, I... well I...” Lydia began sheepishly, feeling her face grow hot. “I was trying to... I really shouldn’t...” She wanted to brush him off, but, as he was the boy next door, it was difficult.

Travis begged, “Please Lydia, it’s my last night home.”

“But...” Lydia stopped looking at his pleading face. She couldn’t crush him, not on his last night home possibly ever. She glanced at the pianist who was getting ready to play another song and then back at Travis. Then, shutting her eyes tight and opening them again, she said, “Yes, I’d like to dance very much.”

“Great,” Travis said, smiling, as he wrapped her up in his arms and began taking her around the dance floor. He was talking, but Lydia could only hear the music. The frazzled notes bounced off the piano keys as the music sped up and slowed down, getting lost as Travis dragged her farther and farther away from the pianist.

“Uh huh, yes,” Lydia muttered, moving her head up and down, not sure what she was agreeing to. She got a brief glance at the pianist as Travis spun her around, but he pulled her back to him as the music burst through the room, spilling notes that tumbled through her ears.



“Am I a coward?” Travis asked and Lydia stared up at him, confused, as she heard him for the first time since they had started dancing. “Am I a coward for being scared to go to war?”

Lydia smiled up at him, adoring the childlike expression on his face. “Of course not,” she offered. “I suspect that everyone’s scared to go to war at some point. Besides, I think you’re really brave to go. You’ll show the Kaiser what we Americans are made of.” She paused then added, “You all will,” thinking of her brother, Mrs. Richardson’s son—Billy Richardson, the pianist, and all the other young men willing to give their lives for their country.

“You think so?”

“I know so,” Lydia reassured as the music quieted and the song came to a halting stop.

Travis nodded. “Would you like another dance?”

“Oh no, I really must be going, but thank you,” Lydia said. Travis left and Lydia pivoted to give herself a clear view of the piano, but when she looked the pianist was gone. For two years, she had been admiring the pianist and his music that had reminded her of home, was now gone, out of her life forever. The wooden piano bench was empty and the piano was lifeless, as if it were missing him too. Lydia glanced around the chattering room and felt it seize up. It seemed to get smaller, hotter, and louder as her disappointment crashed upon her. Finally, deciding she needed fresh air, Lydia stepped outside.

She breathed in the warm spring air and looked around at the dark street in front of her. It was empty except for two parked motor vehicles. She stared out at the peaceful street until she noticed a familiar figure emerging around the back of the hotel. It was the pianist.

“Wait,” she called, running up to him. The pianist turned, acknowledging her, and Lydia blushed before continuing, “I... I just wanted to thank you for playing the hotel piano every night. It meant a lot.”

The pianist nodded, tipped his hat, and said, “My pleasure, Miss Lydia,” before he turned and walked away, disappearing into the night.

*Content Warning

My best friend is puking into the second-floor restroom toilets, and I'm keeping guard outside the door, leaning against the brick wall like I'm a crumbling building, like it's the only thing keeping me upright. Maybe it is.

I can hear her. She knows I can, so maybe she's being extra loud, just for me. She does that sometimes.

Itzel comes out at twelve o'clock sharp, and I know that because I'm on my phone, anxiously refreshing the top of my Twitter feed, and no one's posting because they all have actual lives and things to do, and I'm watching the little *fifty-nine* tick into a *double-zero*. It makes my stomach drop as the door swings open.

"Am I on time?" she asks, wiping the corners of her mouth and fanning at her wet, red eyes. She's always so nonchalant about this.

"You're fine. My turn." I readjust my bookbag on my shoulder and duck into the bathroom.

Sometimes I wish that the ventilation wasn't so good in here, and yes, I realize that that's a weird fucking thought. But there's no scent of vomit, of blood and fingers and saliva. No sign that Itzel was in here at all. I kind of wish there was. It would make it more real, make her more real.

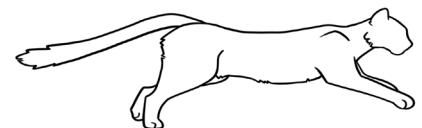
I make my way to the handicap stall, the farthest from the door, and turn on all the sinks as I go. Our school hasn't yet transitioned to the fancy automatic sensor sinks, and I'm grateful for the sound of rushing water, of pumping pipes, as I kneel on the tiles in front of the toilet.

Maybe Itzel wants me to hear her as she purges, but I'd rather keep it to myself.

~

"You good?"

*Disordered Eating, Vomiting, Self Harm



My eyes flick up to her, even though I don't want them to. Soon as I make eye contact, her brows furrow, and she sighs. "You're not good."

"How could you tell," I say in a deadpan, and turn back to the worksheet in front of me. Latin words swim along the page, their endings melting into one big, long conjugation that I couldn't even hope to parse.

"Girl, come on. You're not looking too hot." Itzel makes a little tutting sound as she looks at her classwork as well. "Farmers... Fields..."

I look up at her, chewing at her pencil. "Work in the fields," I say. "I like starting with the verb. Gives context to the rest of the sentence."

"God, I'd rather be in a field than here right now."

Usually that kind of stuff makes me laugh, but I can't even pull my lips into a smile right now. My mouth feels filmy and gross; it often does right after lunch, right after our rendezvous near the second-floor restrooms, but today, it's worse than normal. Maybe I didn't use as much mouthwash as I usually do, I don't know.

We continue working together, even though Magister (he makes us call him that, the Latin word for "teacher") didn't technically tell us it was a group assignment. He's stopped bothering to quiet us down.

At the beginning of the semester, Itzel switched her name placard with the girl who was *supposed* to be sitting at my table. She sat down at her stolen spot, started taking out all her supplies (pens every color of the rainbow, highlighters, and a shiny metallic notebook that probably cost more than my entire backpack), and then crossed her arms. Like she was challenging the teacher to do something about it.

She pointed at me. "We're a package deal, okay?"

And I remember the look of her, the glimmer of her painted nails, carefully filed to short, round nubs. The set to her jaw, just barely hidden by the puffy cheeks she keeps complaining about, even now. The glint in her eyes.

The teacher just sighed and nodded.

Magister is a bit of a pushover, I guess. But that kind of makes Latin my

favorite class. It's like a better version of lunch, where I get to talk and mess around with my best friend without being surrounded by food and eyes and expectations and all that other bullshit.

"The dog... Man... What?"

"Of the man," I correct, and then immediately catch my bottom lip in my teeth, expecting that half-hearted little laughing sound Itzel always makes when I fix something for her, when she gets pissed at me.

But it doesn't come, and she's just looking at me blankly, so I continue, "It's genitive, which implies ownership. So 'man's' works, but you gotta put it in front of 'dog' for it to make sense. It's either 'the man's dog' or 'the dog of the man.'"

I can see Itzel's eyes glazing over in real time, like they do every time I get too teacher-y, too smart. Magister likes when I help her, I know that, but it's really never worth the consequences. I just wish I didn't let the words fall out like I do, so sticky and explanatory and not at all what she wants to hear.

"Oh," she says. And then she laughs in that horrible way, like it's a punishment and not a thank you, and I keep my eyes down on my paper.

"Sorry. Did that even make sense?" My voice sounds weak, even to my ears. As watery and yellow as bile.

Itzel shrugs and picks up her pencil, adding to the loopy cursive writing already there. "Not really, but that's not your fault, babe."

She smiles at me, but it doesn't reach her eyes. And it doesn't make me feel better.

~

Itzel doesn't text me when she gets home that night. It's the real cold shoulder, then.

All for some fucking word vomit in Latin class.

My cat, Baby, purrs into the crook of my legs as I do my homework on my bed. More Latin exercises, geometry, a couple of scenes from *Romeo and*



Juliet. It goes by fast—it always does—but once I’m done, there isn’t much else to do.

I sit there, idly petting Baby’s spine. I think about watching TV, but nothing sounds good. I could scroll through Twitter, but everyone’s posting diet threads again, and those always make me feel like shit, and Itzel might be active on there... I really don’t want to see her stupidly gorgeous face in her little profile picture while she’s pointedly ignoring me. I think that’d make it all worse. *God.*

And I think about going back to the bathroom and trying to purge again. I don’t think I got to the bottom of it all after Mom made me have dinner, and the heavy feeling in my gut is pulling me to my en-suite now.

I wish I could text Itzel about it. She’s so good at motivating people.

When I get to the bathroom, I take a moment to stare at the mirror. I wonder if I have the same cheeks as Itzel, puffed by twice-daily purges, easy to mistake for baby-fat or natural shape or some other shit. It’s hard to tell when it’s your face, I guess, because I’ve never thought she looks anything less than perfect.

Not that I’d ever tell her that. She’d probably slap me.

I suck my cheeks in, biting them between my molars and assessing what I’d look like with cheekbones. *Not bad.* I almost pick up my phone for a quick Snapchat selfie before I remember that Itzel’s mad at me and would probably screenshot it for some embarrassing blackmail material later on. She’s good at that, too.

After I’m done getting rid of the rest of my dinner, I look at myself again. My skin’s a couple shades pinker from the effort, my eyes blurred by tears. A few strands have escaped my high ponytail, curling along the sides of my face.

Itzel once told me that this is when I’m at my prettiest, and I think I agree with her.

I rinse my mouth out with water (Itzel’s voice in my head, telling me that brushing your teeth after purging just rubs the acid in deeper, just makes it all worse) and splash it on my face. And I breathe.

Against my better judgment, I open Twitter, and... Yes, Itzel's active on there, of course, replying to every tweet on the timeline with cute cartoony GIFs and kind words. Do they know she's not like that in real life?

I tap on her profile and then tap once more to zoom in on her little avatar. Eyeliner, "sharp enough to cut a bitch," like she always says, glitter on her eyelids sparkling in the flash of her phone camera. I can just barely make out the fabric of her pillowcase (blue, with little penguins, of course) behind her fanned-out hair.

I was there while she took that one, I think. Cross-legged on her carpeted floor, twiddling my thumbs as she texted her online friends, all people prettier and funnier and nicer than me, people who wouldn't correct her Latin or cling too close to her on outings or laugh too loud at her jokes. I remember how excited she was that she got the picture. *The* picture. She had bounced up off her bed to show me, basking in my compliments because I couldn't think of anything else to say. She'd told me then that it'd make a great Twitter layout, and I agreed, and we started looking for headers together on Pinterest. For a second, that night, I felt like she actually wanted *me* there. Like *I* was wanted.

It was Itzel who found my account first, just about a month after our eighth-grade graduation. I'd kept it secret from everyone I knew, went by "Molly" and "Mo" instead of my real name, never posted my face. But somehow, she knew. And she found me.

She'd just sent a quick DM, something that dropped my heart from my chest to the depths of my empty stomach: *mona, is that you? wtf lol*. The text itself was bad enough; I spiraled for hours, thinking that she'd tell the school, that she'd tell my *mom*, and that my life was literally already over at fifteen.

But when I clicked on her profile... It all faded away. The dread that had been dripping down my throat, cold as ice, melted into something else. Something safe. Because she was *like me*. I remember scanning over her Twitter bio: the goal weight, the trigger warnings, the "don't like, don't follow."

Itzel didn't go by her real name there either. But I knew it was her. We hadn't talked much in school, but a face like hers was hard to ignore. I was jealous of her skin, the color of caramel, the homemade kind, so smooth and free of the acne and scars and freckles that dot my own. I still am a little jealous, I think.



Once we knew each other's deepest secrets, once we'd stalked through each other's profiles, picked each other apart... We became best friends. A package deal.

I think I've spent more time at her house than mine since I met her. And sure, it's not all fucking sunshine and rainbows—but what friendships are? She's the only person in the *world* who truly knows me. I'm the only one who knows her, knows all of her.

She's worth it.

My thoughts start to drift to her hair, soft and shiny enough to reflect like a mirror. The blue-black dye she uses to make it glow in the sunlight. The way she braids it before bed, the way it tumbles into soft, smooth waves every morning.

And then my phone starts ringing.

“Mona!” Itzel's scream cuts right into my eardrum as soon as I pick up, and I wince.

After switching it to speaker, I set my phone down on the bathroom counter. “Huh?”

“I wasn't gonna text you tonight, but *oh my god*, did you see Ash's selfie? And my reply? And HIS reply to MY reply?”

Thank God it's not a video call; I can roll my eyes freely. “Is that all you're calling about?” But even as I say it, I'm scrolling through her interactions, searching for her friend's face. He's moderately popular on our side of Twitter, a couple thousand followers, but Itzel's getting up there too. They both post selfies a lot, and since that's so rare here, it gets quite a bit of attention.

“Oh, he's—” I cut myself off before I say “hot” or something else stupid. Ash's bio just says “junkorexic,” but you'd never be able to tell that from the pics he posts. Like, holy shit, he's shirtless and toned and I think he could be a model if he wanted to be. Itzel's reply to his tweet, punctuated by a GIF of a little blushing cartoon bear, says about as much, if not in those words.

“*Right?*” Itzel's words are breathy, excited. I haven't ever heard her so flustered about a boy, about anyone. It's like she's in love. “And look how much

he's fucking flirting with me, like, come on!"

She's not wrong. One of Itzel's mutuals even replied to her, saying *omg just get a room already*, which I almost laugh at before remembering how that would cost me approximately three days of radio silence from her. But yeah, the interaction between Ash and Itzel kind of makes me want to gag and avert my eyes like I do when I see gross couple PDA at the mall, or something. It's way too much.

"You two are adorable," I tell her, and I hate how the lie burns on my tongue, acrid and sour. "You gonna start e-dating or something?"

Itzel's silent for a second or so, but it's like I can see her shrug, her eyes crinkling at the edges with excitement.

"Someone's in *lo-ove*," I croon, taking my phone back to my bedroom and sinking into my duvet. Baby chirps at me indignantly from the little nest she'd made at the foot of the bed, so I reach up to rub her chin.

Pretty soon, though, I have to get under the covers and put the phone back up to my ear. It was warm outside today, but the temperature drops like crazy once the sun goes down, and the bathroom tiles sucked all the heat from my body. And I haven't actually digested anything since—yesterday? The day before? I've heard that can make you feel cold, too.

"God, Mona, ew. Anyways, I need, um, pictures to think about sending him. Would you wanna help take them?"

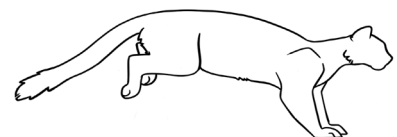
That makes my throat go dry, makes me sting and burn, as if every drop of stomach acid I've ever gotten rid of has just come back to haunt me now. "Pictures?"

Itzel sighs. "Tasteful ones. You know what I mean."

"Yeah, I guess," I say.

I must not have sounded convincing, because she sighs again. "You're such a fucking prude sometimes. We'll talk about it tomorrow, yeah?"

"At lunch?"



“After lunch,” she says.

I nod, even though she can’t see me. “It’s a date.”

~

It’s 11:58 AM, and I’m listening to my best friend puke her guts up again. At 11:59, I hear her splutter and cough. A minute later, she’s still in there.

Two minutes later, I can *still* hear her retching. And she’s cutting into *my* allotted time, Goddammit.

There’s a specific knock pattern we agreed on, in case some random tries to walk into the bathroom while one of us is inside. But it’s been weeks since we’ve seen anyone walking down the hallway at this time, because everyone’s still in the cafeteria and enjoying themselves, and I know I’m supposed to be keeping watch, but it’s probably fine if I go check on her. Right?

“Itzel?” I step inside the bathroom, and the change is immediate. The sounds of her purging are louder, closer; they make me want to gag. I just about do, probably because my body knows my schedule by now.

None of the stall doors have been shut, so I just walk towards the sounds. I find Itzel draped over the toilet, fourth stall from the entrance. A string of saliva trails from her full lips to the green-tinted water in the bowl.

“You good?” I ask, eyeing the bottle of Diet Mountain Dew clutched tight in her hand. “Doesn’t that shit make you nauseous?”

“Why do you think I’m using it?” Itzel croaks. She leans back and pats the floor beside her. An invitation to sit.

It feels weird, a break in the routine that I was just getting used to, but I settle in beside her anyway. I try to ignore the smell, of sour soda and bile and the chicken-fried rice we were served for lunch.

“Why are we even fucking doing this,” I say and almost clap my hand to my mouth. It isn’t a question, but it feels like something I don’t want an answer to. Like something we really shouldn’t talk about.

It isn’t a question, but Itzel answers anyway, “I just wanna be pretty.”

And there are so many words in my throat, in my mouth, and they start coming up like acid reflux before I can swallow them back down. “You *are*.”

“Of course you would say that.” Itzel wipes at her mouth—I watch the chain of saliva break, like a spiderweb, like a curse—then takes a deep swig of soda.

“What does that mean?”

Itzel rolls her eyes and hunches back over the bowl. “I don’t even think getting skinny will fix you, Mona. But it will for me, and I just wanna be pretty. I don’t want to look like you anymore.”

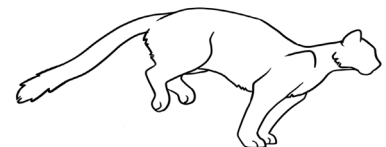
I pull back in shock, like it was really acid she spit out and not just words. I can feel my stomach lurching, that up-and-down movement that means I’m about to purge, to get clean and feel better and be *okay* again.

And I want to. I want to get rid of it all—the food, the words, the breath in my lungs. I want to flush this moment away and go back to standing outside the door and waiting for my best friend to stop killing herself so I could *start* killing myself, and I want to get rid of me and Itzel and the Mountain Dew bottle and the string of spit tracing her jaw. Purge it all, from my memory and my stomach and my brain and my heart, but God, *especially* my heart.

As I watch, Itzel brings her fingers to her mouth, pushes them back, back, back, till she’s heaving and more is coming out. Her hand is so small that she can fit her knuckles between her teeth. It might be jealousy that flares, hot and red, at the base of my stomach at that thought, but I don’t think it is. I think she’s never been prettier than in this moment. I think she would taste horrible, like bile and macerated chicken and the worst soda known to man, and I think she would be worth kissing anyway.

I know what it is now, the thing rotting deep inside me. The thing I’ve been trying to purge. It’s never been the Twitter account or the calorie counting or secrets or the acid coating my throat. It’s *her*.

“I guess I’ll come over to your house tonight. For the pictures,” I say, standing up. She laughs a little at that, the sound cutting into my ears, my nerves, but I don’t acknowledge it.



Lunch sits heavy in my stomach as I leave the bathroom. I'm still lurching, still about to heave it all up for the world to see, but somehow, I still feel clean.

Like I got rid of what I needed to.

*Content Warning

“How are you feeling?” my husband asks as he walks up to me, setting a duffel bag at my feet. I look up at Anthony. I’m so tired that I have to blink hard to get the shape of him to come into focus. I take a deep breath to answer; the greasy smell of the Salisbury steak wafting from the cafeteria mixes with the antiseptic, sterile smell of the hospital and makes my stomach turn. I realize that this discomfort is the first thing I have been truly aware of in a while.

“Numb,” I say with a shrug. I stare past him at a group of people in the corner of the big lobby. A young blond woman holding a pink giraffe puts her head on the shoulder of the man sitting next to her on a faded teal vinyl loveseat. An older man sits in the armchair across from them, talking excitedly. He’s wearing a shirt that says, ‘The Best Dads Get Promoted to Grandpa.’ There is a coffee table between them with a bouquet of candy bars in a pink vase sitting in the center, a pink and purple mylar balloon with “Welcome to the World” splayed across it, bobbing around their heads. “That’s where we were,” I say, nodding my head in their direction. “We were there for fourteen hours, just waiting. God, that was what, sixteen months ago?” I close my eyes, and I can see it. My family, sitting around that same table waiting for the surgeon...

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“I brought Chinese,” my new stepbrother, Connor, called out as he walked through the sliding doors, his sister Alice trailing behind holding a bakery box. “Any news yet?”

“Nothing so far,” my aunt, Amy, said, clearing the small table in the center of the chairs we occupied. “Wonton soup?”

“It’s right here. She went in at 10:30; you would think they would give us an update after what, three and a half hours?” Alice said as she handed a container of soup to my aunt.

“This kind of exploratory surgery takes a long time,” Laura said, opening a box of lo mein. “The surgeon has to inspect the entirety of the abdomen, that’s around twenty-six different body parts, not to mention running twenty-eight feet of intestines through his hands to ensure there isn’t anything going on there. I’m sure he’s just being thorough. They’ll let us know what’s going on as soon as

Jacqueline Loya

ACCEPTANCE*

*Death of a Parent, Childhood Emotional Trauma



they can.” She looked up from the noodles and saw the twin looks of horror on my stepsiblings’ faces. “What?”

“My cousin, the OR nurse,” I said to them, rolling my eyes. “You’ll get used to her.” We fell into silence while they ate. I was nervously picking at my food. My mother had not been well for about a year now. Severe stomach issues had led her doctor to send her to a myriad of specialists. None of them could diagnose her definitively. There were too many overlapping symptoms, and she never followed through with the imaging orders. Now, a month after her wedding, we were all sitting in the hospital lobby, waiting to hear what the surgeon found while he explored her insides.

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“I’m sorry I wasn’t there that day,” Anthony says, ripping me out of the memory.

“Nothing you could have done but sit there. The station needed you,” I say flatly. I don’t want to fight with him, even though I still get angry when I think about him not being there. When the news came, my stepfather had his kids, my aunt had her daughter, and there I was alone. That day, I was the embodiment of the “firehouse widow” moniker. I know it wasn’t his fault; when and where wildfires take place and how long it takes to get them under control are out of his hands. I look up to find him staring at me, his dark brows furrowed together, his square jaw clenched. He runs a hand through his short-cropped black hair.

“I feel like shit about it, Vin. If I could change it...”

“Enough,” I cut him off abruptly. I stand up and tug my shirt over my bulbous form, trying to get the wrinkles to smooth, “Your guilt doesn’t change anything. Besides, you’ve taken a leave of absence, and you’re here now. Why don’t you go up and see her? I’m supposed to be going to the family showers, and I’m sure Dave could use a break. He hasn’t left her side in over a week.”

Anthony nods as he steps closer to me and runs the back of his hand down my freckled cheek, “I think I got everything you asked for. I also put your prenatal vitamins in the bag. You need

to remember to take them—for the baby,” he says as he kisses my forehead and turns to leave. I let out a deep sigh as I watch him head for the elevators. I grab my bag and head in the opposite direction for the showers.

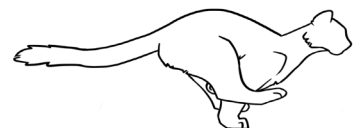
When I get back to my mother’s room after my shower, I find it has been infested with hospital staff. There is a serious-looking woman in a grey pantsuit holding a clipboard, Dr. Nguyen, the oncologist, and her nurse. They’re all huddling around the foot of my mother’s bed, while Dave, my sweet stepfather, looks at her with concern in his eyes. The last year has been hard on him. His once robust frame is now tight with stress; the stubble on his jaw, evidence that grooming is of no importance, has new grey hairs in it. His posture sags, and his brown eyes, usually so warm and inviting, are glassy with unshed tears. I freeze in the doorway as the scene before me transports me back to the day of the surgery...

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I came out of the gift shop to find Dave standing apart from the family group, still sitting around the small table in the lobby. In front of him was the surgeon, Dr. Roth, a nurse, and a man in a sports coat. Dave saw me and waved me over, “Devina, this is Mr. Santoro, he’s a palliative care specialist. He and Dr. Roth were about to tell me what is going on with Karla.”

“Palliative care?” I asked, looking at Dr. Roth. The fourteen-and-a-half-hour surgery looked to have taken a lot out of him. The handsome, confident, genial, auburn-haired man who had wheeled my mother away that morning was no longer. He looked tired. Sweat dried at his temples, the lines on his forehead more prominent with the surgical cap keeping his hair back, and his red-rimmed green eyes made the dark circles under them stand out. His shoulders slumped, and he was massaging his right palm with his left thumb as he swayed a little.

“I was about to tell Dave, it’s cancer—stage four, with metastasis. I’ve removed the tumors and sent them to pathology; we should have the results back in a few days. I had to remove several feet of intestines along with the reproductive organs. Dr. Nguyen, the oncologist, will be here in the morning. She has a lot of experience with the type of cancer I suspect it is. Karla will be in the ICU for a few days. This was a difficult surgery, very hard on her body. I have her heavily sedated; you can go see her, but she won’t be awake.” He kept talking, but the buzzing in my ears drowned out the rest of what he was saying; I caught snippets: colostomy bag, early menopause, aggressive treatment. I swayed, and Dave reached out and grabbed my elbow to steady me.



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“Vin?” Anthony says, leaning in close, his voice soft, worry etched across his face. It’s clear he’s been saying something to me, but I haven’t heard a word—too lost in the memory to hear anything. “Dave’s been waiting for you to get back. These people are here to discuss the next steps.”

I physically shake my head, trying to clear the memory away. I need to focus; she made me her health care proxy. I step into the circle in front of the bed, place my hand on Dave’s sagging shoulder, and look at the oncologist. “Hi, Dr. Nguyen.”

“Devina, I’m glad you’re here,” she says with a kind smile, “We are discussing what the next steps in Karla’s care should be. This is Nancy; she’s with the hospice transition team,” she says, motioning to the woman with the clipboard.

“Hospice? So, this is it then? There’s nothing left to do?” I ask quietly.

“The cancer is no longer responding to treatment, and it’s begun to spread again. She’s in a lot of pain. I think the best thing we can do for her is to keep her as comfortable as possible,” the doctor says, sighing.

“What does that look like?” I ask.

“We have a couple of options.” Nancy takes up the conversation, handing us pamphlets and packages about different facilities and options. She tells us we can take our time considering what we would like to do and gives Dave her card with her phone and office room numbers on it. “I’m here if you have questions or want to talk. I am a licensed bereavement counselor as well as the one you will get in touch with once you’ve decided where Karla will be going. Please don’t hesitate to reach out to me with anything.” Everyone files out then, leaving us alone.

“Well, what do you think?” Dave asks, handing me Nancy’s card.

“I don’t know, Dave. I just wish she could be lucid for a moment so she could tell us what she wants.” She hasn’t really been in a wakeful state for over a week. She comes around for a few minutes here and there, but she doesn’t appear to recognize anyone except for Dave and me. She asks the same

questions about where she is and what's happening every time. She's always confused and scared, almost childlike. Aunt Amy and her daughter, Laura, have stopped coming to visit because it seems to agitate her, and Connor and Alice only pop into the lobby to bring food and clothes for Dave.

"I think she'd want to go home," Dave says.

"I don't know. She was adamant about not being a burden. I think she would want to go to a facility."

"She wouldn't want to spend the rest of her life in a place she doesn't know," Dave says, resting his hand on her ankle. We're still standing at the foot of her bed, whispering as though we might wake her. Anthony has stepped into the semi-circle, taking the place of the doctors. He's just standing there quietly, arms crossed over his chest, staring at the ground. "Well, I'm going to go home and get the house ready for her. Once you've had time to think about it, you'll know that's where she should be," Dave says, nodding, wrapping an arm around me and giving me a quick squeeze. "Try to sleep. That baby needs you to rest, and Karla wouldn't thank you for exhausting yourself."

Anthony asks if I want him to stay with me, but I send him to help Dave. I need to be alone right now to process and read over the information. They leave, and I pull the chair up next to her bed. I look over the literature given to us about hospice care. I'm overwhelmed by the information on the facilities and the different services provided, eligibility, costs, and insurance. I stand up and tell my mother's still form that I need to go for a walk. I just get to the other side of the hospital when I see Nancy rounding a corner.

She smiles as she reaches me. "Hey there, going for a walk?"

"I need to clear my head; all those hospice papers are a little intense," I say.

"I understand. But her husband will be the one who makes the final decision."

"Actually, I'm her proxy," I say, huffing a laugh at her quirked eyebrow, "Their relationship was a little whirlwind, and she was diagnosed only a month after the wedding. She figured, and he agrees, that I know what she wants better than anyone. She also says that I'm cerebral enough to not allow my emotions to get in the way of the difficult decisions."



“Really? That’s interesting,” Nancy says as she motions for me to continue walking. “Do you think that’s true?”

“I don’t know. Once when I was six or seven, we got into a fight about something—I don’t remember what. She got all worked up and was going on and on about how she sacrificed everything to have me and raise me. I stopped her in her tracks when I said that if she wanted to go back to training, I would go live with my Aunt Amy, and that I was sure that she could still make the national team in time for the Olympics. She used to tell that story whenever people would say how mature I was. The truth is, she was very young when she had me—barely sixteen. She was more like a sister than a mother. She was an incredible athlete but had never really experienced life until she got pregnant, which made her immature, and I was left being the adult in our relationship. The therapist we saw when I was a teenager said that I’m a parentified child.” I look up to see the sad look on Nancy’s face. “It’s okay. I’ve had a lot of therapy, and for the last few years, my mother and I have had a great relationship. I understand her better, and I accept who she is. But my childhood is probably why I waited until I was in my thirties to have my first child. This baby and I will have a different kind of relationship,” I say, wrapping my arm around my bump protectively. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to trauma dump on you. You’re incredibly easy to talk to.”

“That’s alright,” Nancy says, nodding. “It really is part of my job. I am here to help you come to some tough decisions, and it’s good for me to know about the family dynamic.”

We walk around the hospital for a bit longer, Nancy explaining the main differences between facility hospice and home hospice. I tell her that I have a couple of nurses in the family, my mother’s sister Amy and her daughter Laura, who have offered to help with anything we might need. By the time we make it back to my mother’s room, it’s early evening. We stop just outside, and Nancy asks, “Has she been alert at all?”

“Not really, when she does wake up, she’s confused. My cousin says it’s common; she calls it hospital delirium.”

“That sounds right. Well, you let me know when you have come to a decision. I’m here every morning. I leave around lunch to check in on my other patients and different facilities, and at home, which I will do with your family, too. I’m typically back for a couple of hours in the evening. If you need

anything, please let me know.”

I see the sky getting dark through the big window as I enter the room. The lights are off, and the shadows creep out of the walls. The rhythmic hiss of the alternating pressure mattress and the steady beep of the bedside monitors fill the room, interrupted only by her choppy breathing. I take the seat I left just an hour ago. Her right hand lies palm down in front of me. I study that hand, barely recognizing it. Hours slip by as I silently note the changes her body has endured.

My mother had never been a petite woman. She was muscular, though compact. A gymnast in her every movement: precise, poised, and graceful. That muscle is all gone now, wasted away with illness, her body ravaged by chemo. She can't be more than ninety-five pounds. The hand I stare at is all bone wrapped in paper-thin skin. I lift the hand gently. It's soft; the calluses that told the story of a hard-working single mom, a national gymnastics medalist, are stripped away. I lean over, resting my forehead on the back of that hand.

“This isn't fair,” I whisper. “How can you leave me? Now that we are finally in a good place? Now that we can talk to each other and spend time together without fighting. You are supposed to be here for this,” I say, resting my hand on my protruding belly. “This is supposed to be the second chance you promised me when Anthony and I got married. The grandchild for you to love, to right all the past wrongs—how can you leave before seeing this wonderful little miracle?”

There is no answer, just the short, rapid sound of her breathing, so I just sit there, slumped over the side of the bed, holding her hand. The sobs come unbidden, my face just inches from her fingertips, silently begging for her to reach up and wipe them away. As my tears subside, my body surrenders to exhaustion, my eyelids grow heavy, and I slowly drift off into a dreamless sleep, heartbroken, drowning in grief.

Movement in the bed startles me awake. I sit up and stare at my mother, who has lifted her bed into a sitting position while I slept, and is now brushing out the dark curls that surround her once-gaunt face. Dawn is breaking through the window, and the effect on her is striking. The warm yellow glow of daybreak has softened the sharp edges of her cheekbones, and there is peace in her eyes that I haven't seen in months. “Good morning,” she says softly with a feeble smile.

“Mom? What are you doing?” I ask in disbelief, startled all over again at



how easily she moves.

“I woke up, there was a brush on the table, and you were asleep. I thought I’d give you a few more minutes; you looked like you could use the rest,” she says, shrugging the question off, “Vinny, I know this has been hard for you, and I’m sorry I put so much responsibility on you.” She sighs and looks at me, “But I promise it’s going to be okay.”

“How can you say that?” My voice breaks, “You’ve been asleep for the better part of a week.”

“Really? I guess I’m losing time. Dr. Nguyen did say I would slip in and out due to the pain meds.” She shakes her head slowly as she shifts to the side of the bed. “Come lie with me, baby.”

I stand up slowly and pinch my forearm to make sure I’m awake; there will be a bruise there tomorrow. I sit on the edge of the bed, my back to her, and suddenly remember Dr. Nguyen saying something about terminal lucidity...

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“It’s brief. Sometimes a few minutes, an hour—in rare circumstances a day. She may become mentally clear and coherent, have purposeful movements, and meaningful conversations. This does not mean she’s getting better; it’s actually the opposite. It’s usually a short period of clarity before the body begins to shut down again. I want you to be prepared if this happens and not caught off guard.”

~

I turn and swing my legs up onto the bed. As I snuggle in close to my mom, she places her hand on my stomach and smiles. “You’re finally showing. Boy or girl?”

“You know?” I say incredulously.

“I’ve known for months, Vinny. I was waiting for you to tell me,” she says, yawning and resting her head on my shoulder.

“It’s a girl. She’s due in September.”

“A girl. That’s nice; you’ll be a good girl-mom. You’re so calm and methodical. I don’t know what you’d do with a rowdy boy,” she says, chuckling. “I’m sorry, baby. I’m sorry about everything. I wasn’t prepared when you came into my life. I was still a child, and I know that doesn’t make anything right or better. But learn from me, Vinny. Take everything you endured with me and do it differently with this little one.”

I nod, the lump in my throat not allowing me to answer. I take her hand and lace my fingers through hers, gently. We go silent, as she caresses my belly, feeling the life I carry inside of me move under her touch. She starts to hum softly, a song that sounds so familiar.

“What’s that?” I ask.

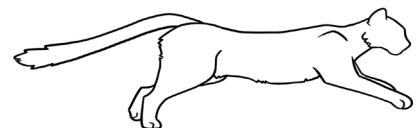
“An Ella Fitzgerald song I used to sing to you when you were little,” she responds dreamily. After a moment, she takes a breath, “You know I love you, right? I know we haven’t always had the best relationship. Still, I hope when you think about me, after I’m gone, you’ll remember no matter what I said, or how I acted, I always loved you.”

I swallow back the sob that rises in my chest. “I love you too, Mama.”

Her body begins to slacken. “Dream... a little dream... of me,” she sings in a whisper as her hand goes limp and slides off my bump. I lay there for a minute listening as her breathing goes from slow and even to short and choppy. I lean the bed back down and stand up slowly. She’s gone again. I reposition her a little so that she’s in the center of the bed and sit back down in the chair. I know in my gut that was it. She won’t open her eyes to me again, and while my heart aches at the thought, a quiet acceptance has settled inside of me. I look down at my watch; it’s 8:17 in the morning. I pull my cell phone out of my back pocket and call Dave.

“Hey,” I say when he answers. “Is everything ready? I’m going to make sure she comes home today.”

Dave says he’ll make sure of it and asks me to let him know as soon as I find out what time hospice will bring the supplies, and when they will bring her home. I hang up and tuck the phone back into my pocket. I stare at my mom for a minute; there is a calmness about her. Her face is smooth and serene, as though the pain has slipped away and isn’t touching her anymore. She said goodbye to me; it’s more than most people get. I stand up, kiss her cheek, and whisper,



“You’re right, Mama, it will be okay. You’re going to be home soon.”

As I leave the room, I look back at my mom once more from the doorway. I will learn from her. I will learn how to live in the moment. I will strive not to say and do things I will regret. I will love with everything I have and not be afraid to show it. I slip from the room, letting the door close behind me. I take a deep breath, square my shoulders, and head out to find Nancy. It’s time for my mother to go home.

The road through the village stretched on forever, pale dust rising around the children's bare feet with every step. The autumn sun hung low but mercilessly, burning their already blistered skin, until it felt too tight across their bones.

No one looked at them. Villagers passed with baskets, tools, and children of their own, but their eyes slid past the two strays, as if they were nothing more than shadows cast across the road.

They made their way up and down the worn-out streets, each step heavier than the last.

"I'm tired, Eris," sobbed the scrawny young girl.

He glanced down at her, taking in the sight of her frail body and hollow cheeks. Even for a small child, anyone could tell that she was malnourished and far too thin.

"We're gonna find something soon. I can feel it, Mar."

She made a soft, broken sound and tugged weakly at his arm before her knees buckled beneath her. She hit the dirt without even trying to catch herself.

Eris dropped beside her instantly, pulling her into his chest.

"I can't do it anymore. We've been walking for hours," she cried.

He sighed and put a hand to her head, stroking her hair soothingly, as he had learned it would calm her down. "I know it's hard, but if we're gonna find anything to eat, we gotta keep going."

"Nobody's gonna give us their scraps, Eris! Nobody even has any scraps to give us anyway. We're done for," she said bitterly as she leaned into his soft touch.

He frowned at her words, even though he knew them to be true. It had been too long since their last meal. He wondered silently how long a person could survive on burnt bread and old potato

BETRAYED [CHAPTER ONE]

Trinity Ross



peels. His stomach groaned, as if to say, “Not long!”

“Listen. We don’t have another option. We’ll just have to keep walking ‘til we find something.”

“Or ‘til we drop dead,” she snapped.

He rolled his eyes as he responded, “Well, what else are we supposed to do? Any bright ideas on how we can miraculously save ourselves?”

“Yes, actually. We should go to Luminara.”

He instantly recoiled at her words, as if she’d suggested walking into fire.

“We can’t go there,” he said bluntly.

At her silence, he continued, “It’s crawling with guards, and they’re bound to grab us the second we step through the gates.”

“But we don’t need to go through the main gate!” she exclaimed, pushing herself upright with stubborn determination. “We could sneak in through the farmer’s gate. No one would suspect a thing; we look just like them!”

She wasn’t entirely wrong, he supposed. They were young to be traveling with the other farmers, but it wasn’t unheard of for one of them to drag a couple of their children along to help make a delivery drop-off.

He mulled it over in his head for a moment before responding, “So you think that *if* we go to Luminara, and *if* we get in, then what? Some rich noblemen will take pity on us and invite us to dinner?”

“Of course not,” she snorted, “but we could hide out for a couple of days, pick through the trash as we do here, or just swipe something fresh off the market carts.”

Any consideration that had crept into his head halted at her last words.

“That’s not funny,” he barked. “Kids get sent to the rope for less than that.” His jaw tightened at the thought. “We don’t steal. You know that.”

“Relax. It was just a joke.” She paused, then added, “Well, the swiping

part anyway. I still think we should go to Luminara if we're gonna make it through the winter. The week, even."

He scowled as he looked out toward the horizon line. Once again, she was right. While the days were still hot on their sunburnt skin, the nights were beginning to grow colder. If they thought it was hard surviving now, how would they ever manage once the frost settled on the land?

"Fine," he finally said. "We'll start heading for Luminara. But I'm serious about us having to watch our backs. You need to listen to me and stay close. One wrong move and those guards will snatch us up."

Her face lit like the sunrise and instantly warmed his anxious heart.

"I swear I'll be good," she sang, launching herself into his arms. He laughed and hugged her back, even as the familiar protective ache settled back into his chest.

Ever since he woke up in that forest all months ago, surrounded only by bodies and one lone, petrified young girl, something in him felt bonded to Amara. Like he had to protect her, no matter what. Even though neither of them had any memory of what had happened, or really any memory at all, they had decided they were each other's only hope of survival. They swore soon after that they would stick together, and they had.

"Let's get going, then!" He said, grabbing her hand and beginning to walk again. "We have a long journey ahead of us, and if we wanna get there before nightfall, we'd better start now. I know you're tired, but—"

"I'm fine now! Come on!" She exclaimed, cutting him off. Letting go of his hand, she darted up ahead, nearly skipping with glee.

"Someone's feeling better, then," he laughed, his eyes following her.

She turned her head as she ran, yelling back at him. "Try to keep up, will ya?"

He just smiled and shook his head, watching with renewed motivation as they made their way up the valley toward the behemoth of a city that was Luminara.



~

The gates of the city somehow seemed to sparkle at this time of day, reflecting the sun setting on the mountains behind them as the children made their approach.

Eris blew out a breath, both in amazement and exhaustion, having walked miles in such a short time.

“I’ve never seen anything so beautiful,” Amara whispered, gazing up at the towering arches.

“Don’t get used to it,” he said, tugging her arm. “Drop gate’s around the side.”

She didn’t move, though.

“One day, I’m gonna get through those gates like a proper person. I’m gonna walk through, and no one will be able to tell me I don’t belong. I swear it.”

He didn’t answer. He didn’t have the heart to tell her.

Orphans like them would never be allowed to truly stay in this city. It was a city for the rich, the high-born, the noble people who wielded some sort of influence or had some level of authority in the Kingdom of Arkana. With no parents, no money, and looking like they did, there wasn’t a chance they could last here more than a few days before they would have to leave.

Otherwise, they’d be taken by the royal guard and forced to work as servants for the Kingdom. Starving and wandering around the valley villages was pretty bad, but having to serve some old, rich, noble born jerk seemed worse somehow. He’d be damned before he let that happen to them.

“Hurry up, before they close the drop-off for the night,” he finally said.

She took the scene in for one final moment before she turned to continue on with him.

As they approached the small gate along the side of the city’s huge stone walls, the stench of animals and sweat began to permeate the air. The side gate was crowded with carts, piled high with hay, milk jugs, and sacks of grain, all

waiting to be inspected before entering the city. Farmers argued and bartered with guards over taxes and tariffs, their words rolling together into one long, irritated hum.

~

Eris led Amara toward the back of the line, moving quickly and keeping his head down. To their surprise, the farmers barely noticed them, too wrapped up in their own proceedings to pay any attention to the two small, barefoot children clinging to the edge of a cart.

“Stay close to me,” he whispered as the cart began to move.

“I always do,” she murmured, slipping her hand into his.

Slowly but surely, the line moved forward. One of the drivers, an older man with a weathered face that looked like an aged reflection of their own, looked down at them but said nothing. Perhaps he thought they belonged to someone else. Maybe he was just a kind soul taking pity on them. Most likely, he simply didn’t care. Either way, he remained silent as their cart rolled up to the entrance.

As they approached, each child silently held their breath in anticipation. Eris knew if they were caught, it was all over. They’d be separated and forced into slavery, or worse. The guard made his way to examine the back of the cart where they crouched, and Eris steeled himself for a fight.

But the steel-plated man’s eyes glossed straight over them, not suspecting a thing. Eris blew out a breath, and they passed through the checkpoint.

~

The air on the inside of the walls was different. Warm, sweet, and heavy with the scent of freshly baked bread. Luminara gleamed and glistened as if it were straight out of a dream. Eris had never seen anything like it. Sunlight spilled over white stone streets, reflecting off glass windows and copper domes. It almost seemed too bright, too perfect, as if the city itself was putting on a show for them.

Hopping off the farm cart as it took a turn around the corner, Amara’s mouth hung open in amazement. “We made it.”



Her eyes darted from one building to the next, over rows of market stalls stacked with fresh fruit, fine cloths, and jars of honey that sparkled like amber.

Eris smiled faintly. “Don’t get too comfortable.”

She barely seemed to have heard him. “Isn’t it just beautiful? I could look at it all for hours!”

“Mar, we aren’t staying here,” he voiced in slight annoyance. He wasn’t sure why, but something about the city made him uneasy. “Come on, we’re gonna find someplace to stake out until it gets dark, then we’ll come back.”

She turned to him and stuck out her tongue. “Sometimes you’re no fun. Can’t you see how perfect this place is?”

He began pulling on her arm. “Yeah, yeah, like heaven on earth. Now, let’s go.”

Her lips formed a pout as he pushed her along but quickly turned back to gasps of amazement as she continued to marvel at the market surrounding them.

While he didn’t want to feed into Amara’s obvious infatuation with this place, Eris couldn’t deny that it was beautiful. More so, he was blown away that a place like this could exist in the same kingdom as Everton, the town they had just left. The people here were well-fed, their clothes clean and rich in color. As they walked by, most didn’t even glance at the two children passing through, too polished and civilized to notice the likes of them.

As they walked past stands full of decadent, warm food, Amara’s stomach began to growl loudly.

“Eris...” she groaned, pressing a hand to her midsection.

“I know. Just a little longer,” he responded, pulling her on. The end of the market street was close. Once they reached it, they could find somewhere to hide and wait for nightfall and then move once it was safer.

Before they could reach the end, however, a small stand appeared on their left, with rows of warm pies and sweet loaves. As the vendor turned his back to them to haggle with a customer, Eris watched as Amara’s gaze locked onto a basket of rolls.

“Don’t,” he warned quietly, already knowing what she was thinking.

“I’m just looking,” she responded absently, but he had heard that tone before. Sweet and innocent, right before she does something rogue and unplanned.

Before he even had time to realize she’d moved, she slipped her hand out of his and darted toward the basket, snatching the bread up and stuffing it in her pocket.

The vendor turned too late; Amara was already standing back in place next to him as if nothing had ever happened.

“What are you doing?” he hissed. “Are you trying to get us caught?”

“Come on, he didn’t even notice! It’s fine!” she whispered, eyes bright with adrenaline.

“Listen to me, you can’t just—”

“Stop! Thieves!”

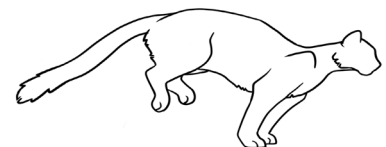
The shout from across the market froze them in their place. Apparently, two guards from across the lane had seen them, and had begun to move from their post toward them.

Eris’s heartbeat roared in his ears. “Run!” he yelled, yanking Amara’s arm.

They bolted, weaving through bodies, carts, and crates. They were small and fast, and it seemed like they were actually going to get away, Eris thought with an exhilarated chuckle right before Amara turned a sharp corner and crashed straight into a crate of apples.

Red fruit exploded across the stones, and she slipped. Eris reached for her, but it was too late.

A hand seized his collar and yanked him backward. He hit the ground hard. As he tried to scramble to his feet, he saw Amara already held at the shoulders by the second guard.



“Eris!” she screamed, trying to reach for him. The guard wrenched him to his feet.

“Don’t move!” the guard holding onto her yelled.

Eris kicked and punched anyway, but the guard was too strong. A swift blow to the side of his head suddenly landed, dazing him.

“Let him go!” Amara sobbed as Eris fell to his knees.

The guard’s only response was a hand on his neck, forcing his head into the ground.

“No!” he heard Amara cry. He tried to move, but the guard only pushed his head down harder.

Then suddenly, without warning, a loud blast erupted through the alley, and a bright light engulfed them.

The guard holding Amara was flung backward, armor screeching against stone as he slammed into the wall. The other staggered away, cursing.

Amara stood shaking, a strange light seeming to be spilling from her like fractured sunbeams.

“What the hell is happening?” one of the guards shouted.

Eris wondered the same thing. Was that blast *caused* by Amara?

Too stunned to move in time to save her, another figure lunged forward and struck her across the head, leaving her in a crumpled heap. The light engulfing her vanished.

“Amara!”

Eris felt something inside of him snap at the sight of her. Like a feeling that had always been with him, suddenly boiling over, unable to be contained.

A shadow rippled across the ground, curling up the wall like spilled ink. The air grew colder, heavier. Eris’s vision suddenly blurred, his emotions stirring

deep inside him, a foreign pressure begging to be unleashed.

The guard holding Amara had frozen. “What’s going on—?”

The stone surrounding them began to crack, and the smell of smoke filled the air. The guard let out a strangled cry as he began clawing at his throat, as if choking on something that wasn’t there.

Eris didn’t really understand what he was doing, if he was the one doing it. He only knew he wanted them to suffer.

A hard fist met the side of his face, and the darkness shattered. Boots forced him flat against the stone.

“We need to take them to the palace,” one guard said, panting.

“Agreed.”

Eris felt himself being pulled to his feet and dragged toward a nearby wagon. His head lolled to the side in delirium as they bound him, tossing him into the back of the cart.

Amara was lifted up beside him, her fragile body still limp.

“Don’t worry, Mar. I’ll fix this,” he whispered. “I swear…”

Darkness overtook him.

~

When Eris opened his eyes again, the world had changed.

He lay on his side against a floor so polished it reflected the small amount of light like glass. His wrists were bound tight behind his back, the coarse rope digging into his skin. Every breath sent a dull ache through his ribs where a guard’s boot had landed, a subtle reminder of the chaos that had ensued in the alley.

He snapped his head up, realization rocketing through him.

Amara.



His eyes scanned the dark room around him.

She lay only a few feet away, hands bound behind her back, but breathing. Her hair was tangled across her face, her cheek streaked with soot. Despite her disheveled appearance, she looked to be alright. Relief washed through him like a tide.

Slowly, he tried to shift toward her, desperate to confirm she was truly alive.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” a voice boomed from behind him.

Eris froze.

A figure stepped from shadow, armored in gleaming silver etched with suns. His helmet concealed his face, but authority radiated from him.

“Who are you?” Eris asked, voice weak.

“Quiet, boy. You’ll have the chance to state your case soon enough,” the man said. “Until then, keep still.”

Eris swallowed hard, heart pounding. “My case?”

Before he could get an answer, the heavy doors at the far end of the chamber creaked open, flooding the room with light and allowing Eris to finally take in the full scope of his surroundings.

They were in a vast hall unlike anything he had ever seen. White marble floors stretched endlessly before him, veined with gold and silver, so clean they looked as though no human had ever walked upon them. Columns rose toward a ceiling so high it disappeared into shadow; their surfaces carved with symbols of suns, stars, and crescent moons. Between them hung long silken banners of deep blue and gold with the sigil of the Rayne dynasty stitched at their centers: a blazing sun encapsulating a half-moon.

Along the walls, guards in polished armor stood at perfect attention, their faces hidden behind masks of burnished metal. Their stillness seemed unnatural to Eris, like he was looking at statues, not people. The air itself felt heavy with silence, as though sound dared not linger here.

And at the far end of the chamber, elevated upon a dais of white marble, were the thrones of Luminara.

Carved from the same stone as the floor, their surfaces were embedded with gems that shimmered like starlight. Eris had never seen something that looked so beautiful yet so terrifying all at once.

A woman, flanked by several more guards, had entered the room and was approaching the man to Eris's left.

"Darling. Thank you for coming so quickly," he said.

"Of course. When the guards informed me of the situation, I knew I had to see this for myself."

Beside him, Amara began to stir. Her eyes slowly fluttered open, taking in the sight surrounding her.

"What's going on?" she asked timidly, looking at Eris.

"I think that's what you ought to be telling us, child," the woman responded in a cold tone.

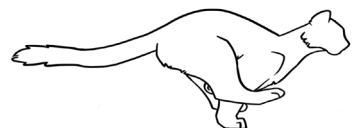
Eris began to understand who these people were, and internal panic spread through him like wildfire.

"Your Majesties, we meant no harm," Eris began, eyes cast downward. He heard Amara's gasp and knew she understood, too.

"Look at me when you speak to me, child," she commanded, and Eris had no choice but to listen.

Her beauty was almost otherworldly. Her gown, a shade of pale gold, shimmered in the dim light; tiny gems sewn into the fabric so that each movement sent light cascading across the floor. Her hair was silver-blonde, woven into a crown of braids, and around her throat hung a chain of pearls that glowed softly against her skin.

Her eyes, however, contradicted everything else about her appearance. A cold shade of blue, it seemed as though they were digging daggers into Eris, and



he couldn't help but shiver under the cruel gaze. "Bring them forward," she said, voice carrying through the hall effortlessly.

Almost instantly, they were being dragged to their knees.

"Now, tell me, child," she said, "how did you do it?"

Eris's brow furrowed. "Do what?"

Her laugh echoed across the stone room.

"Don't play games with me, boy," she boomed. "The magic, of course! You two single-handedly fought off two of my court's strongest guards and nearly had them incapacitated! They came to this castle with two filthy little orphans, dust-caked, barefoot, faces streaked with dirt and blood, claiming that they had been attacked with light and shadows!" Her eyes bored into him, and he found himself unable to form a reply.

"Answer me!"

Eris could only stutter in reply, unable to form any words, pure fear coursing through his veins.

"We didn't mean to do anything!" Amara suddenly shouted, eyes filled with tears. "We were just scared, miss."

The queen laughed at this. "Somehow, I find that hard to believe, little girl. If you truly meant no harm, why did you steal from our market stands and run from our guards?"

Her eyes, sharp and unrelenting, now pinned Amara, but instead of stuttering in fear, Amara jumped at the chance to explain.

"We're hungry, miss! We haven't eaten in days! We came to the city because we were starving!"

"How tragic," she murmured.

Amara seemed to vibrate with anxiety. "We didn't mean to hurt anybody. I swear it, miss."

The queen only shook her head and began to pace across the corridor.

Eris remembered the other person in the room, the one he'd seen upon waking. He looked over at the King, who stood in the far corner, and found his eyes already fixed on Eris.

Eris felt a shiver go down his spine, despite the King having said next to nothing during this interrogation.

Finally, the queen sighed, as if resigning herself to whatever she would say next. Though her mask of ferocity had lifted somewhat, Eris could see her eyes still shone with calculating malevolence.

“Clearly, neither of you have any answers for me tonight. So, you shall clean yourselves up and be fed, and we will revisit this topic tomorrow.”

“Your Majesty, we were only passing through,” Eris said, finally finding his voice. “If you let us go, we’ll be out of your way tonight.”

“Oh no. That won’t do. She just said you haven’t eaten in ages. I’m sure you’ll be much more forthcoming with a full stomach, and I’ve already decided. You will stay here for the night.”

Amara’s face lit with awe, but Eris felt dread sink into his bones. “That’s really not necessary, Majesty—”

“You will not contradict me!” her voice boomed. He fell silent, leaving the room stiff with tension.

“Now then. I shall have the servants draw you both baths and prepare your rooms for the evening. They will serve your dinner there.”

Suddenly, two small women appeared in the room and began unbinding their hands and feet. As they worked, Eris looked back over his shoulder.

The King and Queen stood in a small huddle, whispering to two new guards.

As if she knew she was being watched, the Queen’s eyes suddenly locked with his own. The hair on his neck stood under her unrelenting gaze, and Eris had the profound sense that neither she nor the King liked him very much.



“See you in the morning,” she called as they retreated, with a look in her eyes that Eris couldn’t place. He followed the guards closely, an uneasy feeling building in his stomach.

~

As they were led out of the throne room and into the winding halls, Eris couldn’t help but thank the heavens for whatever soft spot the Queen seemed to find for Amara. If it weren’t for her, who knows where they might be heading right now. Certainly not to a royal suite.

After walking for some time, up stairs and down long hallways, the children found themselves in front of a large door. Eris stepped forward to enter but was met with a large forearm.

“This room is for the girl. We’ll be dropping you off next.”

“No,” Eris said instantly. “We stay together. We always stay together.”

“It’s okay, Eris. I’ll be okay!” Amara chided.

“Mar,” he said sadly, eyes pleading with her to do something, anything. Cry to not be left alone, beg to let them stay together.

“It’s gonna be okay, Eris,” was her only response. “We’ll see each other in the morning.”

“What if you get scared? Or you need my help?”

She laughed, seeming amused at the idea. “Eris, we’re in the royal palace. They’re going to take care of us just fine. I’m going to eat my fill and bathe in warm water for once. I know you want to do the same.”

He couldn’t deny that. His mouth watered in anticipation.

“Okay...” he began, but she was already turning to enter further into her room. “I’ll see you in the morning, okay?” He called after her.

“See you then!” she yelled back before slamming the door in his face.

“Let’s go,” the guard snapped, gruffly pushing him on.

They walked some more, and, as they did, Eris began to get the feeling that they were walking downward.

“Are we nearly there?” he questioned and was met with silence.

Suddenly, one of the guards opened a small wooden door on the side of a hall and shoved him through.

“Hey!” he yelled, disoriented by the change in atmosphere. They were standing in a stairwell that spiraled even further downward, dimly lit by a few flickering candles on the stone walls. “Where are we even going?”

The guard simply pushed him along again, but now a slight feeling of panic was beginning to spread in Eris’s stomach.

Why would Amara’s room be so far from his, and why would his be so far below the castle?

After what felt like hundreds of steps, they reached the ground.

For a moment, Eris just stood there. The silence felt wrong. Too deep. Too thick. The air smelled of rust and rot, damp stone and old despair.

Too little, too late, it all became painfully clear.

They were standing in the dungeons.

A hard shove between his shoulders sent him stumbling forward. His bare feet scraped uselessly against stone as they dragged him to the nearest cell.

“Wait!” he shouted, struggling in their grasp. “The queen said—” but he was already being dumped onto the floor, the sound of a lock clicking behind him. “Let me go!”

The sound of the guard’s feet receding up the stairwell was the only response.

Tears streamed down his face. Water dripped somewhere in the dark, and



rats skittered along the damp floor. The torchlight was barely strong enough to see the bars enclosing him inside the cell.

“No,” he whispered. He grabbed the bars and shook them. The iron didn’t budge. “Let me out!” His voice cracked, ricocheting off the stone.

No answer. His chest tightened, panic beginning to spread through his body like wildfire.

They were going to keep her here. Separate them. He should have known, expected this, even.

His breath became ragged, the feeling he had in the alleyway slowly returned to him. Not quite familiar but seemingly intertwined with his very being.

The cell surrounding him somehow grew darker and colder with every shaking breath.

“No,” he whispered again, unsure of whether he meant it. He was terrified of what he might do.

The shadows thickened, pulling inward toward him, stretching long and thin before snapping back like tethered beasts. Darkness gathered at his feet, pooling unnaturally, swallowing the dim light.

The iron bars groaned. Stone cracked.

A sharp sound split the stone walls, not necessarily loud, but deep. Like the Earth itself had shifted.

Eris staggered backward as a jagged fracture tore through the floor from beneath his feet. The iron door twisted violently, metal warping as if gripped by invisible hands.

He didn’t truly know what he was doing, or how, but he knew he couldn’t stay here. He had to get out.

The shadows had become so dark that he could hardly see anything when he felt the pressure inside of him peak, and—BOOM.

The cell door exploded across the chamber, leaving a gaping hole.

As the shadows receded and light returned to the room, Eris felt his body begin to relax. The foreign feeling, the very same one that he had felt earlier, slowly slipped away again.

Breathing hard, Eris stared at the destruction.

He had done that. Not by touching it. Not by pushing it.

How had he done it? Footsteps echoed faintly above. Guards. He knew he didn't have long.

He ran. Past empty cells, past skeleton-thin prisoners staring in abject terror, and past thick chains bolted into the walls.

He ran until he saw a small chute in the wall, likely for waste disposal, but currently his only way out.

He squeezed himself inside, steeling himself against the stench.

The stone scraped his shoulders raw as he braced himself against the sides, lowering slowly into darkness. It was too tight. Too steep.

His foot slipped, and then he was falling. It felt endless.

Then, he was swallowed by water.

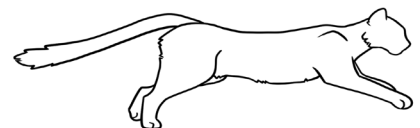
The shock ripped the air from his lungs. He flailed, disoriented, before breaking the surface with a desperate gasp.

He was in a canal. Wide, black, and moving fast. Castle walls loomed high above him, their pale stone glowing faintly under the moonlight.

Shouts erupted from somewhere overhead. They had heard him, no doubt, and would be coming to hunt him down in no time.

He forced himself to swim. His limbs felt heavy, and his head throbbed. Every stroke burned. The current tugged at him, threatening to drag him under.

But his fear drove him.



He swam until the castle lights shrank into distant stars, and he felt the current soften.

Crawling onto the muddy bank, he collapsed onto his hands and knees, coughing up the dirty river water. He didn't let himself dwell on what was likely mixed within it.

Though he was ecstatic to be free of that place, the realization that Amara was still trapped inside cut through him like a knife.

He should turn back. He should find a way, do anything, to get back to her.

But his body wouldn't move. He knew, deep in his soul, that if he turned back now, he would not be so lucky again.

After a long moment, he finally turned and began to walk away from the city of Luminara. He had made his choice. He walked without direction until his feet could carry him no longer.

When he finally fell, it was into wheat, just as the first light of dawn made its way over the valley peaks. He lay there, shaking, soaked, and completely hollow. He had absolutely nothing left in him to give.

As the sun crept slowly over the horizon, warming his frozen skin, he heard footsteps approach.

Perhaps the guards had finally caught up to him. Maybe this was the end of his journey. Or maybe it was a wheat farmer, come to do his morning chores, only to find an orphan boy had made a bed of his crop. He'd call for guards, and he'd be brought back to the castle. After so much effort to get away, he would meet the same fate.

He tried to lift his head, but it was no use.

"Are you alright?" The voice was gruff and older sounding, but surprisingly, not cruel.

A hand touched his cheek, oddly gentle and caring. Eris felt a sense of comfort spread over him, just as darkness claimed him once more.

*Content Warning

I stare at the clock on my bedside table, watching the glowing red numbers change with each passing minute. Minutes of silence as we lie here, motionless, beside each other.

He shifts, rolling over to put his arms around me. I can feel his breath on my neck, the prickle of his beard, the roughness of his hands as they trail up and down my side.

Tears begin to well up in my eyes, and I am unable to stop them.

I remember the beginning, when it was good. He could be so kind and gentle. He told me how special I was, and his validation always felt so glorious. Like the warmth of the sun on a cold day. His words enraptured me, entrapped me. I was enamored with him from the start.

He knew this, of course. He was used to being admired by young, naïve-minded college girls. He was used to being the smartest one in the room, the most powerful. I always thought I was special, like he told me I was. Until the castle I built for us in my imagination started to crumble, and the cracks in the walls of our relationship showed me the truth. Sooner or later, I suppose we all discover our own mundanity.

It started out innocent. It always does. I fell so easily, so willingly, that when he wanted more, I jumped at the chance. He offered me a beacon of light in my monotonous life. He taught me things I could never have dreamed of.

For a while, we were happy. Then I found out about his wife.

I was rifling through the wallet he threw at me to find his debit card in the coffee drive-thru, and suddenly there she was. An old Polaroid, frayed at the edges like it had been in there for decades. She was older, looked closer to his age. I could tell she came from money just based on the way she held herself, sophisticated in a way that I could never hope to be.

THE OTHER WOMAN*
Trinity Ross

*Grooming



He explained it all away, of course. He wanted to divorce her, but he felt it wasn't the right time. I was understanding. I didn't want to be the other woman, so I told myself I wasn't. I looked the other way. I never stopped to think about what my presence in their relationship would do to her. Or to me.

After that, everything started slowly unraveling. He showed me a new side of himself—more arrogance and less charm. The allure of what we were doing wore off. I started feeling guilty, sinful.

He has a power over me that I never fully understand until we're standing in the same room. When I look at him, I can't pull myself out of his grasp. My mind feels like it's tethered to his, and to sever it would be to kill us both.

I feel the silk pillowcase growing wet with tears under my cheek as he continues to soothingly stroke my side. I want to tell him to stop, but all I can do is stare at that damn clock.

"Why are you crying?" His voice is even, sleepy.

"I don't know."

He pulls me gently to roll over, our lips just barely touching. I suck in a deep breath as he gently kisses me, first my lips, then my cheek, my eyelids. I start to relax, slowly melting into him, until he whispers in my ear, "You're always getting worked up over nothing."

I go rigid. I try to turn back over, but he grips my chin suddenly, harshly. "Why can't we ever just have a good day anymore, Jo?"

"I'm sorry. I love you," I whimper, finally meeting his piercing gaze. "I just feel so... guilty. *All* the time."

He sighs, letting go of my face. "You know, I chose this. If anyone should be guilty, it's me. But I'm not." He says it so matter-of-factly, like there's nothing else to discuss, the sort of finality in his voice that always makes me keep my mouth shut. Not tonight.

"That doesn't make this right. It doesn't mean we haven't done anything wrong. Too much has changed. We can't pretend anymore. It won't ever be like it used to!" I pause, feeling the wind knocked out of me, and suck in a deep breath. "I'm sorry, David."

I watch as his beautiful face twists in sudden pain at my words, then settles into one of anger.

“Things used to be easy with you,” he spits, “but now you’re making them so *hard*. Don’t you remember how much fun we used to have?”

With his words, I feel a memory drifting to the surface of my mind...

His office was dark and dusty that day, filled to the brim with textbooks and old papers, the only light coming from the glow of his computer monitor and a small lamp in the corner. We’d been poring over essays for ages, my eyes burning as my red pen underlined yet another citation error.

“You’d think that after the last round of papers, they’d have finally figured out how to type their information into EasyBib at least,” I said, exasperated.

He let out a surprised laugh, looking up at me from behind his desk across the room for the first time in what seemed like hours.

“Trust me, the freshmen never learn,” he mused while running a hand through his salt and pepper hair.

I chuckled as I looked back down at the stack of papers in front of me. I knew this would be a long night when I signed up for it, but my back was beginning to ache from sitting in this chair, and my head felt somewhat heavy after hours of reading.

I stretched out my arms and stole another glance at him, suddenly startled to see him looking right back at me. I quickly averted my eyes, cheeks burning from the heat I felt from his gaze. When we worked with the other TA, he always acted so professional, never giving me a second thought, or so it seemed. Now, for whatever reason, he looked at me brazenly.

As I pretended to continue reading, his voice cut through the silence. “Josephine? Could you come over here for a moment?”

I jumped up, adjusting my skirt, and nervously walked over.

“Yes, sir?” I asked.



“Come take a look at this article I just found on the New Yorker website. I think it would make a great source for your next assignment.”

I leaned over to look at his computer. I’d only been reading for a few moments when I suddenly felt his fingers tickling the back of my thigh. I jumped a little, startled by his touch, but didn’t turn around for some reason. Somehow, the way he touched me felt... electrifying. Was it somehow possible that, for once, someone wanted... me?

Slowly, gracefully, he began drawing small patterns on my leg as I continued trying to read, growing more and more distracted by the second.

He leaned in closer, eventually hovering right above me. I’d completely given up any attempt at comprehension of the words on the screen at this point. Sensing that I wouldn’t object, he twisted me around to face him.

The flush in my face deepened further when I saw my own desire reflected in his ocean blue eyes. I never knew blue could be such hot fire until I saw his eyes. I knew I should have been scared, uncomfortable, appalled. All I felt was longing.

All at once, we crashed into each other, his lips devouring every inch of my mouth, my face, my neck. The scratch of his beard on my cheek deepened my cravings as he explored my body with his hands. It was a whirlwind of friction and thirst.

Then a knock sounded at the door. We jumped apart, surprised and breathing heavily. I ran back to my chair while pulling my skirt back into place, as he sat back down, combing fingers through his now unruly hair.

He let out a deep cough and answered, “Yes?”

A meek, hunched-over freshman boy appeared in the doorway, the light from the outside hallway flooding into the small space and stinging my eyes.

“Professor Whitlock, I just need you to look over my practice test before tomor—oh! Sorry. I can come back,” he exclaimed as he suddenly saw me in my corner chair.

“No, it’s fine, Josephine was just getting ready to leave.” He responded quickly.

“Right!” I said, avoiding all eye contact and gathering up my things. “Thanks for the extra credit opportunity, sir, I’ll see you tomorrow in class...” I trailed off as I made my way past the boy.

I turned to shut the door behind me, briefly locking eyes with David. I gave him a hesitant smile, which he returned before looking back at his computer.

As I wandered through the halls of the musty old university building, I reflected on what had happened. What on Earth did it mean, and what would happen now? It had felt like a revelation, a realization. I remembered the feel of his heartbeat as he held me, pulling me closer, feeling me everywhere. It was euphoric, the sensation of how wrong it was and how right it felt in that moment.

That day, I felt my life trajectory change. It was the beginning of him molding me, shaping me into someone wholly different than who I had been before. I couldn’t have been more willing.

He kisses me suddenly, ripping me from my memory and into an all too familiar present. I feel the longing on his mouth as he coaxes mine open. I let him in, the taste of irony stinging my tongue.

Had I really once been that girl in my memory? Like a dog with a bird in its mouth, begging her master for acknowledgment? I brought this on myself, so desperate for love, so blinded by lust to see the warning signs at every turn.

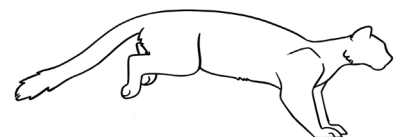
A sob wracks through my body as I push him away.

“Baby. Please don’t be like this,” he says, a trace of resentment in his voice.

“I had a dream about you last night,” I say. “It was my birthday. You were singing to me, and I’d never seen your smile so big.”

“What is this about, Jo?” he asks.

“I could tell there was something I was supposed to say to you,” I continue, “something important, but I just couldn’t remember, not for the life of me.”



He rolls his eyes at me, dismissing it. “You know I love you, Jo, you don’t need to keep playing these games.”

“Do you? Do you really love me?”

Another eye roll. “Yes, obvi—”

“If we were in love, wouldn’t you have told me you were dying?” I blurt.

He looks at me, stunned. “What are you talking about?”

I sit up finally, swinging my legs over the side of the bed. “She called me yesterday. Sarah. She told me about your diagnosis. I didn’t even know she knew who I was, and she was rambling on about how she thought I should know about the cancer, even though you didn’t want to tell me.”

I feel his gaze hot on my back. We sit in silence for a while, neither of us sure what to say next.

“I can’t believe she knows about us,” I mumble. “How terrible is that? She knows her husband is cheating on her with some random college girl, his student, for God’s sake, and she just... didn’t say anything.”

“I didn’t want to tell you,” he finally whispers.

“We are terrible people. Horrible, Chris. I can’t believe I did this to her. You have fucking *cancer*,” I yell, anger and pain making my voice shake. “I’ve been sleeping with someone twice my age behind his wife’s back, while she’s sitting at home, alone.”

I turn to face him, surprised to see the tears falling from his eyes. “And yet, I can’t walk away. I’m so scared. Scared because even after everything, even with how messed up this all is, I am so terrified of losing you,” I cry, voice breaking. “This is all so fucked up.”

“I’m sorry, Jo. This isn’t how this was supposed to happen. I just couldn’t keep myself away from you.” He shifts his gaze to the floor. “I never should have kissed you that day.”

I remember again how happy I was the night that happened, as I feel the sting of those words. The feeling of being so special, having someone finally

notice me. Then, how quickly I realized I was in over my head, lying to everyone I knew just for the sake of being with him. Why did I do it?

I never thought I would be here, be this person. A mistress. Yet somehow, if I could give him the moon, I would. I'd still do anything he wants, no matter how dirty I feel for what we've done, how belittled I've become.

"I can't lose you," I say, my voice raspy from crying. "You're sick, and you're married, and you might be dying. But I can't lose you."

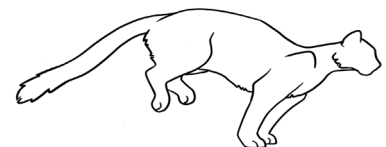
He wraps his arms around me, pulling me back down onto the mattress. His hands freely roam my body as he whispers his affections in my ears, and I let him pull me closer, doing what he always does. Distracting me.

Afterwards, he holds me. I feel like water in his hands, only able to be there temporarily, slowly slipping away.

"I love you," he mutters, voice sleepy once again.

My conscience eats at me. It's screaming at me, angry that we've ended up here again. No matter how many times I try to break away, I end up back in his arms. I can never escape them. I don't think I really want to. We need each other.

I can feel his breath even out as he drifts into sleep. I lay awake still, eyes blurring as I stare at the red glowing numbers in the distance.



MELIORA

Joy Russelavage

The sun shone brightly over Westhaven Harbor, a beacon of hope amidst dreary gray skies, promising brighter days and better tomorrows. From the harbor, the island of Meliora could be seen on the horizon, its lush mountains tucked away behind a veil of ocean mist. Thousands of skyscrapers loomed over the sea below, glinting in the sunlight like the facets of a diamond. The island shone so brightly that wayward ships mistook it for a lighthouse.

Even grander than the island's scenery was its scent. Hints of orange blossoms, strawberries, and freshly baked goods wafted lazily across the sea, boasting of Meliora's riches and taunting foreign aristocrats and nobles who thought highly of themselves. Ships approached the island from every direction, lured in by the addictive scent of luxury. For it was rumored that whatever a person wanted most—whether it be love, fortune, comfort, or glory—could be found at Meliora. Just the sight of the island made Heaven itself bow its head in humiliation and made the neighboring island Westhaven seem to sink in shame.

Too small to be seen on a traditional map, Westhaven was regarded by most as no more than a fuel station for passing ships. The buildings were a dull canvas of browns and grays, most with cracked windows and some with doors swinging on broken hinges. Narrow roads meandered over the hills, their uneven cobblestones worn down by centuries of use. Apartments and convenience stores were built so closely together that residents passed groceries through their windows and hung clotheslines between their homes.

The only place that held any sort of pleasure was the harbor, where a colorful assortment of yachts, sailboats, and pontoons bobbed in the murky waters. The ships that left the harbor were always full of people. They shouted and waved from the decks, sipping dry martinis and dancing to the symphony of foghorns. The ones that came in were always empty. Just a few thousand residents lived on the island, all of whom had the misfortune of being born there, and all of whom had the same goal: to leave. Today, the queue at the collector's booth spanned the entire boardwalk.

Those who weren't waiting in line were busy saying goodbye to their loved ones and lugging their bags down the docks.

Others pushed carts with handwoven blankets and baked goods, hoping to pocket some money.

Most just watched. They watched the people in line, placing bets on which ships they'd be assigned to. They watched seagulls scurry up and down the boardwalk. They watched ships entering and leaving the bay. And they watched the horizon, hoping to catch a glimpse of the Andromeda 2000. Only those with the best papers could board the 2000. Most would be fortunate to get a ticket in the low hundreds.

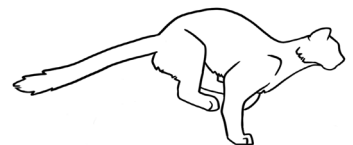
Every so often, someone was confident enough in their papers to ask for a ticket when they came of age, but most people spent their whole lives trying to better their figures. A lifetime of labor all in yearning for a stroll up the passerelle. Some of the townspeople had been waiting in the queue for weeks, their suitcases clutched in one hand, and their information papers held tightly in the other.

It did not matter how long they had waited or how strenuously they had labored. To the ticket collector, their papers were all that mattered. The papers were marked with every fact and facet of their lives—ancestry and education, status and affluence, achievements and inadequacies.

At the front stood a scrawny man in an oversized trench coat. His trousers were several sizes too big, his shoes worn down and tearing at the seams. Deep creases were etched into his forehead like railroad tracks, and gray whiskers speckled his beard. He held his papers with trembling hands and held himself with crippled confidence.

Signaled by the collector, the man approached the booth and passed his papers through the slot. They were tattered at the edges and sullied by ink splatters and coffee stains; he could only hope they were legible. Before any watcher had time to place bets, the papers were stuffed through the slot; a number scribbled over the top in red ink. The man stood silent. He scanned over the list of occupations he held and hated, noted by every employer he'd worked for, all of it buried beneath a few red marks. Did his efforts amount to so little?

“Move.” The collector shoved him aside and signaled the next person in the queue. There was no reason to argue. Everyone knew the numbers could not be bargained. The watchers looked on with pitiful resignation before turning their attention to the next person in line. The man tucked the papers into his pocket and shouldered his way through the crowd. Suitcases clattered across the deck and foghorns blared behind him. It was almost sundown when he found the rowboat,



his number smeared across the wood in chipped red paint. It was empty, save for two oars and a rusty bucket.

With no belongings to gather and no loved ones to wish him off, the man untied the boat from the dock and took up the oars. His legs were cramped beneath him and there was no backrest for him to lean on, but he felt a sense of kinship with the old boat. The wood splintered in tune with his creaking joints and quaked as clumsily as he did when he tried to dance.

Frigid water seeped into his shoes as he rowed out of the harbor. By the time he reached the open sea, dusk was settling, and the sun cast a trail of golden light over the waters. He did not make it far before the sun slipped into the sea and drowned.

The man passed the hours in a daydream, wondering what he would do first when he reached the island. He'd spent countless days imagining it.

He pictured palaces and mansions when he stocked shelves in the warehouse, imagined the soft babbling of streams when he fixed leaky pipes in the apartments, and dreamed of ripe mangoes and lemon cakes when he bought bread from the market. This was not so different. The man pushed and pulled the oars, each monotonous stroke bringing him closer to happiness and comfort.

But when the island came into view ahead of him, not even his most indulgent daydreams could compare. There was no sunlight to make it shine, but the island was alive with light and color. A forest of skyscrapers rose against the backdrop of the starlit sky, glowing with neon billboards and party lights. Beside it, a cluster of hills teemed with flowering trees and waterfalls. Sapphire streams rolled over the hills like ribbons and spilled into the sea. At the center of the island was a plaza, a tapestry of ornate cobblestones and marble fountains shining with multicolored spotlights. The shops were a harmony of ancient and modern, grandiose and plain, cozy and luxurious. And every inch of the island was covered in flowers—they blanketed the treetops, sprouted from bushes along the streets, and burst forth from pots and window boxes.

Before it all, the harbor stood like the gates of Heaven. Gentle waves caressed the beaches, and weeping willows dipped their branches into the sea. Hundreds of ships embellished the bay. It was a splendor unlike anything the man had seen before. For each ship that left, another took its place. Some bore the Westhaven flag, others the Boardwalk flag. Some bore flags the man didn't recognize, and still others bore no flag at all.

The man wept at the sight of it all. Or perhaps he wept for his frozen toes and blistered fingers. He wasn't sure. But his tears spilled into his bucket and the sea pooled into his boat.

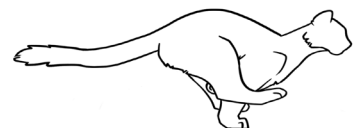
It was then that a yacht passed by, a name written across its hull in swooping cursive. The letters were drawn with such grace and elegance that they seemed to sing. The man wished he could hear their song. The ship was as lovely as its name, with a spotless white hull and a deck so high he had to crane his neck to see it.

There were several people leaning over the railing. They turned away when they saw him. One woman threw down a life preserver and the man set down his oars to catch it—but the rope wasn't long enough. She watched him fall further and further behind, shrugged, and then turned away like the rest.

The yacht left such a great wake that his rowboat pitched to the side and the man was nearly thrown into the sea. He cried out but his voice was lost in the chaos that followed the ship. Furious waves beat against his boat and doused his clothes. He filled bucketful after bucketful, but it was no use. Just as the yacht pulled into the harbor, his body slipped into the sea. For a moment, he could feel nothing but the cold. His coat dragged him downwards, but he could not untangle himself from it. He was a ragdoll, tossed about at the mercy of the swelling sea. And he did not know how to swim.

And yet, there was a beauty to the water now. The surface shimmered in the reflection of the stars, and the ocean floor was teeming with life. Crabs and sea fleas scuttled over the sand. Bunches of waxy coral reached up like a thousand hands, and seaweed billowed like fabric on a clothesline. And the man returned to his daydreams.

Behind him, dawn broke over Westhaven harbor, beckoned in by the bellow of foghorns and the squawking of seabirds. As the townspeople stood in their endless queue, the *Andromeda 2000* sailed into the harbor, its masts so tall they cast a shadow over the docks. The watchers surveyed the people in line, wondering if any of them might make it, and a woman stepped up to the ticket booth and tripped over the cracked sole of her shoe.



In the southern hemisphere of the land of Alderne, there lay the county of Dremon. Dremon was a mountainous region with some of the tallest peaks in the world, Mount Terinaci and its sister, Mount Terihani. At the top of the taller of the two mountains lay only jutting rocks and a large scree field that was no longer visible, as it was already covered in snow, while its opposite held bursts of rocky outcrops and randomly patched trees. Deep green pine trees climbed up their hills to meet the rocky enclosures at the top, interspersed with aspens that glowed with fall reds, oranges, and yellows. These trees were a cacophony of color that heralded the changing of the seasons for the small village sheltered below, for this was the home of the famous tourist town, Nor. It sat nestled within the valley of two mountains, known for stunning views and more stunning hot springs.

The village itself only consisted of a few hundred people, with the large manor of the local lord in the center. Due to Nor's tourist nature, however, there were many inns, and the town itself was well developed, with wide stone walls that encompassed the buildings inside to protect the citizens from wild animals or roaming monsters. Outside of the town walls lay multiple fields of grain, several grape fields, a few other vegetables and fruits, and even a few pastures for the animals that were raised locally. Nor was well known for its wine, meant to be drunk within the hot springs themselves, and its odd variety of local cuisine that seemed to mix multiple tastes simultaneously. It was a popular spot for adventurers looking to relax and take a break from monster hunting.

Night had descended several hours earlier. The stars were covered by the dark clouds above and, though the moon had yet to rise, if it would even be visible tonight was anyone's guess. A blanket of darkness lay heavily upon the land, except for within the small village. As if to fight off the deepening gloom, the village was lit by torches along popular intersections in the shopping district and the strong stone walls that guarded the town. Beyond those places, far from prying tourist eyes and where the townsfolk lived their daily lives, lay thick shadows, as most of the houses did not have the finances to support a light at night. Large swaths of the town were hazy due to these engulfing shadows, and often, they were avoided at such times. After all, it was not uncommon for a drunken

person to ‘lose’ his purse when he stumbled home too late at night.

In one of these sections where the darkness pervaded and the light seemed forgotten, quiet movements transpired. A shadow moved from one tiled rooftop to another, dashing at such speed they left a wind trail in their wake. When the shadow reached a rooftop that looked over the central square, they paused. Their steps were light, the sound of each like a feather falling. They crept steadily closer to the edge of the building, maintaining their stance in the darkness, and observed the lit land below.

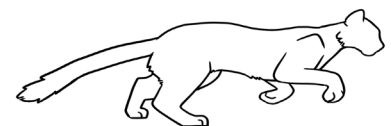
The central square held a fountain in the very center, with benches placed round in strategic places for people to linger. Small patches of trees and flowers were placed in carefully cultivated areas to enhance the ambiance. There was a feeling of prosperity within this square, one delicately maintained with the cultured buildings that surrounded it, the enforced cleanliness, and the regular guard rotations.

Currently within the central square, a couple of guards were passing by each other. After a few minutes, their pathways diverged, and the square was once again empty. The next guard rotation was in fifteen minutes, but that wasn’t what the shadow was waiting for; they merely needed to be aware of it. Another minute went by, and then movement below caught their attention.

A man strode forward with evenly paced steps, the intentionality of each movement oddly disjointed, as if the man had a robotic feel to him. He was dressed in red finery. His coat was a bright, grand red, his waistcoat white, and his breeches dark black. Upon his head sat a white wig, indicating his high status within the town, for only nobility used such wigs. His jaw was sharp and his nose hawkish, while his eyes seemed sharp and unforgiving.

Behind the gentleman, a young girl followed at a pace that was neither too fast nor too slow. The smooth flow of her movements contrasted against the robotic ones of the man she followed and created a rather peculiar scene. The outfit she wore also seemed to clash against the man’s and had one wondering who decided what they wore. She was dressed in black shorts, a black tank top with suspenders, and black boots. She had long, dark hair, a small, pointed chin, and looked too young to be out at this time of the night.

The shadow smiled and slowly stood up. They watched as the mismatched people moved closer to the building until they were right below. With a flap of their black cloak, the shadow leaped off the edge of the building. There was a



feeling of release—a feeling of ecstasy in the free-falling.

The rush of adrenaline that grew as they neared the ground brought a sharp light to their eyes, and with a sudden movement, they withdrew two daggers from the belt at their waist.

The daggers gleamed darkly in the night, a flash of black steel that promised rivers of blood as they passed a lit torch. Before the shadow reached the ground, their black-booted foot reached out, lightly kicking the side of the building, and they twisted in the air to land in front of the man in red.

The shadow brought the two daggers down, intent on attacking the man immediately, but the girl who had followed him flashed forward. She drew a small, short sword from her waist and stopped the attack.

The ring of metal meeting metal jarred the silent night and the black cloak that had covered the shadow fell, revealing their features. Before the girl stood another who looked exactly the same.

The same dark hair, the same pointed chin, the same black attire. Besides their weapon choices, the only other difference was the black cloak.

The shadow smiled slightly, her dark eyes narrowed at her opponent in pleasure. “Ohhh, not bad. You blocked my attack.” The shadow’s voice was sweet, with a teasing lilt to it, as if as if she was vastly amused.

The girl who protected the man in red blinked and tilted her head. “Ashe? If you’re working on Ashe, why are you attacking Lord Dalloran? He provides the questline.” Her voice was remarkably similar, but it didn’t hold that teasing quality. It simply seemed confused.

Ashe was one of the playable characters within *Lost Crusade*, a virtual MMORPG that allowed players to immerse themselves within Alderne. There were many characters to choose from, and a player could own multiple characters within the game; however, the characters’ overall build and features depended on the player’s choices, allowing a wide expanse of customization to players.

The shadow Ashe leaned in closer, her eyes twinkling as her grin grew wider. “Your name is blocked... What’s your name?”

After a moment of hesitation, an icon appeared above the head of the Ashe protecting the man in red. The icon lit up white, showcasing the name DeadZ. As soon as their name was revealed, the shadow also clicked to reveal their own gamer ID, Mast3r.

Mast3r continued to tease the other Ashe, the sweet lilting of her voice infectious in a way that raised goosebumps upon the skin and trailed shivers down the spine. It was both annoyingly coy and surprisingly addicting. “DeadZ, eh? I’ll remember that.”

Mast3r brought up a leg and kicked DeadZ hard in the gut. DeadZ was pushed backward for a moment. They raised a hand to cover their stomach, which had taken the hit, and stared at their opponent in quiet surprise.

Mast3r was a name they recognized. They were was a player well known for taking characters and creating odd builds, like Celeste, the healer built strong enough to tank S-class dungeons; or Merlin, a glass cannon mage capable of one-shotting an A-tier mini boss; and Avi, a necromancer that had once summoned so many minions they overloaded the server on the Pacific Zone. The company had to shut down the server completely to reboot the system. Mast3r got a lot of shit for it, but also, a lot of fans.

To the creators of Lost Crusade, Mast3r was a walking disaster, but to their fans, Mast3r was considered a gaming God.

DeadZ stood up slightly as they studied the person across from them, and the implications of Mast3r creating an Ashe filled their mind.

They turned off the voice modifier that changed their voice to the character’s voice. Now what came out of the speakers was not the sweet, lilting sweet voice of a young girl, but a male’s voice. While not overly deep, it was smooth and young, and seemed to draw a person in. “What is Mast3r doing in the Mountain Region?”

Lost Crusade was a very large game and had a lot of layers to it. It was split into multiple servers that focused on different time zones on Earth. There were Global and Country chat features that allowed players to access other players worldwide, but any other players they ran into on the server were based within the same time zone as them. Mast3r was typically active in the Pacific Time Zone Region in America, so to find them here was a big surprise.



Mast3r also switched over the voice so her own voice could be heard. While it was still a girl's voice, it wasn't as high pitched and young. It still seemed sweet, but not in an not in an artificially sticky way. The teasing quality was still present, and DeadZ was left wondering if it was just a part of the person behind the character.

"Moved," Mast3r sighed as she shrugged slightly. There was a lazy indulgence to the act, as if she hadn't just attacked the other but was merely a friend talking to another.

He raised a brow; Mast3r was a girl. "So, you'll play here now?" DeadZ asked.

"Something like that." Mast3r laughed lightly, a wisp that seemed to vanish without a trace in the air, as if it had been merely a hallucination.

She turned to one side and began slowly circling DeadZ in a deliberately provocative manner, testing to see what DeadZ would do. She was curious about this player who could stop her attack. It wasn't everyday she came across someone so capable. Her daggers twirled in her hands as if as if she was bored, and she asked, "So, Lord Dalloran's questline. How goes it?"

DeadZ's eyes narrowed as he watched Mast3r's movements. His grip upon his short sword tightened once more as he subtly prepared. He had a feeling this girl was dangerous, and not just because of the gossip he'd heard before. The way she moved her character with such ease alerted him that this player was very aware of how Ashe was meant to be played. "Almost done," DeadZ replied.

Mast3r nodded her head, the smile upon her lips rising slightly. "What a shame."

"Why would that be?" DeadZ said. He almost hadn't asked. He was playing into her game, but his curiosity about this player was too strong.

Mast3r's steps paused, and she licked her bottom lip in anticipation as her muscles tensed. "You'll have to restart."

Without another word, Mast3r launched herself toward DeadZ. Another clash of metal clanged loudly in the night air as the sword blocked one of the daggers.

DeadZ's eyes tightened as he watched the other dagger shove in from below. He twisted his body out of the way, allowing the dagger that pushed against his sword to slide off harmlessly as the short sword within his hand swung up to hit Mast3r's shoulder.

Mast3r swerved, moved her shoulder out of the way, and twisted to attack again. Flashes of light sparked in the night as the weapons met again and again in fierce battle. The two circled each other, matching characters moving in a twisted, repetitive, macabre dance.

Special skills flashed as one teleported behind the other. Almost immediately, the other moved out of the range of attacks with the same flash technique. For a long time, it seemed the two were evenly matched.

Whenever Mast3r could land a hit, it was always something tiny, barely causing any damage and seeming more like scratches. DeadZ's attacks carried more weight, but he was unable to hit Mast3r as often or in critical places due to her speed.

Minutes ticked by as they continued their clash, each second noted carefully as cooldowns were applied to skills and they became available for use once more. Both were now left with about a quarter of their life, with DeadZ's a little lower than Mast3r's. He wasn't worried, however, as he'd already calculated that it would only take him three more hits to finish her. If Mast3r wanted to kill him first, she'd need to do some fancy footwork. His win was almost assured, but he found himself unable to relax. After all, Mast3r didn't seem worried about her situation at all.

DeadZ spoke up once more. "You went all speed?"

"I like to go fast," was Mast3r's quick reply. Her eyes were bright. She was clearly enjoying their exchange.

DeadZ licked his teeth slightly when he realized he wanted to chuckle at her response. This girl was something else. She seemed playful and strong. He couldn't help it as his grin grew wider the longer their battle continued. He'd met lots of interesting people playing this game, but this girl raised something more in him. There was a challenge to her stance, an arrogance and confidence in her that he found dangerously appealing.

Finally, he responded, his voice rising in a teasing manner, "Is that so?"



But isn't it uneven? Each hit you land has barely scratched me. Look how hard you've had to work, aren't you tired?"

Mast3r laughed in response as she raced forward to clash against his sword once more. She didn't look or feel tired at all; in fact, she felt invigorated. It had been a long time since she had come across an opponent willing to challenge her with such determination. She felt almost bad she had to interrupt his quest... Almost, but not quite.

Across the blades, she grinned and raised a brow at him, "Haven't you ever heard of 'death by a thousand cuts?' And no, I'm not tired. Why, are you?"

This time DeadZ couldn't help the chuckle that escaped, "No... but this battle will have to end soon. It is getting late after all, and your life is dwindling."

They broke apart, jumping to increase the distance between them before circling each other. Each looked for an opening within the other's defenses.

"My life is just fine. As for getting late, what's the matter? Got plans?" Mast3r asked.

DeadZ hardly hesitated before he answered, "Nothing that can't be rearranged. If you want to spend all night sparring, by all means, I'll play with you... after this quest."

Mast3r paused her careful steps as she tilted her head and blinked in surprise at him. "Are you flirting with me?"

"Only if you want me to be," was his quick answer.

Mast3r hesitated, her daggers poised and ready to attack, her body leaning in its defensive state. It wasn't the first time someone had tried to flirt with her, and she doubted it would be the last. After all, gaming culture was a bit vulgar towards girl gamers, but that didn't mean she had to tolerate it.

When she spoke, her voice was filled with sarcastic distress. "What a shame. I'm going to have to kill you now."

DeadZ snorted. "Like you weren't trying before?"

Mast3r shrugged lightly. "Only a little." She crouched slightly lower,

rising to the balls of her feet in preparation. “Now I have to kill you for real.”

“Does that mean you haven’t been giving it your all?” DeadZ raised a brow. “I’m offended.”

Mast3r smiled slightly, twirling her daggers. “Don’t be, I enjoyed playing with you... but now it’s time to put an end to it. I do have a question I hope you’ll answer first, though.”

DeadZ shrugged. “Ask away. We’ll see if I answer.”

“Have you done the Shadow Realm dungeon with Ashe yet?”

DeadZ froze, eyes narrowing. “Why do you ask?”

Mast3r shot him a feral grin that held more teeth than humor. “Well, your lack of answer is enough. You should definitely do it.”

DeadZ regripped his short sword. He was uneasy with her stance and became even more alert. “I can take that to mean you’ve done it already. Any hints?”

“Yeah.” Mast3r smiled slightly. Without any more warning, she disappeared completely.

DeadZ’s eyes widened. Immediately, he flashed to one side, trying to avoid any oncoming attack, but he couldn’t see anything. Mast3r had completely vanished. He froze, short sword poised, ready to attack the second any hint that revealed where Mast3r was. Seconds passed, his fingers tensed, and his heartbeat accelerated.

Behind him, a voice sounded out. “Don’t trust the shadows.”

Mast3r emerged from DeadZ’s shadow and stabbed him in the back with both daggers. DeadZ gasped as he contorted in pain, his shoulders drawing back as his chest arched forward. The pain settings for the game were set low, but the player would still feel as if they had been scratched when critically hit, and Mast3r’s top skill was a guaranteed critical hit if a monster or player received a certain amount of damage beforehand.

Mast3r’s multiple attacks, though they only did small amounts of



damage, had been built up for this single strike. She knew if she wanted to win, she'd not only have to land a critical hit but also use Shadow-Step Backstab, a shadow skill that multiplied a crit four times. Combined, it did a massive amount of damage—enough to wipe out the remainder of DeadZ's life.

This effectively killed DeadZ's Ashe. Truly a 'death by a thousand cuts.'

Mast3r watched as DeadZ's body fell and flashed into thousands of tiny light particles. Then she turned, walked over to the man in the red suit who had stood there the whole time they'd battled.

She smiled at the character, waiting patiently as it was frozen. It would take a few seconds for it to reset and realize the person who had been guarding it was dead. Lord Dalloran's face suddenly contorted with anger and fear.

"What are you doing here? Shouldn't the Liche have killed you? Go away! Go away!"

He turned, trying to run, but Mast3r cut him down before he could take two steps. The last part of Lord Dalloran's quest line is to get revenge on him, as he tries to betray Ashe when he sends her on the final quest. A notification sounded as Mast3r finished the questline and received the 300 gold that she had been promised.

She pursed her lips lightly as she clicked the button to teleport her character back to her hometown.

DeadZ would have to start the questline all over again, but she wasn't too concerned. After all, death in the game merely took half a level's experience points and some gold to fix armor. He had seemed like a capable player; being killed wouldn't hurt him much.

She stretched her arms high above her head once Ashe was safely back to her hometown, rolling her shoulders and shaking her fingers out. A player's hometown was a safe spot for them. They could not be attacked by other players or monsters, unless under the 'siege' action, and that time was only applied on weekends.

As she walked through the town to the inn where characters could rest, she thought back to the fight with DeadZ, critically analyzing each moment she could remember. His moves had been fluid and practiced. He'd obviously been

playing Ashe for a while and was familiar with her character type. However, he had fallen into the same pit as other players. Instead of personalizing her stats and build, he had chosen to go with the generic build most players assumed. It might be effective, but for her, it wasn't as fun. He had mocked her custom setup, but she'd been figuring out how to make it work for weeks after receiving that shadow skill.

She smirked as she pushed the inn doors open. Well, it looked like it had been quite effective.

~

On the other side of the server, DeadZ was staring blankly at the white walls of the temple. Melodious music played lightly in the background as a beam of light surrounded the altar he had revived on. For a moment, he didn't move. He was frozen in place as he recalled each move of the battle with Mast3r: speed and multiple hits with low damage that could be linked with whatever shadow attack she'd used at the end. His eyes narrowed as he remembered the life drain of the final move. It'd been a critical hit. He didn't know if that made the difference, but it certainly hadn't hurt.

He raised a brow. In the end, her speed build worked.

He smiled as he sat up and slid off the altar to restart Lord Dalloran's escort quest. He didn't mind doing it all over again. After all, Mast3r had just given him a huge hint on how to maximize Ashe's build. With his arms stretched wide to work out any kinks in his muscles from the death and respawn, he walked slowly out of the temple, ready to teleport and start again. This time, there would be no one to interrupt him.

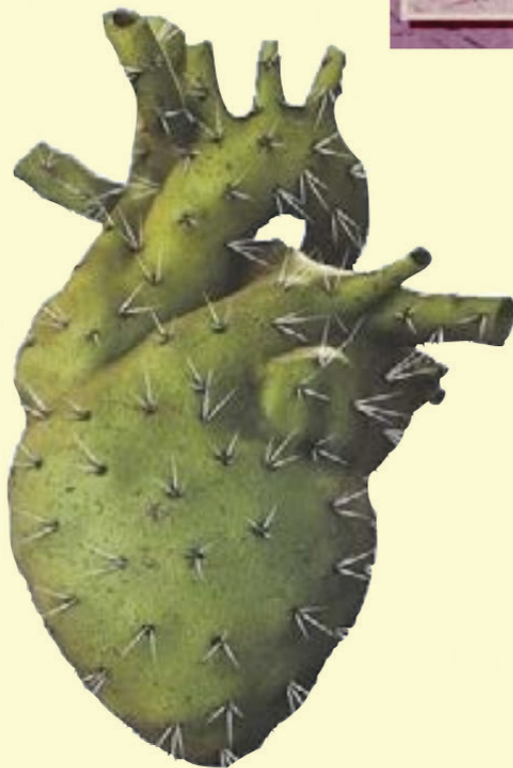




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V I S U A L A R T

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Bri Arcamone

2 PYRS



HENDRIX IN THE ZONE

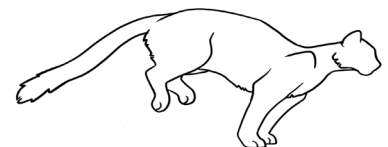
Bri Arcamone





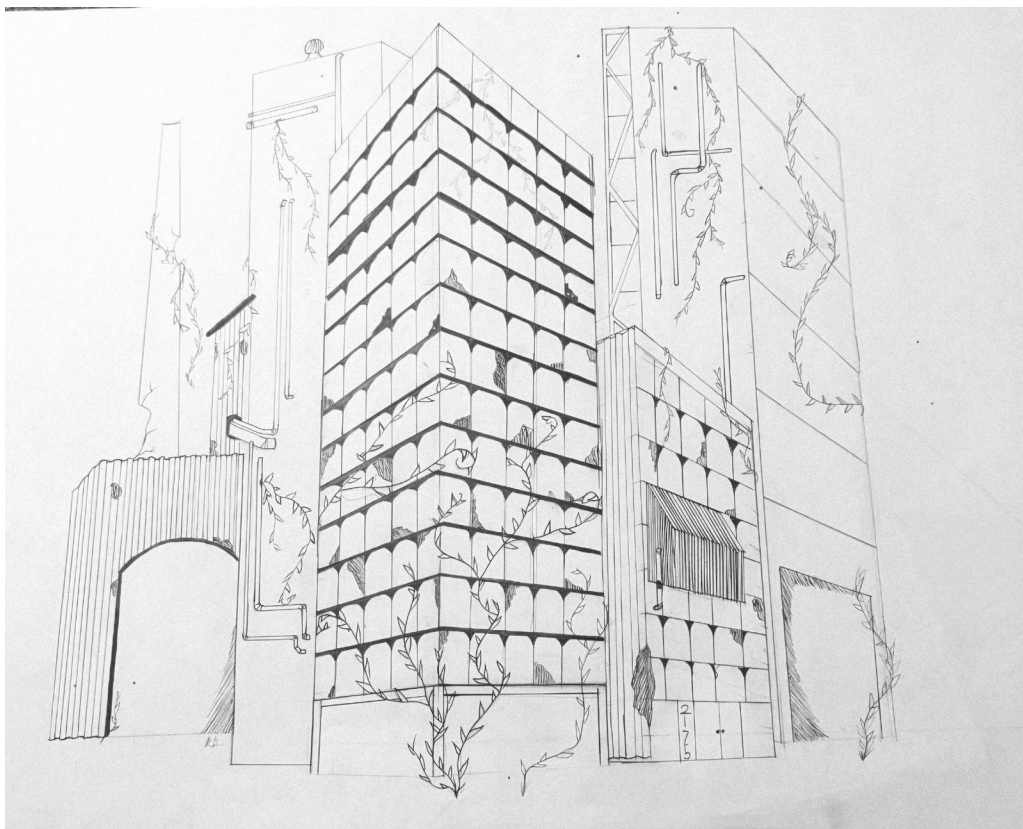
POLAR BEAR LOVERS

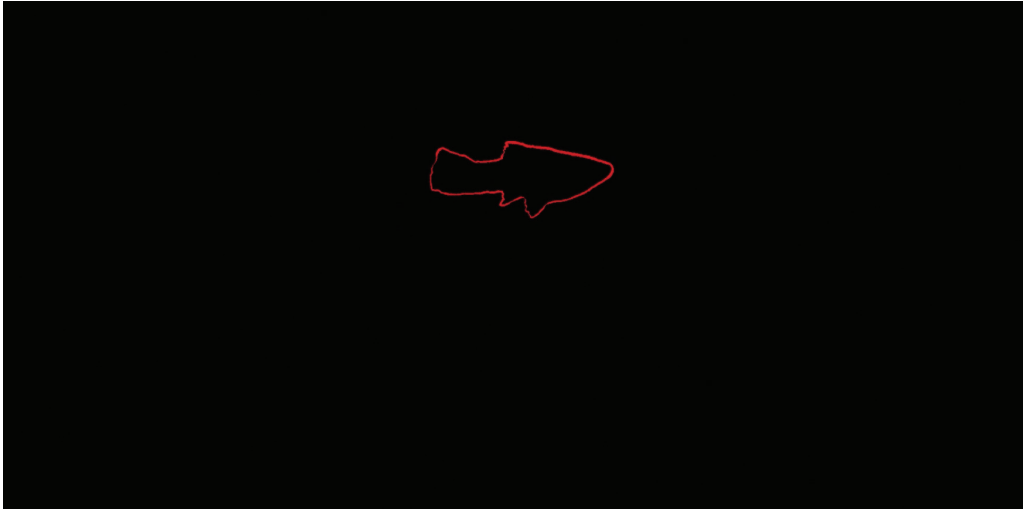
Bri Arcamone



GROWTH WITHIN

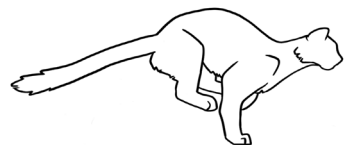
Solea Babb





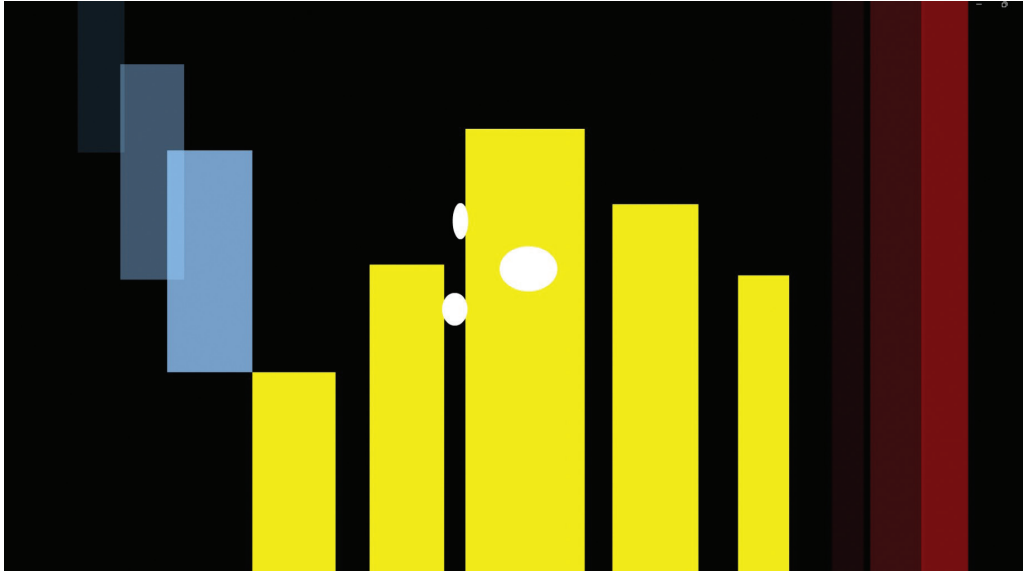
FISH TANK
Kyra Bass

Watch the animated short film here:



THE WALTZ

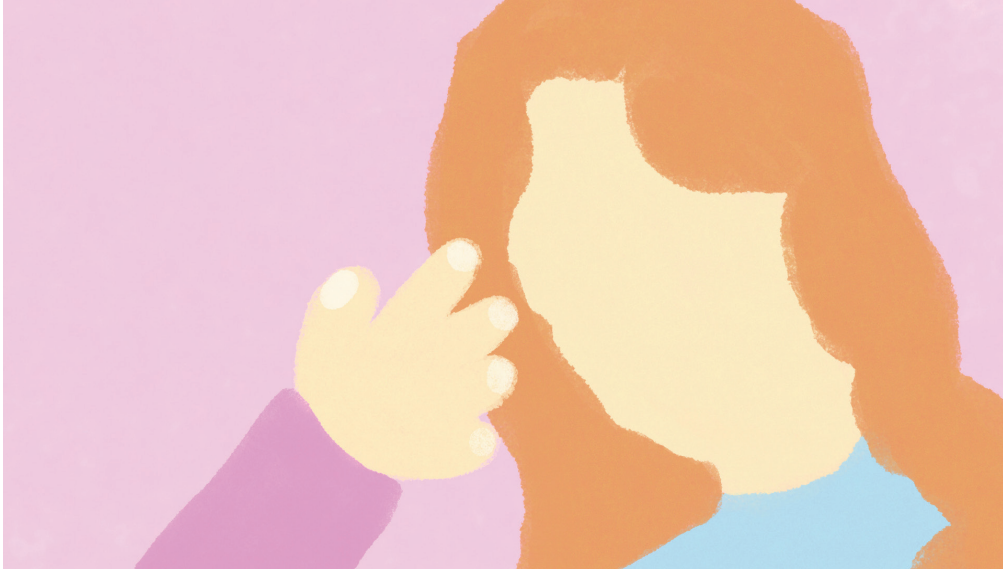
Kyra Bass



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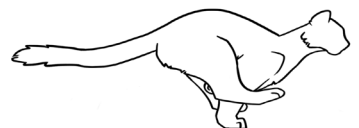


WHAT ALMOST WAS*
Kyra Bass

Watch the animated short film here:



*Child Loss



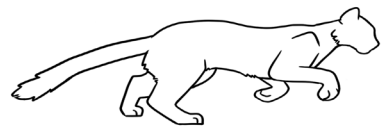
CALM BEFORE THE STORM

Josh Bohumil





THE EYES OF A WOLF
T.W. Davis



MAROON BELLS IN WINTER

T.W. Davis





WATCHING THE LINE
T.W. Davis



LATE NIGHT

Josiah Dolan





SPINNING SPARKS
Josiah Dolan



OCEAN OF PEACE

Caden Fifield





SHAPING
Caden Fifield



GREEN DOUBT

Braeden Grebenik





UNTITLED [DENY, DEFEND, DEPOSE]
Braeden Grebenik



*Content Warning

DRINK THY KOOLAID*

Melody Gruber



*Defaced Bible Pages, Mention of a Cult Leader

*Content Warning



FALLEN*
Melody Gruber

*Defaced Bible Pages, Blood



*Content Warning

LETS MEAT*

Melody Gruber



**Raw Meat, Blood*

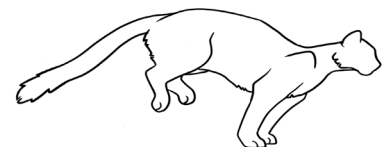
*Content Warning



ROTTEN AND HOLLOW*
Melody Gruber

*Blood

riverrun | volume 53 | 2026



*Content Warning

LADY GREAT TEETH*

Lana Heath



**Realistic Muscle Tissue and Teeth*

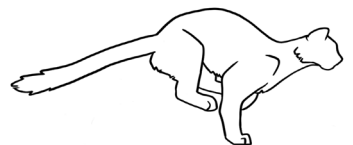
*Content Warning



POP EYES CAFFEINE EFFECT*
Lana Heath

*Realistic Skeleton

riverrun | volume 53 | 2026



*Content Warning

SECTIONS OF SWEET TISSUE*

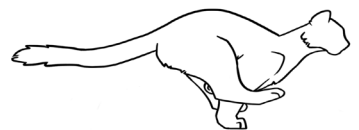
Lana Heath



**Realistic Skeleton and Muscle Tissue*



GO TOUCH GRASS
Lilly Kuiper



LARK

Lilly Kuiper





FRONT PORCH NORTHERN LIGHTS

Lisa
Kujawa-Levine



FROZEN WISHES

Lisa
Kujawa-Levine





SUNSET GRAINS
Lisa
Kujawa-Levine



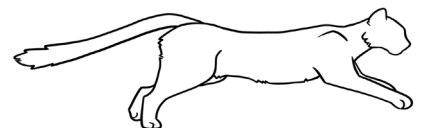
MAMA AND BABY MONSTERS

Leal Lauderbaugh





UNTITLED
Riley Rhodes



*Content Warning

PHANTOM*

Leila Schwan



*Explicit Likeness to Human Anatomy



POMPEII
Leila Schwan



SHINE

Leila Schwan





CREATIVE ABSTRACT
Cassidy Stiles



*Content Warning

HORRORS OF BODILY INSECURITY*

Cassidy Stiles



*Blood, Nudity



QUEER ROMANCE OF TWO UNIQUE VAMPIRES

Cassidy Stiles



VAMPIRE WOMEN IN THE RED NIGHT

Cassidy Stiles





p o e t r y





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*Content Warning

I. The Witch

A lost soul in the void, yet alive,
A beauty left behind, wilting and fading
Black as the absence of a heartbeat,
The Death did her part before and after the curse.

II. The Elf

A vibrant soul flourishing, forever growing,
An essence admired by all, like tulips and roses
Green as the fluorescent forest overtaking,
The Life did her part on the surface and within.

III. The Mage

An eccentric soul starburst, interstellar with emotion,
A song of presence trailing like the tail of a comet,
Magenta as the eye observing a world purely imagined,
The Galaxy did her part in the hearts of those beheld.

IV. The Priestess

A quaint soul kept inside a vault of thoughts,
A glinting heart, wrapped and hidden in sand and gold
Brown as the warmth of comfort around familiarity,
The Desert did her part burying those burdening feelings.

V. The Enchantress

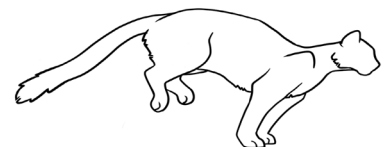
A bitter soul like all that is frigid and resilient
A past layered in permafrost, beautiful yet dangerous,
Blue as the frosted sky while a heart begins to thaw
The Ice did her part to keep any remorse from the surface.

VI. The Siren

A curious soul pondering the sea's horizon,
A character that yearns to be carried by the waves.
Purple as the raging majestic clouds of a fantasy,
The Storm did her part to deliver to a place of belonging.

FABLES OF DIVINE HARDSHIPS*
Gianelly
Ayala-Rodríguez

*Death, Trauma



VII. The Moroi

A restless soul, thriving but with uncertain purpose,
An angry shell seething; ash veils a saddened speck
Red as flickering flames of ire and resentment,
The Fire did her part to ignite, but not heal.

VIII. The

A lighthearted soul, fighting a duality of innocence and none,
A happy façade when not concealed by a dark tale,
Golden as a child's heart, gleaming even in the dirt,
The Glitter did her part to bridge reality from the lies.

*Content Warning



A normal life was all you ever prayed for
Dreaming big as a young girl, eager with your sights in your mind
A perfect little life, surrounded by everything you could
ever hope for
Nothing was bound to strangle that light, right?

Yet that plague behind a bloody mask struck overnight
From the distance, news to overlook, but it drew closer like a
seeking magnet
The town braced behind locks and wept through dark,
dangerous nights
Then... those familiar faces began to drop

You've lost those beloved faces the light once offered
All while unmasking those who were never on your side.
Each candle is put out one by one,
Until you are left among a voided life, lonely and harmed

Your fear and your tears turn to fury and thirst for revenge
No one can save you without their life as the cost
You no longer hide, pushing against the tide of the fearful town
You march as you realize you are the one they seek

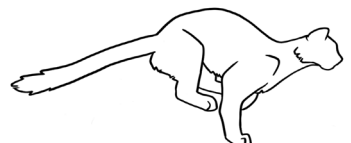
A thunderous gunshot for a quick fate, a ruby-coated blade for the
patient, molten win
You've fought until the end you yearned for
You're branded with pulsing scars
Yet the screams of those wounds summon the shroud of conquest

Rest now, my darling
Embrace the seedling of the new life that awaits you,
Born from the ashes of the life your dreams resided in
Unknowing a plague would choose you as its victim of torment

Gianelly
Ayala-Rodríguez

FINAL GIRL*

*Blood, Weapons, Wounds



*Content Warning

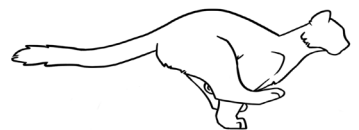
LOVE UNLOVE*

Solea Babb

Human emotions create bonds
Friendship, partnership, or just basic reliance
Even being enemies is a bond
But love
Love is such a different form
But for so many, it's continuous pain
Like the waves in the sea
Flat and it's easy and calm
With a rise, it becomes exciting and bold
But
A rise means that there has to be a fall
But the fall isn't like the rise
The rise is fast
But the fall is slow
It starts with distance, quietness, lost emotions
Sometimes you can feel it start to happen after one little thing
Other times it comes in like mold
Slow, originally unnoticed
But growing under the surface
Until it grows to the surface
When you can see it
You get scared, hurt, disgusted
Sometimes you can fix it, other times
You just can't
You can fix the wall but somehow that mold comes back
So you quit
You leave that house that
Person
But you knew so much peace
That it almost feels like you're dying
The pain is so hard
You cry but know you have no reason to stay
It comes like pins through your body
To your eyes
Like a flood
You just feel like drowning
But if you go down too far, you might not come back
Or if you already were fighting another battle
It's so much that you let the flood drown you in the hole from the
other battles
To not want to find love or live

*Suicidal Ideation

Some never see the battle
They see a painted wall
The purest mask



*Content Warning

I went on a date today
Pulled my perfume from the corner
The dress from the back of the closet
Got all pretty and filled with excitement

An hour away
My grandma planned her funeral
The seating arrangement
The officiant
The cremation
Every detail nailed down to celebrate her life

How can a heart be so full and so broken?
A life just beginning,
while another one comes to an end?

THE DUALITY OF THE HUMAN HEART*

Lizzie Bair

**Loss of a Loved One*

I make her tea in the morning
With a teaspoon of maple syrup
Just how she likes it

Go to class for her
Taking detailed notes
With the goal to help her grow
And see how smart she is

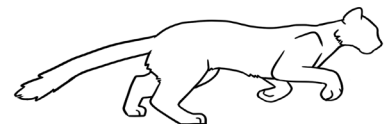
I watch her romance movies
Reread the books that she loves
Cook her pasta and buy her flowers
Gift her the sweetest dreams

For why would I not?
As soon as she was born I loved her
She is the girl I see in the mirror
The one that supports me always



Lizzie Bair

MY FIRST LOVE



ROSE COLORED GLASSES

Lizzie Bair

We never realize the burn
Until we come inside, out of the sun
Skin red and raw and aching
Cursing ourselves
For forgetting the sunscreen

And yet we go outside again
Repeat the same mistakes
Never donning a hat or an extra layer
Expecting the pain to never come
And covering the damage with lotion
That will never fully heal it

She came at me like a hot knife
Ranting and swinging as spit flew out of her teeth
I cowered into the corner sinking down to become smaller
Silly girl, don't you know that life marries the damned
Be.
Come.

BECOME
Patricia
Carazo Danner



THE COMPLIMENT

Patricia
Carazo Danner

You look at me admiringly and present a slow smoldering smile.
I feel my cheeks warm
You compliment me ever so sweetly.
 “You’re really pretty,” you say.
And then with a tilt of your head and a wink, you add
 “You should wear something that compliments you.
 Maybe something more form fitting
 Something that shows off your body
 That dress doesn’t complement your body”

I feel my cheeks heating up
I feel the flame of my tongue
The flame I’ve learned to ignite in moments like this.
I carefully consider all that MY body is
 And has been
 Before speaking another word.

I ask you.
 “What do you need to know about MY body that I can help
 you understand.
 This body, clothed and elegant.
 What do you need to know about it?”

You’re taken aback by the searing tone
I say
 Let me give you some insight into this body.
This body
 has bled every month for 40 years
 has created life
 has sustained that life with its naturally produced nutrition
 has ridden a bike across Europe
 has pulled people from a burning vehicle
 has felt the reverberation of bombs hitting the ground
 has nursed people in times of death
 has ingested the death of a friend
 has overcome injury and illness
 has completed marathons, thousands of miles on bikes, swam
 with sharks in the oceans, and survived seasons of rugby
Mine is a body that has climbed mountains
It has laughed, cried, lifted, carried.
This body has aged beautifully

This, MY body, has learned to not be obsolete in a world that devalues it
Your need to see MY body is a trope for your need to control it.
You sir, have no idea what this body looks like because you can't see ME
Your misogynist compliment is saturated with a misplaced level of
decency and respect
I fought for this country so that people can speak their minds
And that includes speaking my mind about the kind of man you are
You wish that I wouldn't fight back.
You prefer compliance over opinion
You desire women who are easy to manage, manipulate, master
Carefully consider all that MY body is before speaking another word.
Should you feel the need to say one more word to MY body, the hands on this
body will pull out your larynx so effortlessly that you will never have
another erection
Then this body will walk away so nonchalantly that nobody will notice you again.
Remember this. Remember MY body.
Choose your compliments wisely



What really happened when that last card was drawn
I can't keep doing this
I won't make it
Did you really think I would stay
I've been down this road before
I love and I love and I love until
I love myself more
And I leave
I grieve
I live

IT'S OVER

Patricia

Carazo Danner

My heart beats and I know it is you.
You alone.
Gently, you hold it in your fist.
Pulsing it to make sure I keep going.
For you alone.
My breath yields involuntarily
Gravity pulls at me like an anvil.
I'm tethered to earth
Skin and bones hold my pain in
For you alone.

YOU

Patricia
Carazo Danner



*Content Warning

UNA MUÑECA PARA TI*

Brody Dickson

You never let the cloth leave.
Left me unmasked—
but not free.
I was a vision.
Una muñeca para ti.

But you stayed clothed.
Called me pretty.
Told me I was perfect—
but what did I get to see?
Tú tenías el poder.
Y yo? Solo tenía la piel.

I was open for you.
Undressed for you.
Todo era para ti.
But you never let me be.
I was just your vision of free.

Porque una muñeca—
no habla.
No sangra.
No grita.

“I want to fuck you,”
he said—
and I pushed.
Not once.
Not gently.
I pushed like my body knew
before I did.

And you?
You just watched.
Watched him laugh.
Watched me shrink.
I became perfume—
passed in a room.
A doll held by hands
that never asked.

**Sexual Assault, Trauma*

Una muñeca para él.
Una muñeca para ti.
Una muñeca—passed around—
but never for me.

I wanted to be loved.
Not positioned.
Not imagined.
Not stripped down
to a single function.

You saw a doll—

And I kept thinking:
Maybe if I'm good.
If I'm soft enough.
If I shut up enough.
You'll take off the mask.
The armor.
The shirt.

The way I always did.

But you stayed dressed.
And I stayed exposed.
And when I got too messy—
Too broken.
Too real—
you turned away.
Said I was too much.

And I think—
you wanted a doll
that didn't talk back.
Didn't shake.
Didn't cry.
Didn't defy.

But I'm not your muñeca.
I never was.
And I never will be.



Porque ahora—
yo me pertenezco a mi

I belong to me.
Because I deserve me.

You called me perfect
when I was silent.
When I was soft.
When I let you paint me in your image
and call it love.

I was a fool. (To chase you.)
I let myself believe that I could love you.
That you could love me.
So I chased the rope and when I finally grabbed hold,
You dragged me.

I was a fool. (To trust you.)
I let myself believe that you would care.
That when you looked down and saw me being dragged through the dirt,
I trusted you'd pull me up.
But you left me there.

I was a fool. (To hold onto you.)
There in the dirt,
I made myself believe when you insisted I wasn't a fool for
failing to let go.
That you'd pull me up soon.
So I held on.

For you.
With dust clotting my lungs and dirt stinging my eyes, I held on.

For you.
I waited. Watching the world as it passed me by.

For you,
I stated lies to myself and everyone else who cared to reveal the truth I
refused to see.

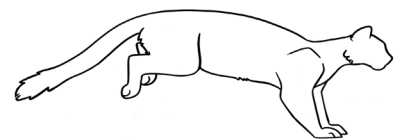
For you,
I ignored my conscience and every voice of reason that brought to light
every fallacy and fear I had in me.

For you,
I stored up all of the love and hope and compassion I had until there was
nothing left,

for you.

I was a fool.
For you.

I WAS A FOOL [FOR YOU]
Josiah Dolan



POOL OF SILENCE

Josiah Dolan

Silence fills the room.

It creeps in from under the door and floods the floor, submerging our feet as that cold quiet creeps up our legs and sends shivers down the spine.

Words cut deeper and voices grow weaker when that frigid hush reaches the chest, pressurizing the lungs from all sides.

Breaths grow short and heavy in the deadened air, insulating the room, emphasizing every truth.

The weight of each wait worsens with every stifled word until our weary mouths won't utter a thing at all.

Like a drowning man gasping for one more breath, we grasp for words while the pool of silence engulfs us, surging over our heads.

Gone is the ability to speak, to move, to breathe.

You hold your breath until you can no longer.

Until that cold quiet floods the lungs and pools at the bottom of your throat.

That piercing emptiness stings the eyes and aches the heart.

It muffles the ears and turns the tongue to sandpaper and your insides to stone. Anchoring us to the bottom below the surface.

To the inescapable here and the gentle impenetrable silence of now.

Drowning together, alone in our pool of silence.

Time doesn't exist—
not here. not in the way i wish it did.

It exists in your hand on my shoulder:
your smile and silver eyes and overflowing journals at the bottom of
a storage bin from when I
was a kid. From when I was 16? From when dead grass is all I can
remember and
unread texts and unsaid words and I miss you and I love you and I
think about you all the time even now,
five years later. And you're gone and I'm still here and I'm gone too
but recently I've been listening to the same
songs as I did back then. I've been thinking about things I haven't
thought of for years, like
you—but I think about you all the time. It's almost August again and
it's embarrassing
to say I still miss you when I really have no idea if you thought of
me like this even back then. I've
never been someone to have many friends. I could, maybe, if I
wanted to. But I don't and I didn't and you did
and maybe I was holding you back. And I don't know who I was or
if it was ever enough
to make up for what I cost and while that's not true, it still pulled
some string in my throat to say it and
I feel sick. I feel like a parasite and while that's not true either, it still
makes me afraid.

UNTITLED
Theo Engle



often i wonder about the words he murmurs:
half asleep when he says my name,
arms pulling me close and his
breaths i try to match

i wonder if he is happy though i know he is not
and then i wonder if he could be
if i could love him?

and he is there and he is beautiful
and despite everything, i want him to love me
like he does
when he is half asleep.



UNTITLED

Theo Engle



When you get to the ER
They make you lift your shirt up
(Did you wear a cute bra today?)
So a complete stranger
Can put stickers all over you
To listen to your heart
The first indignity of many

Because why would anyone want to go to the ER
And have a needle forced into your arm
That feeds you fluids that make your blood run cold
And dye that makes your blood run warm
Heating you up from the inside
Making you light up on a monitor
That you will never see
Because they keep it turned away from you
Everything is hidden behind the screen
That lights up their faces at 10:57

You get headaches from this disinfected place
The forced friendliness of the people
The scrubs
The white coats and the crocs
Who knock on your door and ask how you're doing
And you want to say pretty fucking scared
But you're too polite
So you say, "alright"
Or joke, "well I'm here so..."

Your second indignity
Is the suction sound
From those yellow grippy socks
As you walk (supervised) to the bathroom
Makes you think of a young octopus
Walking across the linoleum
Like he has octopus business to attend to
Meanwhile the ugly yellow of your gown
Does not match the wretched yellow of your grippy socks

Midnight
The neurologist talks to you

THE MACHINES THAT WILL KILL YOU

Stephanie Few



And orders more tests
And when she pulls the curtain shut behind her
In an illusion of privacy
You hear her say something
About the possibility of a mini stroke

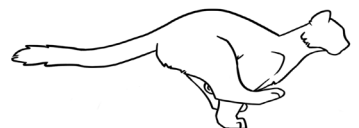
Four minutes past midnight
The IV bends every time you move your arm
Which is great
Because that's how you sleep
But who can sleep in a place
Where electronics reign
(Oh how alive those machines are
Even in the dark)
But none of the scrubs seem to care
As they run the alphabet on you
EKG
CT
SED
MRI
How is this alphabet soup
Supposed to save you

*Content Warning

He loves you.
He loves you because you are there every time the world needs to be
drowned out.
He—God knows—could never live without you.
Because you are there when he needs to sleep, wake, feel, win, and
lose, he needs you.
He needs you.
He will need you
for as long as
the future
can see

ALCOHOLISM*
Elyssa Gleeson

**Alcoholism*



callused hands evidence a lived life loneliness
is a deep dark place although quiet and at peace
darkness of an enemy meets the darkness of a blank and
bland mind no thoughts can be added into my head, yet my
head sickeningly spins with mundane moving nonsense that no
one will ever be able to understand much less me
those who work do nothing but work no matter how much I
hate being yanked under I never managed a
stay at home alone where I feel an essence of purpose within
me self-destruction self-manipulation
self-slaughter must be edited into greatness but how
not even a sorrow sparrow feels full it just feels content

reaching out reaching towards reaching to anyone around, but the forms
don't have hands they stare they laugh their body haunting
through me knocking the breath from my lungs I am
stuck here pleading that a form a face my face I know I love I
cherish
becomes crystalized in the smoked-out room I just want
another chance just one more please

MOTIVATE

Elyssa Gleeson

Autumn falls damp
In my mind
Droplets of rain slide down the stems
of leaves not yet brown.
I count one hundred shades of gold

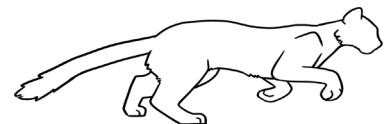
Fog blankets the low hanging branches
A dizzy canopy from my ears to the edge of Heaven
Dew clings to the grass
To my ankles
To the sky
My eyes press against all
that cries above

I remember not
The shade of mornings past
Light traveled so far only to dissipate
Overruled by dull and gray
Helios swallowed by ocean; his cup runneth over once more

A season like citrus,
abundance
then Death



ABUNDANCE
Kate Hutnick



SWALLOW THE SUN

Kate Hutnick

Only in the light of a love
worth a lifetime can an
immense ocean become
Insignificant;
what is distance to a
love that could swallow the sun?

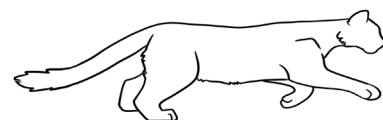
Green to gold, to bronze, to gone,
the wind between the
aging leaves will carry you to me.
Rocks skip and sink
on the surface of a pond;
ripples send a chill up my spine,
a thousand miles melt into my cheeks.

As trees grow towards the sunlight,
I find myself leaning into you.
A world away I feel the pull
of music in the air,
laughter filling the silent vacuum
of the space between our lips,
my eyes drawn to the unclaimed artwork
spilling out all around me.
You are everywhere,
in everything,
clear as dawn on the horizon.

Untouched by the heat of a fickle summer,
immune to the death and decay of autumn,
my love for you is evergreen. Ever growing.
Never far when pieces of my soul,
cut out of infinity,
now live inside
your ribs.

Now and until covers more
than the space between all the galaxies
from here to the far side of Heaven.
Grieving rains fall on the
morning our fingers untangle.

Even God weeps,
sometimes.



DISHES

Lillian Hyatt

I'll do the dishes so you don't have to.
it's not because I think it's traditional
and it's not because I feel like I should,
it's so your fingers don't get wrinkled.
that part of chores when your fingerprints turn into stamps of raisins
and the mushy food in the sink starts to clog the garbage disposal,
I'll do the dishes so you don't have to.
I'll dig in the drain
even if I always think that the disposal switch will get flipped
accidentally
I'll risk my fingers for yours.
so your hands never get too cracked to hold
so your fingers can always wrap around mine,
even if my hands are rough from the over hydration,
I'll do the dishes so you don't have to.
I'll dry my hands on the folded towel after I finish
I'll lay the scrub brush next to the orchid,
and I'll still leave a damp mark on your shirt,
wrinkled where I grab at it to kiss you.
your fingers will never be wrinkled,
only ever your shirts
your hands will never be wet,
only ever my hand prints on your clothes
and the dishes will never be dirty,
only ever the dish towels.

seeing your speech patterns
unfold from the lips of others
is a sticky note on the fridge
that reads
“need more milk”
without the follow up
“have a good day, i love you”
that normally is there.

GROcery LISTS
Lillian Hyatt



HEAT STAIN ON A WOODEN TABLE

Lillian Hyatt

and when it all feels too much again,
open the screen door
push through the cold front
and walk into the snow.
put the kettle on
and when it shrieks
scream with it.
empty all the air out of your lungs
and fill them back up with the bitter cold
feel the icicles form stalactites inside your lungs
then drink your boiling blueberry tea to melt them.
focus on how the streetlights have halos
and how the street becomes one lane
notice the swirls the snowflakes form in their dance through the air,
dance with them.
allow the high tide in your soul to crash on the shore within your
chest
let the icicles freeze to your cheeks
invite hopelessness to the dinner table and after she leaves a heat
stain from her mug
give her a hug.
now whisper.
tell her “thank you.”
kiss each one of her fingers and let them caress your cheek,
each one for a brief moment.
there will be one more gust of wind,
one that blows the shutters open from the inside
and it is important that you listen to its message then.
bring hopelessness to the door,
twirl her once around so that she mirrors the snow,
and turn away as she takes her resolute first
steps into the storm.
that heat stain will forever be on your table,
and her fingers forever against your cheek.
welcome, December.
we will find a way to dance someday.

indeed,
I have considered the flowers.
I have considered the daisies, the lilies, the fern
I have considered the veins of their hands
and the thorns of their stems.
I have considered the honeysuckle,
the way that her petals entwine with the sun
I have also considered the peony,
gentle pink firework
engaged with the sod.
I have considered the lines in your palms
and I have also considered your hair,
every strand conducting an orchestral arrangement
that defies law of heaven and earth
I have considered the corner of your mouth
where the raspberry jam still resides
the crackles of lighting
uplifted from your cheeks
send a spark catapulted to my own
when you consider the flowers, consider them all
each petal a cartographic amazement
the lines from your palms remind me of that
which is too sweet to overpass.

I HAVE CONSIDERED THE FLOWERS

Lillian Hyatt



SCULPTURE

Lillian Hyatt

I am a woman
It is my purpose to be touched.
I exist to be examined
Observed
like a lab rat running the same course
over and over
but with no cheese to reward me at the end.
I am tired
I should not have to be Narcissus' pool
should not have to act as the statue of Venus,
the hands of Alexandros of Antioch
shaping my hips for his pleasure
let me be a Degas,
Little Dancer of Fourteen Years,
with a tutu and ribbons covering my body
saving me from being accosted by the eyes and hands of men
mold me with a loose dress,
let the chisel know nothing of the shape of my silhouette,
make a place for me in the catacombs instead of the Louvre,
for there I will know the shelters for the brains
of the tragic women that came before.

*Content Warning

she first discovered the door
when she was little
barely learned to crawl

it was the most peculiar door
no handle
no frame
just an outline in the wall

a silhouette she had only seen
in the mirror
and in the shadows

she put her little hand upon it
gently pushed
and crawled on through

she was met with flowers and fairies
they kissed her with magic
she babbled and played

but soon she missed her parents
and they led her back to the door
she put her head against it
and was through once more

she often came back to door
finding it had grown with her
once it fit a little baby
now it fit a little girl

but as the years wore on
the door was forgotten
the girl had grown up
and she had met a boy

they quickly fell in love
stealing kisses when they could
then walking down the aisle

THE DOOR THAT ONLY FIT HER*
Emily Johnson

*Death, Grief, Postpartum Depression, Suicide



a baby boy was soon welcomed
she loved him as much as she should
it was never enough

winter came and flu followed
by spring he was gone and so was she
a hollow shell of herself

life was hard and it grew harder
i tried my best to bring her joy
and so i brought her a baby girl

giggles went unnoticed
cries did too

i found her one day at the door
listlessly tracing the familiar silhouette
she looked at me and then she said

come, come with me
where it is not hard
only happy

i nodded
she stepped through the door
i followed but i could not go through
the door only fit her

i stared at her
watching the fairies flit around her
the flowers bloom at her feet
i pleaded

come, come back through the door
i know it is hard
but love will get us through

yes, yes she said
love will get you through the door

but
i can't love
i can't feel
i can't be
anymore

i watched as the door closed
the outline fading from the wall

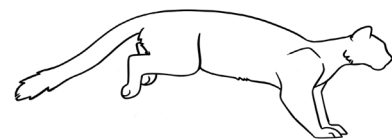
i dropped to my knees and wailed
stopping when my wails were echoed
by my little baby girl

i ran down the stairs to the nursery
picked her up from her crib
cradled her in my arms
whispered in her ear

my sweet sweet baby girl
life is hard and it gets harder
let's try happiness together
and if we fail, we fail

i make you a promise
a promise i'll try to keep
your mother made the same promise
we will not fault her
for it not keeping it
though some days it may be hard

my sweet baby girl
my love my love will always
take you through the door



ANOTHER ODE

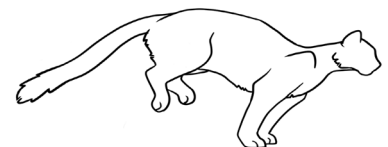
Sophia Kustar

Maybe they cut the cord to my country too early
and I am hemorrhaging.
I think if I ever go there the blood will catch up to me,
drain out of the bottle of my body
when I try to see my father.
I'm not sure I'd recognize him
under the clouds of a place I don't remember,
of a place I took him from.
I know he doesn't resent me for it;
 not sure he's thought about it enough
 to blame the child
 the baby in the belly in the wedding in the garden
 in the city in the country he didn't want to be stuck in
but maybe he should.
I am afraid
to take America with me,
to butcher the language he should have taught me,
to see the muscles in his jaw work
and work
while I make my attempts.
The blood will come out of my mouth
in broken words,
gurgling grammars.
I think about my father more now,
now that he's living the life he always should have been,
the life I took from him.
I don't understand how so many
miles and hours and buckets of water
can stand between us,
and yet there is this cord
pulling me to my country,
to him,
to me.

Has it been cut?

I always flew too low,
it's fun avoiding spiders and evading death,
but I did always envy those in the sky,
in truth, I was scared,
not of birds or the wind,
but of making my attempt.
as I now succumb to an early fate
due to tattered and rippled wings,
I look up to see twigs and plants,
as clouds and hills are not in my scope.
I never flew high,
I never got to fall as Icarus.

MOUNTAINS BEYOND THE GRASS
Matthew Lalone



THE KALEIDOSCOPE OF A FAÇADE.

Grace Morrison

The crowd is loud, and angry. A living, pulsing thing with too many mouths. Voices colliding like stones thrown too close. Screaming, begging the opposition to collapse.

You are wrong.
No—You are wrong.

Verses are shouted like verdicts. Creeds are cracked open and hurled. Hands are bloody and bodies are beaten black and blue. Fingers point, jaws clench. The voices are climbing louder, louder, as if trying to outshout heaven. They're speaking of God as if He is a possession, something that can be owned, defended, proved. As if whoever shouts the loudest gets to keep Him.

The mob leans closer and closer, and my head fills with bees. I am trapped inside this horde, shoulder to shoulder, breath to breath, and the sound swells until I can't tell where their voices end and my thoughts begin.

The tears are falling as I sink to my knees. And I am screaming, not because I doubt this God they are fighting about, but because I don't understand Him, and no one seems to be allowed to say that out loud.

Have I lost my faith? Or has seeing it be used as a weapon broken open something inside of me?

The God they are trying to define is different from the One I know, or thought I knew. And I feel utterly helpless, watching Him ripped to shreds by voices that sound so certain.

Kneeling in the dirt, I want to stand, to scream my questions into the throng, but questions are dangerous here. They sound too much like doubt, and doubt sounds too much like betrayal.

I want to yell, "*YOU are wrong.*"
But am I the one that is wrong?

And so I stomp up the steps to the cathedral of my heart. Throw open the front door and the sound of that heavy wood makes a reverberating thud throughout the chambers I have built. I storm

through the walls of this room that I know like the back of my hand, solid, thick, the crumble from the brick staying on Your hand long after You grace it. Upheld by doctrine and carefully mortared belief. My mother and father taught me to build these walls, their parents before them. Rehearsed, reinforced.

But I have turned the stone structure into walls made of glass. Stained by my own hands. Colored by what I needed God to be in order to fathom Him. I stare at the glass as the tears continue to flow. In my ire, I smear with mud and dirt, trying to make the walls concrete again, to stop the cathedral from cracking.

The mud slips away.
My hands are filthy.
The colored glass returns.

I scream and strike the glass in my fury. Hoping that the shatter might finally explain what the silence would not.

But the light comes in anyways. It always does. Gentle. Like a breath of spring. It fractures and bends as it kisses the glass, refusing to stay singular, spilling into patterns I did not design, onto floors I meant to keep clean.

A kaleidoscope revealing my façade.

Beautiful, intentional, devout in its symmetry, and never the whole cathedral, only the part I could face without shielding my eyes.

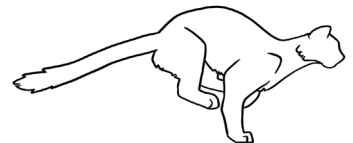
And so I scream at the light:

Are You the thunder behind the veil, holy and reverent, too radiant for my eyes to survive. The God before whom mountains loosen and language fails?

Or are You the quiet echo in the nave, Close enough to hear my breath catch in my chest. Close enough to notice the tremor in my prayer, the doubt I never speak out loud?

Have I mistaken reverence for distance, mystery for absence, silence for indifference? Have I shaped You into something smaller, portable, a God I could set down when I grew tired, a God I could carry without trembling—so that Jesus would be easier to explain, easier to love, without being undone by Him?

I crumble to the earth, slowly picking up the glass that has shattered all over the floor. I know the stories the panels depict. The cross, the bread, the open tomb, the careful arc from death to glory. But knowing the architecture is not the same as knowing the One who walks the aisle, who pauses beside my trembling body, who



picks up the broken glass that I am holding in bloody hands.

If I am honest, I have loved the symmetry more than the source, the reflection of colored light more than The Light itself. I memorized the way it fell at certain hours, mistook beauty for truth, clarity for closeness. I called it faith. I called it understanding.

Yet, still, The Light moves through the fractured glass and borrowed names, through the cathedral I have built in my mind. Through the doctrines that try to hold You still. The Light moves toward the places I did not intend to open, toward the locked doors of my certainty, toward the questions I was always too afraid to ask.

And I am left here, small beneath the vaulted ceiling of Your being, my thoughts echoing back to me, wondering if I ever truly knew You, or if I only knew the version of You that fit inside my head. That stayed the right size, so that I would never have to admit how little I understood.

But You are far bigger than that.
And if You are both, which I am learning You are,
The fire and the nearness
The holiness that terrifies
And the love that stays
Then teach me how to stand in The Light
Without trying to bend into something I can control.

To the Broken Heart's Corporation
100-120 Heartbreak Way
Lonestown, LO

Dear Mrs. Heart,

I wish to inform you of my timely application
To the Broken Heart's Corporation.
I have recently come into possession of a heart,
One that is broken, of course,
And would like to be considered for a position.

I can assure you that this heart broke none too lightly
As there were no clouds cushioning sour-sweet truths.
In fact the person who trapped this little heart
Cracked it recklessly
Almost like it was an object to be fixed.

It did not break delicately,
Like raindrops break upon velvet petals
It was squashed into a pulp like someone ran their car over it,
And then abandoned on the side of the road
For passersby to pity.

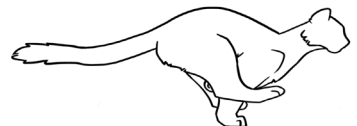
All elements I believe will be invaluable to this position.

Although while we are being honest here,
I should let you know that I never intended
To have this broken-glass heart,
One that lacerates you whenever you try to pick it up.

In fact, I was quite content having a whole heart,
But the acidic venom of love is sticky sweet,
Not like maple syrup, more like a viscous glue.

And so instead, now I just have a hole heart,
A heart that decomposes like a neglected tomato,
A heart that fractures like chipped pottery
A little scorched heart
A cavernous heart
A broken heart.

TO THE BROKEN HEART'S CORPORATION
Bethany Odegard



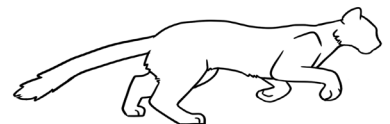
Thank you for considering my application.
I look forward to meeting you in person to discuss
My future at The Broken Heart's Corporation.

My most bitter-sweet regards,
A Lonely Breaking Heart

i'll tell you my pain
you tell me yours
i'll tell you my hopes and dreams
you'll tell me your life story
we're a community
everyone helps each other
everyone takes care of each other
no one ever judges each other
you make me want to get old,
no matter how much it hurts

EXERCISE CLASSES FOR SENIORS

Zee O'Donnell



*Content Warning

i fill the passenger seat you once
occupied with a small backpack
and dive into books full of fantasies
to escape this painful reality
the one where my heart bears a crack
the plane that took you its own brutality

i see your ghost in every space you occupied
feel the phantom drag of your lips
across the canvas of my skin
as if my heart hasn't been notified
too focused on every place your hands
have been

as i drive, i pass a street named
"Fairplay"
which i wouldn't use to describe what
the distance does to my heart
in exchange for one week of sunny days,
months of loving a living ghost
stuck worlds apart

FAIRPLAY*

Zee O'Donnell

*Allusion to *Intimacy*

if letting go
is so much easier than holding on
then why does letting go
hurt so much more?

if losing you
is supposed to heal me
then why has it left me with
large gaping wounds

if hating you
is so much easier than loving you
then why can't i stop
why can't i hate you?

FALLING IN LOVE WITH A TRAITOR?

Zee O'Donnell



you can pretend like you love me
and always have
the same way i pretend that i never
loved you
but always will

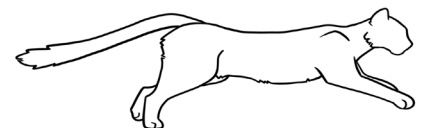
MY HEART IS BIGGER THAN MY BODY

Zee O'Donnell

Unknown to the rest of the world, in everyone's hearts, there is a hurricane. Whether it be big or small doesn't matter; what matters is who survives.

The hurricane started in the Midwest
Destroying the precious crops of the land,
Unprepared test
The true downfall of man
It moved up north, towards the cities of trade
The manifesto of the brave, ripped from their hands
Winds not so far away
The true downfall of man
It tormented the south, even though we were ready
Told us our truths, ruined many
Preparation doesn't save
The true downfall of man
The north, the south; the east and the west
Nothing can stop the beast of mess
Bare your real mark
The true downfall of man
Wars of the past never compared
To the never-ending drowning of the hurricane's land
Don't pay any mind to
The true downfall of man
Shouts of protest
Against the human saviors
Blinding rage, is step one of
The true downfall of man
And when reality slowly reels in
When the storm suddenly stops
We'll soon realize
that nobody cares about
The true downfall of man

DOWNPOUR
Mathena Pierre



You can sleep on a bed of stars,
and they'll weave you a blanket of spider silk

Careful,
Stagnant water can be a tempting poison...
Don't let rosy eyes burn into the blue

Don't go,
Swaying on a hammock of thought
can you really feel the rain without the clouds?

Come back,
You're so close to changing
No need to sleep now
when you can dream later

They'll hear the bells and snatch the warmth
you worked so hard to get
Careful,

Wishes like to linger.
Don't go,
stay here where Time doesn't sleep
But it does dream

What's my name, you ask?
Well, if you don't remember yours, I'll lend you mine
Silence
No thanks,
I'll stay.

THE FAIRY MOUND

Kristi Raney

The wolf cries
The elk screams
The horse runs
The eagle flies

And the human cries
The deer prays
And the human runs
The deer falls

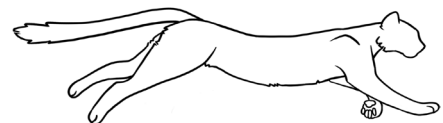
Sticks break under my weight
Choking out the breath
The world turning all black
And the deer wishes

The dog howls
The cat claws
The goat buckles
The butterfly hopes

Humans are of the consequences
Result of our destruction
Growing the vines around
The skeleton sharp thorns

The moths soar above
Whisking me away
I disappear away forever

THE NIGHT OF CREATURES
Solar Ritchie



DO THEY WALK WITH MINE?

Tessa Schauer

The air.
The air today
Smelt of sweet grass
And incoming rain.
I waited for your memory.

Help guide me to the fields we used to roam.
Lead me to the summer days we spoke of:
Quick swims in mother's stream.
You may be gone, now,
But your memory walks with mine.

Our remembrances plan for two white-haired women,
Young in age and aged in character,
To prowl around foreign countrysides,
Touching every cathedral and worshiping each other's gods.

Your mind
Approached like soft rain.
It stripped my memory of its companion
And barren becomes the fields they spoke of.
Sequestered in protective solace,
Your memory grew weak.

The air.
The air today smelt of dry heat,
wearisome sand.
And I knew your memory would not come.

When my lungs collapse and heart decays,
do not remember my body plagued with death.
I, like you, lived.

I punctured my belief system and drained it to excess.
I became pretty and uncontrolled;
Free to pick and chose what to rebuild with.
I took the clay that formed my being and,
moment by moment,
analyzed and restructured what no longer served me.
I have let go, given up, and gained.
I have lived.

I have been alienated and united from and to my family.
I am connected with someone who has seen the entirety of my
existence,
and I have seen the entirety of hers.
I have always been one in a pair.
I have been alone, but never lonely.
I have lived.

I have loved and hated god.
I have fallen to the mercy of a higher power.
I have cursed Rome and everything that's come from it.
I have cried in churches. I have sobbed outside of them.
I have lived.

I wrapped my arms around Love
And spoke latin hymns to her.
We traded bouquets and barrettes.
Two girls became women.
I have lived.

I will not surrender the validity of my existence
to the opinion of those who did not know me.
They did not feel me.
They did not touch the copper hair on my head,
Or hear the voice I produced.
They did not smell the bourbon perfume I frequented,
or listen to the lectures I gave.
They did not know me.

WHAT LIES BEYOND OUR BODIES
Tessa Schauer



But I have lived.
I am living.

To you who is just beginning.
Don't rush.
Stay with your days longer.

Enjoy the sun kissing your skin and trace the shapes in clouds.
Dance under the torrential rain and laugh in the face of lightning.
Relish the moon's glow and wonder at the promises
 beyond the stars.
Admire the strength of an ant and listen when cicada's sing.
Climb that tree that's too tall and make mud pies below in
 the garden.
Fall into piles of leaves and watch as autumn color's the land.
Catch snowflakes on your tongue and watch as footprints
 mark snow.
Do all of this and more.

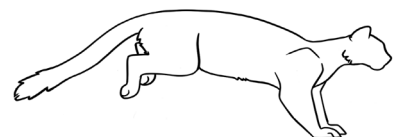
Because one day you might forget how.
After time has passed
And life has placed its burden on your shoulders,
You might forget to look up.
You might forget to look down.
Years will go by and you will become busy
And you simply...
Forget to stop.
To admire.
To wonder.
To enjoy.
To live.

So, to you who is just beginning.
Don't rush.
Stay with your days longer.



Jennifer Smith

DON'T RUSH



*Content Warning

When life gives you lemons...
Fuck making lemonade.

Yet...

Without an added sweetness
I find that the bitterness lingers.

The citrus eats away at my existence,
Dissolving beliefs one at a time.
The acid corrodes through memories,
Leaving an astringent flavor to color every moment afterward.

Caustic.

Bitter.

All I can taste is the tartness of the citric acid.
All I can see is biting reflections of mistaken possibilities.
All that's left is the pungent ache when it is gone.

I want to—

Drench my world in syrup.
Breath in sharp puffs of powdered sugar
To cover the acrid smell that's been left behind.

I want to—

Bathe in molasses.
Douse myself in artificial extracts and overprocessed honey
To mask the flavor and numb the burn.

I now need that sweetness.

It is a

Serotonin Addiction

Caused by the decay of sulfurous reactions that lay within the daily
range of potentialities.

And without it ...

I am lost to the blistering taste of lemons as they eat away at my
everyday reality.

LEMONADE*

Jennifer Smith

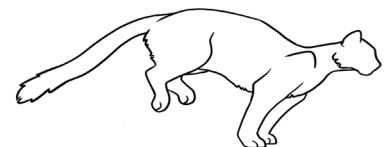
*Strong Language

Déjà vu of driving by flat fields;
Déjà vu of loving and leaving;
Déjà vu of hearing *so and so died*;
Déjà vu of finding the “right” black dress;
Déjà vu of leaving behind your first job;
Déjà vu of living 17 at 19;
Déjà vu of an aching thumb;
Déjà vu of “she’s just a friend;”
Déjà vu of purple sunsets and orange sunrises;
Déjà vu of the shadows stretching over days;
Déjà vu of needing to clean the dishes because you’ve used
 your last fork;
Déjà vu of pretending to believe this was all in His Plan;
Déjà vu of forgetting keys; déjà vu of finding your keys;
Déjà vu of “it wasn’t always like this;”
Déjà vu of using sick time in lieu of bereavement leave;
Déjà vu of the day before last;
Déjà vu of posting a thirst trap; déjà vu of deleting it after an hour;
Déjà vu of working “too much;” déjà vu of not having
 enough money;
Déjà vu of missing your sisters;
Déjà vu of “I’ve seen this before;”
Déjà vu of trying to remember what was just on the tip of
 your tongue;
Déjà vu is sinking yesterday into tomorrow; or passing by today;
knowing you know something you can’t name; and
 loving your mom;
singing along to the radio; and dancing like the world is watching;

Rhianna
Smith-Burns

DYSTOPIAN POETRY

Inspired by Franny Choi’s “Science Fiction Poetry”



*Content Warning

THE WORLD DOES NOT END LIKE LIFE*

Rhianna
Smith-Burns

Dead musicians can release “new” music.

Netflix used AI to replicate Gabby Petito’s voice for a new show. She read excerpts from her personal journal, narrating the trip. I wonder if she knew she was narrating a true crime documentary.

Poets’ personal letters and scrawlings are analyzed posthumously every day. I wonder if they knew privacy is an illusion.

I was once told illusions are only images of the mind. I don’t know what they were getting at. I thought everyone knew that.

When I was younger, people talked about mirages in the desert due to heat exhaustion. When I was older, I learned mirages are refractions of light that make distant objects appear near.

They are seen most when hot ground heats the air above it. This happens a lot in deserts.

I don’t know a lot about deserts.

I got a really bad sunburn a few summers ago. It lasted for weeks. My nose is red in my mother’s wedding photos. I haven’t seen the photos.

Yesterday I saw a photo of my grandpa.

My grandpa died in September.

It’s weird to look at a dead person captured at a moment of liveliness. It makes you doubt that they’re dead. Sometimes, I think Mary Shelley and her husband are still alive, but then I remember they’re both dead.

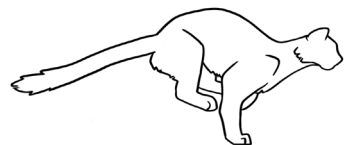
He died first.

I wonder if a dry heart can replicate a wrinkled photo.

Mary Shelley edited and published much of her late husband’s poetry and prose, providing invaluable insight.

*Death

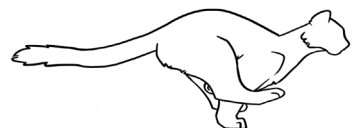
If I die, I want my journals to be burned.



But first ~~community~~ coffee.
But first ~~compassion~~ coffee.
But first ~~third spaces~~ coffee.
But first ~~permission to rest~~ coffee.
But first ~~equality~~ coffee.

BUT FIRST COFFEE
Savannah Storms

This poem is a symbolic representation of the normalization of substance use to replace the things that capitalism has stolen from Western society. We live in a world that condemns a desire for community, shuts down empathy, makes compassion a thing of the past, deletes third spaces, and punishes rest. We are in such a fast-paced world that the answer to everything is “drink more coffee” when what we really need is connection with others and permission to be human.



BLEACHED DREAMS

Claudia
Tena Guzman

8am first house
Hallway is cleaned then we turn to the kitchen
Orange juice on the floor and cereal scattered on the counters
The lady of the house sips her coffee and says nothing
Its routine
We go in, no hellos just clean
The smell of coffee swirls with the aroma of our *Fabuloso* spray
A splash of bleach for just in case
We sweep, we wipe, we scrub and we mop
Bathroom, living room and dining room
The lady of the house silently pries
Onto the second floor
We vacuum, we wipe, we scrub and we mop
All rooms, all bathrooms
The lady of the house one minute behind us
Running her finger on the rails, looking at the carpet
Don't smile at her kids
or acknowledge her husband
You're only there to clean
Make everything spotless
You're not there to be, let alone dream
It's routine

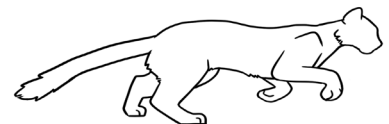
I know I don't cry enough
Because you do it for the both of us
I carry the ache
While you pour it out
Each tear heavy
With the burden of our father's mistakes
Even his pain

I don't cry enough
And you cry too much
Because you feel plenty
And I don't feel at all

It's an 'elder sister syndrome,' they said
Even so
Before you came
Before you opened your eyes to the world
In my mother's womb
You cried
While I waited
To protect you out here
While our mother did the best
To protect you in there

We're older now
Harsh words
Fashion and hair tips
And even punches
 have been exchanged
You still cry
I still swallow my pride
Wishing you wouldn't
That I can carry the burden for the both of us
But it's in your water nature
River flows of everything you feel
And it's in my fire nature
Burn to ashes or until there is no more
Someday, I'll let you see me cry.

FANY CRIES
Claudia
Tena Guzman



HEARD IT BEATING

Claudia
Tena Guzman

Heard it beating
Like a thunderstorm
And the tears
Poured on the cold surface
Of my sealed lips
Because I wouldn't speak

The quiet tension
Radiating lightning
And with every breath
The winds grew fierce
Pushing back
My heated mouth
From the things
I wanted to say

My face red as lava
My eyes fighting oceans
I unleashed it all
As I stepped down
And watch how my arrogance
Blazed through hurricanes

There are teardrops after the storm
And the sun shades the branches
Of the lingering winter
Between me
And my anxiety

I've heard of the colors and the greenery
Of the cheerful songs
And the songs of youth heartache
Of the food with *abuela*
and the never-ending tamales
Surrounded by family
And *cuentos* of *duendes*

That's a Mexico I didn't leave
I left the desert
The blazing hot and the heartless cold
Too harsh that my *abuelo*
became a heavy blanket
That I don't like to remember
My mother's fear
Of becoming another body, another number
And family that only gathered
For a few tamales
I left a forgotten Mexico
A forgotten desert where my name was already buried
Se llamaba Claudia
Ni una mas
But there are still many

Still, when I think of Mexico
I think of the colors
And the greenery
And I've sang the cheerful songs
And the ones of heartache in my youth
And I've told *cuentos* of the *duendes*
and ate endless tamales
But that's not my Mexico
Mine is the one no one talks about
The one I wish I could tell you about
But maybe *algun dia*
Asi lo sera

THE MEXICO THEY DON'T TELL YOU ABOUT

Claudia
Tena Guzman



Translation in Order of Appearance:

Abuela = Grandma

Cuentos = Tales

Duendes = Elves

Abuelo = Grandpa

Se llamaba Claudia = Her name is Claudia

Ni una mas = Not one more

Algun dia = Someday

Asi lo sera = That's how it'll be

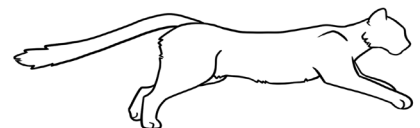
Drowning in an enormous wave
Of emotions
Of regret
Because I chose not to love myself
Enough to save myself
Enough to at least wear a life vest

I paddled with my life
Not fearing death
And now that I'm on the surface
I welcome it
But not with all these feelings
That were brought
Like uninvited guests

The water wasn't supposed to be
A reflection
But a
Purification
Of all the trauma I endured
All the hurt
My skin holds

I wasn't supposed to drown like this
Not by this wave
I was supposed to calmly descend
Like in my baptism
Promising myself to God for one last time

PURIFIED
Claudia
Tena Guzman



AMBIGUOUS LOSS

Libby Toman

Letting go of you is undoing Velcro
severing what was once ensnared
As it tears, it catches and clings
I cling
Walking into webs and wondering
In what world I wouldn't waste away
Holding fast to false hope
An imagined future that falls and fades
I fade
Always into sleep so sweet it reminds me of you
Yet with every morning that I wake
I taste blood, so sour under my tongue
And sorrowfully still I search for something
Anything
Perhaps a perfect patch to fix a fracture
Or a seam to stitch to heal a hole
You are a vapor not fully vanished, a mist
I miss

In the town of Mahler, there once lived a little mouse of a doctor named Doctor Calor. One day, Doctor Calor found himself atop a great tower, and called down to the townsfolk he needed a ladder. The crowds they did gather, the elderly they did blather; all patient for the white of Doctor Calor's pallor to splather over the flowers in front of the tower.

"Don't fall Doctor Calor!"

"Yes! Yes! Hold just another hour!"

Doctor Calor's hands started to ramble as the townsfolk continued to rabble. He yelled from his stoop that he is not aloof, and rather, a simple man atop a forced pageant stand. A hand then brushed the length of his whiskers, a gentle memory of love lost to whispers. Now the mouse is without a house, or so to speak. Guess the doctor's heart's sprung a leak!

"We're here with you Doctor Calor!"

"Yes! Yes! We'll send you love and praise in a shower!"

Doctor Calor looked down at the frown of a town and hid his disdain behind the feign of livened eyes. A loud knock in the tower's big clock incited some shock as it struck 12 o'clock, and the world stopped spinning. Doctor Calor looked at the ground, scoffed at the sound, kicked down a rock, and measured the top.

"About four seconds Doctor Calor!"

"Yes! Yes! Just four more seconds! You've made it past the hour!"

Doctor Calor then reached in his coat and pulled out his float, a tiny blast for his expired throttle and stolen gas. The mouse wrote a long note, soaked up his bloat, and soared high above the crowd.

"I fucking hate you all!" Doctor Calor shrieked as he fell.

The creatures they did hold as the little mouse did unfold.

Andrew Tyree
EMOTIONAL



And when he reached the bottom, the townsfolk found their Sodom and released
their blame for the stain left on the rotting, reddened flowers in front of the tower—
yet no one saw this coming.

“If only you had waited Doctor Calor!”

“Yes! Yes! We’re here with your ladder!”

When the lights come on,
only to illuminate the tawdry makeup
hiding your cold eyes
and the death dwelling within your soul,

Will you think of me?

When you find that the same light,
only provides its service for just a moment
as you kiss another man
and lie with his rough, callous hands,

Will you think of me?

You never did before,
so why expect such a gift now.

Perhaps you will lie.

Lie like you always have,
so shamelessly like your father,
I find that guilt binds us all
under the weight of its damning grip,

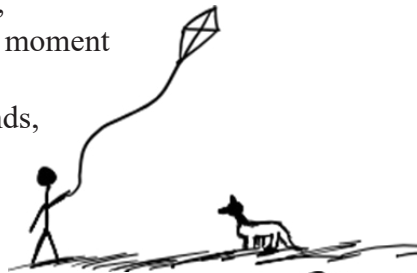
Perhaps you will lie.

Shame will balance the scales,
where my love could not,
for guilt is an omniscient goddess
that will haunt you until your end,

When will you find your regret?

Know that if you ever reach that treasure,
your sorrow will undoubtedly runneth over,
and leave you clawing to find an answer
that makes you inculpable of your misgivings.

Perhaps you will think of me then.



*Introspection is difficult
when the only voice you listen to
only says what you want to
hear.
Goodbye*

THE LAST PART OF MYSELF
Andrew Tyree



Yet you never did before,
so it would be foolish to expect such a gift now.

Maybe you will just lie again.

Hopeful is the morning sun
And fresh the scent upon the breeze
Upon this waking springtime morn
Refreshing to the heart at ease

Kettle warming on the stove
Quiet still is all the house
Perfect time for contemplation
Grass outside starting to sprout

Sounds of baby waking up
Giggles, grunts, and silly smiles
Thankful, restful, happy, home
Praise to God for this shalom

BRIGHT
Christopher Varga



HUMIDITY

Christopher Varga

“This humidity feels like the sea,”
she said to me.
And I agree.

A sea breeze in the mountain air.
Yet icicles upon my hair.
I feel aware.

There is no harbor waiting for me here.
No crashing ocean near.
No salty spray to hear.

Only frosty sands
ever blowing from the North.
Any icy desert sea.

The salty spray
of the mountain sea
beckons to me.

There are so many humid clouds.
I thought my head was in them.
But not now.

Now,
concrete, present, reality
is, to me, tranquility.

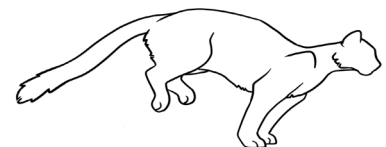
The mountain sea,
that cold humidity.

Construction noises fill the day
Cranking, squealing, hammering
Pestering metal, fleeing birds and deer
Then nature starts to shed a tear

Rain falls as wet dirt fills the air
Builders starting to retreat
The droning fades, dirt turns to mud
No longer sounds of building thuds

For one brief moment, nature wins
The rain is stronger than the sword
No industry here anymore
Only sweet nature's petrichor

NATURE'S TEARS
Christopher Varga



NIGHT WALK

Christopher Varga

All is still
The air is chill
The wind against the face

Blowing trees
Crunching leaves
A distant flagpole quakes

Somehow lambent
Green and red
Christmas lights aglow

Howling dogs
Croaking frogs
Misty breath dissolves

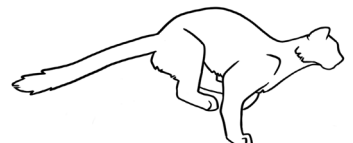
In the flow
Another block
A peaceful, quiet

Night walk

hope is such a fickle lover.
hope you like my gift.
hope you smile.
hope you never let me go.
this sours to,
hope you come back.
hope you apologize.
hope you pick me.
hope never leaves and that's the problem.
because I hope for more.



HOPE
Rin Westbay



NOI

Fiction



NON FICTION

CONTENT WARNINGS

Bertram, Tanner | *Great Grandma's Letter* | Death | p. 241

Bertram, Tanner | *A Heavy Heart* | Death | p. 242

Ross, Trinity | *The Invisible String: A Love Letter to Romance Novels* | Strong Language, Sexual Themes | pp. 246-255

Santiago-Smith, Syanna | *I Should Probably Talk About It* | Rape, Sexual Assault | pp. 256-257

The calf was born before sunrise, and my father, being the stoic man he was, said nothin' at first...

On our ranch, way back in the woods, I spent my childhood years working odd jobs alongside my father and helpin' my mother with the household chores. I was about ten years old, and it was early spring, my favorite time of year. Calving season!

I loved headin' out to the barn every morning to check on the mothering cows before I had to catch the bus to school. I knew each one by name, knew their tempers, too. Some sweet as syrup, others mean as snakes, but I loved 'em all. Seeing the new calves every spring was what made all this work worthwhile.

But between you and me, I'd have loved the work just the same, even if that weren't the case.

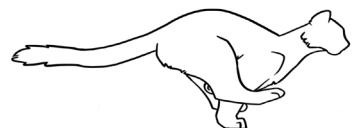
The smell of fresh hay in the air, the warm fur under my palm, and the way the cows' rough, wet tongues would lick cookie crumbs from my fingers. Ranch life was hard honest work, but to me, it was also livin'.

One spring mornin', when the air was crisp and the chill bit to your bones, one of our older cows, Hazel, started to calve. I woke to the sound of my father's boots crossin' the hardwood floor. He'd come in for coffee after spendin' hours in the barn with her. I rolled over and squinted at the glowin' red numbers of my alarm clock, 5:00 a.m.

I heard him open the cabinet, and the familiar sound of his coffee tin being set on the counter slowly stirred my mind. Sitting up, I rubbed the sleep from my eyes and stretched. Then, suddenly, my heart flipped with excitement. *Today might be the day!* I remembered my father tellin' me Hazel might have her calf soon.

I swung my legs over the side of my bed and quickly pulled on my worn jeans and socks. In a flash, I hurried to my bedroom door. With one of my boots still only half on, I yanked my plaid

A CALF NAMED CASH
Anonymous



jacket from its hook on the wall. Making my way downstairs, I was nearly out the front door when two strong arms lifted me up. *Dang, so close...*

“Hey!” I protested, twistin’ my head back to shoot my father with an indignant look.

“Shh,” my father whispered, smilin’ as he carried me back towards the kitchen. “You’ll wake your mother.”

“But I wanna see the calf ...” I whined, strugglin’ in his grip.

He laughed quietly and set me down on the barstool at our kitchen counter.

“It’s old Hazel, she ain’t even that far along yet.” he murmured as he walked back to the coffee pot.

I sat kickin’ my feet impatiently. I waited for what felt like forever as he leisurely made his cup of coffee. *I swear he was draggin’ it out on purpose.* Finally, thermos in hand, he nodded toward the door. I jumped down excitedly, followin’ him out onto the front porch.

As I stepped outside, I exhaled, and my breath clouded in the cool air. The early morning sunlight shone weakly over the horizon, makin’ the frost on the grass sparkle. We walked together toward the barn. The old door creaked as I pushed it open and made a dash for Hazel’s pen.

She lifted her head with a slow low before layin’ it down again. She sounded tired, and her sides heaved every few minutes. Straw clung to her damp fur and her nostrils flared with each short snort. I gave my father a concerned sideways glance as he came up behind me. He studied her for a long moment before settin’ his thermos down on a crate.

“Well,” he murmured evenly, “that don’t look too good...” His voice was calm as ever, and he bent down to assess her. The calf was comin’ feet first.

Two small hooves had appeared. My father worked with unshakable focus on easin’ the calf out, while I sat watchin’ and quietly frettin’. He squatted for some time, workin’ steadily and patiently, his arms buried up to the elbow. Finally, the calf slipped free and flopped into the straw. For a second, pride lit up my chest at

my father's fine work.

But then I saw it. Somethin' wasn't right. The calf was born... *wrong*. Now, standin' back, I could see its small body lying twisted in an unnatural way. My stomach tightened as its little legs lay bent in on themselves and it struggled to stand. It tried weakly to lift its head but couldn't manage more than a small quiver.

My father straightened up slowly. He didn't say much... He never said much, he just looked on. I glanced up at him with soft worry in my eyes.

"It won't last," he said quietly, as if he knew what I wanted to ask before I asked it.

But I knelt down in the straw anyway. I scooted closer as Hazel turned to lick the calf's little head. Her tongue swiped over its face in gentle, rhythmic strokes. I watched her for a time before timidly reachin' out my fingers to touch the calf's damp ears. They were soft and warm. That had to count for somethin', right? My father had always told me not to name animals we might lose. Said it made things harder if I got attached. I glanced back toward my father to be sure he wasn't lookin' before turning back to the calf. I cradled its small head in my hands and whispered a name to it under my breath. A quiet prayer, somethin' of its own, as if somebody calling it by name would make it stay.

My father and I walked back to the house together that day. Before school, I begged him to let us keep the calf, even if it wasn't the strongest or best lookin'. He told me not to worry and sent me off to the bus. My stomach was in knots all day until I got home. I rushed to the barn as soon as my boots hit the gravel driveway.

The calf was still there! I rushed to get a bottle from the shed and returned excitedly. Slowly, I knelt by it, liftin' its head, and held the bottle to its lips. The calf tried weakly to eat, and I felt hopeful.

My father had followed me out to the barn and watched in silence. When I returned to the barn that night, he helped me set a heatin' lamp for it and lay out blankets, but he never spoke about the future.

He just waited.

A few days later, I left for school as usual. The calf was still alive when I



checked on it. I gently pressed my forehead to its side and whispered soft praises. How good it was, how strong it was, and finally a soft goodbye before I ran to the bus.

That day, my father did the work alone. He chose a time when the barn was empty. He did what needed to be done, cleanly, quickly, the way a man learns to do necessary things.

When I came home later on, I ran to the barn. My boots stopped at the door. The stall was cleaned. The blankets were folded. The space felt bigger than I remembered. The sound of my father's footsteps had my head turning back toward the barn door.

He stood there; his stoic expression softened with fatherly care. He told me the truth, without details. He said he was sorry he hadn't waited. He held his arms open, and as I felt tears spill over my cheeks, a small whimper escaped my lips. My legs moved and before I knew it, I was pressin' my face into his chest. He held me close and my heart ached, but I realized he waited as long as he could.

That evening, we finished chores, washed up, and sat down for supper. I didn't eat much. After clearin' my plate, I walked outside and sat on the front porch swing, lookin' out at the sky. My father joined me a few minutes later, and we sat in comfortable silence. The sun set the same way it always did.

And the next mornin' I woke, the cattle needed feeding, the water troughs needed breakin'... Life went on.

But when I walked through the barn and passed the other new calves, I understood somethin' I hadn't before.

Not about death.

But about my father. About the kind of love he had. The kind of love that showed up in strong hands, the kind of love that wasn't loud, the kind of love that shouldered the hard things, so I didn't have to.

Cash didn't stay long in my life, but I loved him, about as much as my father loved me. Enough to know just what I needed, enough to know when it was time to let go.

One taste abroad of that golden *tostón* fresh out of the sizzling oil and I'm reminded of the island of enchantment where I grew up. *Wet and humid* is the first thing that comes to mind when I think of my Puerto Rico. You'd feel moist 90% of the time, sweating from the kind of exercise called "existing." Even at night, you'd feel wet as well but colder. No difference, though, once you get used to it. Have frizzy hair? Acne prone? This is not the place for you. Get ready to invest a lot in hair and face products to combat the moisture this island has year-round. You'd think feeling wet through the average 90-degree weather would help, but you'd be dead wrong. Somehow, moisture makes you feel the heat tenfold—insufferable. But as a local Puerto Rican, you'd be used to it if you can't afford air conditioning, which is true for the grand majority.

We get a slight break at night, where the temps go down to the 60's. Nothing too bad. Average low temperature of Colorado summers. There is no such thing as a silent night here, because the one thing that will always sing you to sleep is the *Coqui* frogs hidden in every nook and cranny of the island. It's a beautiful sound, though; it's what makes Puerto Rico so unique. The constellations seem so distant up in the sky, positioned differently if you were to compare them to their places in the Colorado sky. The majority of the population lives near sea level, so a noticeable scent would be the ocean's saltwater that accompanies the occasional breath of the sea. If you go to the neighborhoods, *los barrios y los sectores*, you'll smell rotting mangoes, papayas, or whatever fruit tree a *doña* planted years ago and simply forgot to harvest its bearings. It's easily bound to turn into a love-hate relationship, because even through decay, there are notes of fresh fruit scents among the putrid rotting. Factors that play a role in the enjoyability of such scents are time and population. Nevertheless, it's a nostalgic smell any homesick Puerto Rican raised in the outdoors would talk about.

The buildings, no matter how old, are very colorful. People want their houses to stand out by using the most vibrant colors imaginable. They even get their gates to match (and yes, it is standard for our houses to have gates). Look to the hills and mountains where houses sit: the first thing you will notice is the colors. It's like looking at a bush of multicolored berries; straight out of a fairy tale. Each house tells a story, with shades of turquoise, coral pink, lime green, or sunshine yellow representing joy,

MI PATRIA [TOSTONE PART II]

Gianelly
Ayala-Rodríguez



resilience, and a deep connection to the natural yet chaotic beauty surrounding them. Even the simplest homes are transformed into works of art, celebrating individuality while creating a breathtaking collective harmony. As the sunlight shifts throughout the day, the colors seem to dance and glow, making the entire landscape feel alive. It's as if the hills themselves are singing with happiness, inviting anyone passing by to join in the celebration. A statement almost immortal, withstanding hurricanes and thunderclouds that give the locals hope and a place to look up to and breathe after the tragedy.

No alarm? No problem. I can guarantee that the first sound you'll wake up to is the roars of the motorcycle- and 4-wheeler-riders who believe morning time is the best time to ride to avoid the harsh noon sun. That, or at night on weekends, because they want to be considerate and assume most people don't work on weekends, so they should tolerate having their houses shaken by the roaring sounds. A foreigner would immediately complain, but it's normal for us. It's really nothing in comparison to the start and end of a school year, when all the graduating high school students gather together at 4 AM to officially celebrate their senior title through an *entrada* (entrance) and a *salida* (exit), where everyone with cars drives around the town with giant, barrier breaking speakers blasting whatever music was trending during the time (reggaeton took the crown every single time), following a *tumbacoco* (its literal translation being "coconut overthrewer"), a truck with one of the biggest speakers you've ever seen, usually seen during election time to blast campaign ads and reminders down the roads across the town. There was no way of sleeping through this, no matter how deep a sleeper you are, so you might as well bundle up and go outside to your balcony to cheer on the future working class.

Life is something else in Puerto Rico. You might think many things you witness are illegal, because they are in the United States. Parties 24/7, houses and cars blasting music 'round the clock. Although I love the peaceful life and beautiful sights of colorful Colorado, these things, seen as ridiculous and out of place to outsiders, are what make this island so lively and different. This is home; my childhood, the place where I first began to experience life. I wouldn't change my roots for anything in the world. I am lured back to the *tostones* that forever remain in my heart, a simple act that shows never-ending, genuine love. A dish that holds a lifetime worth of memories behind it every time it crosses my mind. Despite any cracks and flaws I point out, my soul will forever sing out one song to remind me...

Yo soy Boricua, aunque naciera en la luna.

*Content Warning

Every year since I was five, I would receive a birthday letter from Great Grandma St. George with the usual well wishes of love and celebration, along with \$20. The money was always the exciting part because I could buy snacks at school or add more money to my little wallet of savings. I had saved \$100 at this point, and my dad even started to give us an allowance for doing chores!

I was now eleven and on August 2nd, same as every year, Great Grandma St. George's letter came. This time, it only read: "Happy Birthday Tanner!"

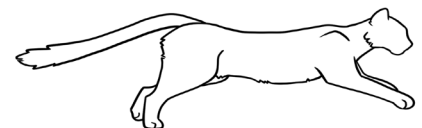
I scanned the letter for more, but besides the tacky birthday message the card contained, her only words were, "Happy Birthday Tanner!"

She was ninety this year, and I had heard my dad on a few phone calls with Papa Bertram about her health over the past few months. She was in hospice care now, and we had just gone to see her in July. Great Grandma was getting older, but she was the same tough lady she always was. I always remember her dark red hair framing her tough smile, which carried so much warmth and love. With just one glance, you would know you're leaving her house with a hot meal and a \$2 bill she always carried in her purse. She carried that same look when we saw her in July, and she even remembered a small conversation we had about her favorite president. My favorite was Teddy Roosevelt; she said her favorite was Richard Nixon. I couldn't for the life of me understand why my mom was so upset when we saw her; she was still the same strong lady she always was.

My dad's phone calls with his dad carried a weight with them, talking like something inevitable was to happen. I couldn't understand, and nobody else seemed to either. Her words in that birthday letter carried the same weight that my dad's did, and I couldn't shake the feeling that I was missing something. "Happy Birthday Tanner" meant a whole lot more than \$20 this year, I decided.

"Happy Birthday Tanner" meant everything when I heard softened cries from my dad's bedroom two weeks later.

*Death



*Content Warning

Why is my heart heavy?

I tossed and turned, back and forth. *No, my shoulder feels uncomfortable there, my neck is too craned here, I can't breathe facedown, the pillow's too hot on that side, why does my leg keep itching in the same spot... Fine! I'll get out of bed.* The ladder whirred and strained as I climbed out of my bunk bed, trying not to wake my brother. As I hit the floor, the soft carpet luckily muffled my fall. *Whew, he didn't hear me; he always gets annoyed when I wake him up.*

Why is my heart heavy?

Romeo was asleep in the hallway, head resting on that fancy new bed we got him, snoring as loud as possible. *Man, he was loud this morning.* I finally made my way to the bathroom, drinking some sink water to hopefully clear that weird feeling I had. I folded down the toilet seat and sat for a second, letting the noises of the house fill me.

Clock ticking, Romeo snoring, birds chirping from our pine tree, the quiet breeze from the fan, the vent carrying the hushed voice of my dad. *What was he saying?*

“Did she go in her sleep? Good, that’s good. I’m glad she’s alri...”

His voice broke at this point, a quiet cry taking us both.

My heart is heavy.

A HEAVY HEART*

Tanner Bertram

*Death

What if I told you that music once came loaded on small, plastic rectangles full of magnetic audio, and in order to listen to it, you had to slot it into a speaker system? If you know what I'm talking about—hi, how are your knees? If you don't, allow me to share my nostalgia with you. However, before I can dial back our experience into longing for the technology of the past, we need to take a moment to acknowledge the immediacy of the present.

Instant gratification is the pinnacle of our society. Notifications constantly *ding*, visual media can be consumed on demand, and data is practically unlimited. Nearly everyone holds the proverbial promise of everything in the palm of their hand, accessible twenty-four seven via our phones, tablets, computers, televisions, and even our cars. But it wasn't always that way. Once upon a time, the way we listened to music was reliant on intention rather than inattentiveness.

Once housed in thick cases that popped open with a *snap*, the cassette tape was a four inch by two-and-a-half-inch fragile chunk of plastic containing two wheels wound with thin magnetic tape that contained the soundtrack to my life. I am rarely without music playing in the background—honestly, I don't think I'd mind if my life was a musical—and with streaming services like Spotify, YouTube, and Pandora, access to music is practically endless. While I do love my Spotify playlists and wouldn't give them up for the world, I often find myself longing for something more tangible.

My first cassette tape was Shania Twain's *Come On Over* album, handed down to me by my mother along with her old cassette player. She taught me how to carefully rewind the tapes with a pencil, how to avoid them with a magnet or risk losing the music burned into the tape, and how some tapes required switching from side A to side B to listen to the whole album. I used to load them into my cassette player, one right after the other, relishing the soft *click* of the tape seating itself in the deck, the hum of the speakers I turned up way too loud, and the faint scratch of plastic against plastic as the wheels began to turn. These sounds ingrained themselves into the very foundations of my childhood, something so familiar, yet now so distant.

River Hampton
REWIND REQUIRED



Cassette tapes exist in the liminal space between personal intimacy and technological advancement. Vinyl records demanded a stationary listening experience. Radio offered something slightly more portable, but the playlist was dictated by the radio DJ. Later, compact disks offered us something similar to, but smaller than, vinyl records. However, there was something in between these inventions... something that transformed how we consumed music: the cassette tape. This was truly the first personal, portable music experience. One tape could be carried in your pocket, shared with friends, rewound, recorded over, and duplicated. Music was no longer a fixed experience. It could travel with you, and listening became something you did, not something that happened around you. This reshaped the way music was consumed and valued.

Unlike digital streaming now, cassette tapes required patience from the listener; songs couldn't be skipped instantly, albums were listened to in the order the band initially planned, and the act of rewinding required time and attention. And unlike streaming, cassettes were imperfect. The tape could warp, the sound could be muffled, and the medium often expressed itself with a faint static hiss. This fallible mechanical effect, however, felt very human, resisting the illusion of perfection that today's digital audio promises and demands.

What I miss the most is the intentionality that cassette tapes fostered. Mixtapes—the vintage equivalent to a Spotify playlist—were a labor of love. Choosing songs and arranging the order, timing the recording from the radio just right, hand-writing the tracklist on the label or on a card inserted into the case... it was expressively intimate. Cassettes turned music into a language of connection, passed from person to person with meaning encoded not only in the songs, but in the effort behind them. Receiving a mixtape meant you were receiving someone's time, thought, and emotions in an audible format.

The resurgence of cassette tapes over the last few years hints at a longing for something that rests on the fringes of our digital world—tangibility. And while cassettes aren't the sturdiest of vintage items, their fragile nature is part of what makes them *real*. A playlist on Spotify exists wherever the app is installed, and zero extra care from the listener is placed in maintaining it, whereas cassettes require mindfulness to keep them alive. Holding a cassette is a reminder that listening once required commitment, deepening the experience and bringing people together.

Holding a cassette now feels like holding a piece of my soul; both fragile

and strangely alive, carrying the energy of every person who listened, sang along, and danced to the music stored within. In this constantly moving world, where sound is weightless and fleeting, cassette tapes endure as tangible evidence of intention. They remind us not to just *hear* the music, but to truly *listen* to it, to let it spool slowly through our fingers. Cassettes ask us to remember that, sometimes, what we long for isn't just sound itself, but the imperfections that connect us to it.



*Content Warning

“And that was the moment I realized: when the world felt dark and scary, love could whisk you off to go dancing; laughter could take some of the pain away; beauty could punch holes in your fear. I decided then that my life would be full of all three... That was what I’d always loved about reading, what had driven me to write in the first place. That feeling that a new world was being spun like a spiderweb around you and you couldn’t move until the whole thing had revealed itself to you.”

—Emily Henry, *Beach Read*

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I have been a reader my entire life. Even before I could follow the words on the pages, I would sit for hours with my thick, cardboard picture books and escape into the world of imagination. I would lay with my head in my mother’s lap as she ran her fingers through my long, unbrushed blonde hair and read aloud from *Pinocchio* or *Cinderella*. I would twirl around in colorful skirts made of tulle with mismatched socks on as I listened to *The Chronicles of Narnia* books-on-tape. I was a dreamer, an eccentric, and nothing made me happier than books. I was president of my very own club, tearing through book after book, always hunting through the library for my newest inspiration. I still feel it, that burning passion I felt as a girl, each time I find myself lost between the pages, enraptured in the lines. It feels like sunshine on my face, butterflies in my stomach. Books have always carried insurmountable magic for me, and the best kind of all? Romance.

I guess I’ve always been an idealist, an optimist. A hopeless romantic. With each heroic prince rescuing his princess and every girl getting swept off her feet, my mind soared and my cheeks burned. I loved love. I dreamed of a life like that, of love like that. So, as I grew older, my love for the romance genre stayed with me. I graduated from middle reader fantasy with a romantic subplot, to vampire romance with fade-to-black scenes leaving me wanting to

*Strong Language, Sexual Themes

know more, then finally to stand-alone rom-coms that left nothing to the imagination. No matter the season of life, I could always find a romance novel to brighten my day, to sweep me off into another world when mine seemed bleak.

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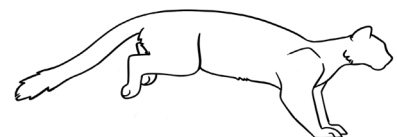
“Maybe that’s why we as a species love stories so much. All those chances for do-overs, opportunities to live the lives we’ll never have.”

—Holly Black, *The Cruel Prince*

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The romance genre first emerged in the early 1800s. It was a time in which men and women were wholly divided in their opportunities, allowances, and positions. Men could go out into the social world; they worked, ran the political sphere, had lives outside the four walls of their home. Women were expected [read: forced] to stay at home to cook, clean, and take care of the children. They existed purely in a domestic function and as an accessory to men. The very first acknowledged ‘romance’ book was written by a man about a woman attempting to stave off the advances of a wealthy man trying to take her virginity. As you might guess, there was not a whole lot of appeal to the female population with those types of themes. As more years went by, however, more novels centering around actual relationships, and female main characters, appeared. In 1811, Jane Austen published a brand-new kind of story, her debut novel: *Sense and Sensibility*. At the time, she simply authored her novels as “A Lady,” ushering in a whole new era of novels in which women were the focus. The Jane Austen era, as it is affectionately referred to, welcomed dozens of new authors and romance classics, such as Emily Bronte (*Wuthering Heights*), Luisa May Alcott (*Little Women*), and Charlotte Bronte (*Jane Eyre*). Women, for the very first time, were being catered to in the publishing sphere, and they wasted no time devouring the books. Sales soared as more and more authors began to capitalize on the opportunities that romance provided. These books gave women of this time the ability to live vicariously, to experience things they would never have had the ability to otherwise. Romance had made a name for itself in history by being primarily written by women, about women, and for women.

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“Books were, and always would be, something a little magic and something to respect.”

—Sally Thorne, *The Hating Game*

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As my life expanded, so did my choices in literature. While I still reached for a light-hearted 200-page romance occasionally, I found myself looking for more complex and robust stories. I thought I’d need to go to the classics, or realistic fiction, to find these hard topics, the real hard hitters. I figured romance was too light a topic, not broad enough to hold this level of merit. After all, that idea was drilled into my head for years.

In my freshman year of college, I began working at the library. While I did usually have some shelving to complete or books to catalog, a lot of my job was just sitting at a desk, waiting for customers to ask me for help. That meant I had a lot of down time to explore the shelves, and to read. I picked up books from every genre, from fantasy to mystery to classical literature. I loved each one in a different way, but just like when I was a kid, I always found myself drawn to stories where someone was falling in love. I tried to stay away from romance, wanting to “broaden my horizons,” and yet somehow, I would find myself back in it time after time. I can still remember the day I sat at the front desk of the library with tears streaming down my eyes when the young adult novel I was reading told the story of two unexpected teenagers struggling to make sense of a cruel world, falling in love despite it all, only to be ripped apart by suicide. Or the time I read about two people from Scotland going away to university and struggling to find out who they are both together and separately, seeing myself reflected in the pages so vividly. Or when I first discovered that a close friend of mine had also read the romantasy (romantic-fantasy) series I had, and the pure elated joy I felt in being able to talk about how much I loved it. I feel like there was an invisible string between me and the romance genre. We have always been pulled together; no matter how far away I drift, it always pulls me back in.

The very first time I heard the terms “harlequin” and “bodice ripper,” I was sitting in my parent’s kitchen, sipping a cup of coffee with my latest read, *Love on the Brain* by Ali Hazelwood. She writes these amazing books about women working in the STEM fields, being badasses, overcoming sexism, accomplishing their dreams, struggling with identity and meaning, and discovering love alongside

it all. I love these books. I love imagining that I too can kick ass and take names, yet still be soft and romantic and lovable. My dad walked into the kitchen to make his own coffee and glanced at my book from behind me.

“Another romance?” he questioned.

“Yep. She’s about to realize that the guy she thought was working against her has actually been her secret advocate all along and has loved her since they met years ago.”

“Jeez. So when I thought you were being all intellectual, reading all the time, you’ve really just been reading these... harlequin romances.”

“What does that even mean?” I questioned him.

“You know, like the bodice rippers genre. All they’re about is some silly relationship, all surface level, girls lusting for dudes with big muscles.”

I was dumbfounded. For one, I’d never heard those terms and was shocked that was what people assumed all romance was about. Secondly, I was a little hurt that my dad suddenly thought that if I was reading romance, I wasn’t “intellectual,” that my books were a joke to him, and by extension, so was I, in a way.

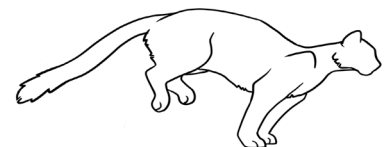
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“It is a truth universally acknowledged that a community of women trying to mind their own business must be in want of a random man’s opinion.”

—Ali Hazelwood, *Love on the Brain*

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The term “harlequin romance” originates from one of the most prominent names in publishing, Harlequin Enterprises. They were founded in 1949 by Richard Bonnycastle. They were a small publishing house dealing mostly in reprints, everything from mysteries to cookbooks. In 1957, Richard’s wife, Mary Bonnycastle, noticed how well their romances were selling and proposed that they focus on them. She helped negotiate a deal with British publishers Mills & Boon, who had been in the romance business for decades, and together, the two



houses began to build their empire. Mrs. Bonnycastle read and edited the books and recommended which genres they should focus on. They decided to take their advertising and products to female-centered areas, selling books in supermarkets and corner stores, putting ads in Kotex boxes and Tide containers.

Writing for *The New York Times Magazine*, Author Kelly Faircloth argues that these ads and marketing strategies, while undeniably successful, were part of the reason Harlequin quickly became a punchline to other publishers and amongst literary circles. “They knew they were selling to women, and they chased women’s dollars without embarrassment or apology,” writes Faircloth. “And let’s face it, being associated with women is often the shortest route to being dismissed in the broader culture as fundamentally unserious.” It’s often said that harlequin romances are lacking in substance and center solely on a hapless woman who becomes swept away by a mysterious man. While it’s true that harlequins in this era (1960s–1980s) typically stuck to a formula, it is because they knew their demographic. Faircloth, when discussing the appeal of harlequins and why they sold so well, stated, “Harlequin promised consistently entertaining books you could read in a couple of hours, clearly packaged, available for purchase without so much as driving fifteen minutes out of your way. Imagine you’re a woman with three kids and maybe a part-time job, on a budget that’s far from unlimited, and think about the power of that promise.” The publishing house knew that there was a group of women out there, looking for an easy escape, some simple fun, that would buy these books time and time again. Yet, because these books are targeted at this demographic, they are deemed a punchline by those who find themselves too ‘dignified’ for such a genre.

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“Women, they have minds, and they have souls, as well as just hearts. And they’ve got ambition, and they’ve got talent, as well as just beauty.”

—Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women*

~

I started college as a nursing major. When I was in my senior year of high school, I contemplated a lot of life paths. I knew my all-time favorite subject was English, and I thrived in that class above all others. My favorite teacher, Mr. Rupp, made books and essays and writing so *fun*. I looked forward to those classes every day, and my grades reflected it. When asked what I thought I wanted to do with my

life, I responded with, “Maybe something with English? I really love books.” The responses were usually the same, though.

“Oh, English is pretty much a useless degree.”

“There are no job opportunities in the publishing field.”

“Unless you’re going to be a teacher, there is no point to that.”

To say I was discouraged would be an understatement. I had found this thing, something that I loved and was good at, that no one seemed to take seriously. Maybe everyone was right. If I wanted to go into publishing, I would probably have to fight tooth and nail, make myself okay with earning very little money, and more than likely never get to work on the type of books I actually enjoy reading. So, I re-evaluated. Come college application time, I needed to pick something normal, acceptable, and realistic. I went with nursing. Within the first two months of my fall semester freshman year, I knew I wasn’t cut out for it. I was flunking out of anatomy, barely scraping by in chemistry. Every week when I called my mom, I’d cry or complain about how hard it was and how miserable I was. Then, I’d talk for 20 minutes about how amazing my English course was, and how interesting my latest book from the library was. By the tenth iteration of nearly the same phone call, I started putting together some of the dots.

“Mom... what would you say if I wanted to switch my major to English?”

“I’d say it’s about damn time.”

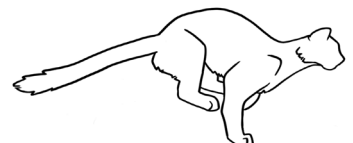
There was that invisible string again.

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“Prejudices, it is well known, are most difficult to eradicate from the heart whose soil has never been loosened or fertilized by education: they grow there, firm as weeds among stones.”

—Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*

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Romance today has surpassed the formulaic nature of its past and moved on to new heights. Strong female characters with development that pushes standards, stories of people from diverse backgrounds, plotlines of growth and learning that are as essential to the story as the romantic aspects. All this and more have helped bring the genre from simply being light, easy reads to profound, deeply heartfelt reading experiences not just for one kind of woman, but for anyone and everyone. Even so, romance is treated as something to be made fun of. Instead of celebrating a genre created by women that promotes them and creates safe spaces for them, they are marginalized and mocked.

In September 2017, *The New York Times Book Review* released a ‘romance roundup’ cover, dedicated to book reviews and recommendations within the genre. In response, they got some extreme reactions. One woman wrote in the following:

“Of all the choices of books to review at this time, you pick romances. If I were interested in this genre of writing I would subscribe to the Harlequin or Reader Service websites. I thought maybe to garner some intellectual discourse about books with some relevance to the cultural time we live in... but no. Are you really in New York? Book Review choices are pathetically lackluster. I hope you will improve. Give us fiction, nonfiction, poetry or biography, but spare us the bodice rippers of romances.”

Even amongst women, romance often isn’t taken seriously. Romantic movies are marketed to women alone, leading them to often perform worse at the box office than other genres. Artists like Taylor Swift, who make music about love and romance are deemed redundant and annoying, while a man singing about the same things is said to be a visionary and a leader in music. In every form of media, women who enjoy love and romance are looked down upon. “No other genre has to defend itself as much as we do,” says Leah Koch in an interview with *LA Times* journalist Agatha French. Koch is the co-founder of The Ripped Boddice, a romance-only bookstore in Brooklyn, New York. Leah and her sister, Bea, started their bookstore when they began to notice this stigma in the bookish community. “That’s the main thing that motivated us to open the store. You walk into a bookstore and you ask where the romance section is and they don’t have one. Pretty much every independent bookstore in LA doesn’t have a romance section.” It seems as though the genre as a whole has been excluded from any and all circles of literature that want to deem themselves as serious or intellectual. There is this common line of thought, this stereotype that penetrates its way into popular opinion that romance isn’t to be taken seriously, it’s unrealistic, and it’s foolish.

Yet, if you take the time to read it, you can see it taking on every facet of serious, important themes and discussions. Abuse, alcoholism, divorce, adultery, drug addiction, suicide, OCD, miscarriage, and more are all topics I have encountered while reading a romance novel. You encounter it all, because at the end of the day, romance's main goal is to prove that each and every person deserves love and happiness, and to show you that it is possible.

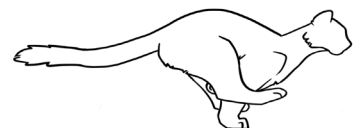
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“If you swapped out all my Jessicas for Johns, do you know what you’d get? Fiction. Just fiction. Ready and willing to be read by anyone, but somehow by being a woman who writes about women, I’ve eliminated half the Earth’s population from my potential readers, and you know what? I don’t feel ashamed of that. I feel pissed.”

—Emily Henry, *Beach Read*

~

I am an avid re-reader. When I find a book that I love, for whatever reason, I will read it over and over again, never once getting bored. I will buy countless copies, one to display, one to mark up and annotate, one to give to a friend if they’re ever looking for a recommendation, one because it’s a special edition. Currently, I own four different copies of *Pride and Prejudice*, two copies of *Normal People*, three copies of *Beach Read*, and at least three sets of the *Harry Potter* series. Different books, at different points in my life, jump out at me, all for different reasons. *Harry Potter* defined my childhood; it was the book I spent countless nights far past bedtime reading by flashlight. *Pride and Prejudice* was my very first attempt at classical literature, with a love story that makes my heart swell with longing every time. *Beach Read* was the first book I read by my favorite romance writer, Emily Henry, who made me want to write romance the way she does, to write women the way she does. *Normal People* was the first romance book I read that talked about mental illness, which seemed to peer into my very soul as I read it. These books changed me, redirected the trajectory of my life, and set me upon a new path to be where I am today. Every time I go to re-read one of these books, I’m brought back in time to who I used to be, to what I felt all that time ago. All these authors, all these women, found a way to speak to me. I think that is the reasoning behind why I want to work as a romance novel publisher. I want to find those kinds of books, the re-reading kind. The ones that transport you, transcend



time and space, that have the power to change someone. That's what I've been able to find in the pages of my favorite books. I want to keep doing that, forever.

~

“Life offers up these moments of joy despite everything,”

—Sally Rooney, *Normal People*

~

The reasoning behind why we as a society are so reluctant to accept romance as a valid, intellectually stimulating, worthwhile genre could be a million different things. It could be because we don't view romantic relationships to be as essential as we once did. It may be because of how 'unrealistic' some of them are, how high the standards are set. It might be due to our ingrained negative association with female pleasure. Likely, it is a combination of all these things. There are hundreds of reasons why people don't want to take this genre as seriously as others, but, more often than not, it circles back to the fact that it's all about women. The romance genre is designed to cater to women, to appeal to women, to focus predominantly on women. This is something that has never gone over well. As a gender, we've had to fight, protest, petition, march, *never stop fighting* for our rights. Feminists received pushback at every stage of this fight, in the form of governmental mandates or bills being passed, unequal pay and compensation, inadequate opportunities or admissions, and more, worse things I don't feel comfortable writing out.

Feminism is a part of the history of the world. It is still something that is somehow up for discussion, judgments still being passed on everything we do, our rights still somehow up for debate after centuries *of* debate. Feminism today can be seen as a dirty word. It has a negative connotation, an association with aggression and anger, a perceived connection to 'man-hating.' Many women don't want to associate themselves with the term due to these reasons. It changed, at some point, from being about wanting equality to being about wanting power. At least, that's what I've heard people say.

To me, feminism is my permanent state of being. I could not be who I am without the feminists of the past, and it would be a disrespect to them to not claim myself as a part of them, a disregard to my future self to not fight for her in every

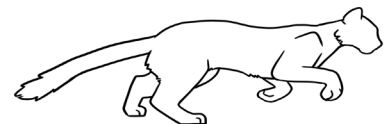
way I can. It isn't about getting ahead or getting even for me. It's about deserving respect, love, and peace.

I know that romance novels are pretty low on the totem pole of important feminist issues. The way I see it, though, is that every single thing that is worthwhile to someone out there deserves to be fought for. Romance is worthwhile to me. I dream about a day when I can call myself a romance novel enthusiast and not be questioned as to why not a different genre, a worthier genre? A day when I can sit at my kitchen table with my rom-com book in peace, not in heartache. Maybe I will never see my dream actualized, but I will never stop reading romance, and never stop working towards my dream. The invisible string will never stop pulling on my heart.

~

“Nothing lasts forever. Not the good things, not the bad. So just find what makes you happy, and do it for as long as you can.”

—Ashley Poston, *The Seven Year Slip*



*Content Warning

I SHOULD PROBABLY TALK ABOUT IT*

Syanna
Santiago-Smith

Something pretty bad happened to me when I was 15. One of my oldest, closest friends—the only person who knows—thinks I’m one of the strongest people he knows, because in his eyes, I’ve gone through hell and back. Most of the time, I forget why.

But other times, I become painfully aware that I’m alive for the stupidest reasons. When someone grabs my arm too tight, or when the January wind brushes my shoulders just enough to send a chill up my spine, I go back to being the scared 15-year-old I was that night.

Every time I go home, his house still casts a deep shadow down my street. It still makes me shudder, just like it did when I felt a weathered hand well over twice my age slide down my leg as I sunk into the passenger’s seat.

Why did I ignore the knots in my stomach? I knew something was off, I should’ve known it when my “well-developed figure” became the topic of conversation, but what was I supposed to say? That I didn’t feel safe?

I froze in fear, thinking to myself, “This isn’t happening, there’s no way, I just needed a ride home from school.” My eyes welled up with tears and I held my breath, terrified of what was going to happen next. That’s as far as it went that time. After that, I wasn’t as lucky.

Floating outside of my body, my consciousness following two steps behind, I was so angry and disgusted with myself. I could’ve fought harder, screamed, bit, kicked, done anything else, but I was terrified and half his size.

It probably took me 20 showers to wash off the lingering smell of cigarettes I swore soaked into my skin. I curled up in bed, clutching my knees close to my chest, hoping to find some comfort, but all I was met with was the deafening silence of knowing that nothing would be the same.

*Rape, Sexual Assault

I don't really talk about what happened to me. I probably should, but now they're just heavy accusations well beyond the statute of limitations. I know that I can't change what happened, but I'm not sure how to move on from here.

I'm 23 now, still not even half the age he was when I was 15, and I've lived a lot of life since then. It's not exactly an easy conversation to have, and I don't want people to worry about me. Just give me some grace and believe my story.



IN THE NAME OF FIRST LOVES

Rhianna
Smith-Burns

I suppose this story starts in October of my eighth-grade year—even though years later we would agree eighth grade doesn’t count.

I met him in US History. He sat behind me, but I didn’t really notice him for a week or two. Sure, he was cute, but I was there to learn—not fall in love. I ignored his dark hair and goofy smile until he started to fall asleep in class. I was appalled. Falling asleep in class meant missing notes, which would only lead to failing the test and probably the whole class. So, I woke him up every time the lecture slide changed. He would wake up, grunt, and jot down a few words with his eyes half open.

In December, he added me on Snapchat. I was taking a seat at my sister’s basketball game when my phone buzzed against my thigh. My heart sped up, and my breath quickened as I read the notification: Landon added you. I couldn’t decide whether to smile or slap some sense into myself.

We started talking every day. We learned each other’s favorite animals, seasons, colors—his purple, mine orange—and every other typical thing. He learned about my tween obsessions with Harry Potter and One Direction, and I learned about how much he valued training and kickboxing. I would stay up late to text him back, and I timed getting my silverware at lunch so I’d “run into him.”

I started watching *The Umbrella Academy*—his recommendation. I would watch an episode and talk with him about it the next day, asking questions I knew he’d never answer for the risk of spoiling it. We watched episodes together on FaceTime and habitually paused and rewind the TV in the battle against poor internet service.

March brought a new seating chart, and he moved catty-corner behind me. That’s when he started throwing erasers at me. He timed the throw so he was ready whenever the teacher turned his back. I would turn and give him my best stink eye as he smirked at me, his dimple pronounced against his tan skin.

One day after basketball, my sister came home with news for

me. “Delicia said Landon likes you.”

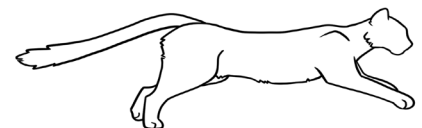
“Really? How does she know?”

“She said she can just tell.” I smiled as my cheeks heated up. We started dating in May.

The next three months brought a breakup and a second relationship—a pattern that continued throughout high school. We dated for four months our freshman year, another four our sophomore year, and in junior year we were “unofficially-official” for about two months. We were friends through the breakups and at the core of our relationships. He was my pillar when I struggled to eat and, during my parents’ divorce, when I dealt with a sporadically absent father. I was his shoulder when he began to splinter from pressure and when another girl continuously broke his heart. We shared watermelon gum, late-night FaceTime calls, and spent hours creating Minecraft worlds together. He built houses, barns, boating docks, and anything else my heart desired while I domesticated ocelots, tilled paths, and decorated with flowers. I would take extra care to place an orange flower next to his bed and a purple one next to mine, reminders of one another. We introduced each other to new shows and learned about each other’s childhoods. We talked about religion and whether we believed in Heaven and Hell.

Simultaneously, I was falling apart in love. My heart yearned for someone I wasn’t sure even existed. We were great friends, but our relationships only seemed to fail. There was always something—or someone—holding him back. I watched his eyes look over my head as someone prettier passed. I watched as his texts shortened, and my calls went unanswered. I remember how I used to imagine his eyes softening under my gaze until he reminded me of a young deer who didn’t know any better. I would smile softly to myself and bask in his fictionalized love. Each good moment washed away any bad emotion he made me feel as my walls and intuition silently collapsed. I ignored my gut when it told me he was devoting his attention to a different girl. I ignored my knuckles turning white as I held onto the rope he dragged behind him. I would not allow my heart to break until I heard, “This isn’t working.” I spent long nights sobbing myself to sleep, wondering why. Why me? Was I the problem? Why her? Why, why, why? I still struggle to pinpoint when things first began to fall apart. Sometimes, when the night is dark and my mind is bright, I start to think maybe things between us were destined to be cracked. Never easy, always work.

In our junior year of high school, I ended our budding relationship and—eventually—our friendship. I thought I would feel relieved and empowered because



I'd left the boy who had cut me down and rewired my brain. I chose to leave. I wasn't left. Wasn't that supposed to feel good? I thought it would, but I'd also lost my closest friend and the only boy I'd ever loved. Kicking him out of my life hurt just as bad as keeping him in it, so I reached out the summer before our senior year. I hoped there was something salvageable because—when push came to shove—I missed my friend.

It was a long road back to us. We hardly trusted each other anymore. We spent countless hours talking and trying to understand each other's perspectives, but we struggled. Could he forgive me for leaving? Could I forgive him for hurting me? The friendship progressed slowly. At first, we only texted before and after school. Then, we began talking during passing periods and partnering up in class. Eventually, the late-night FaceTime calls returned, and we attended homecoming together (as friends).

When the summer before college rolled around, we started dating once more. It was different than before—better. We had been wrapped together since the beginning of high school. Our identities overlapped until we had become a package deal no one wanted. The time apart gave each of us a chance to grow into ourselves and mature. I gained self-confidence, and he began discovering what he wanted from the world. We knew who we were as individuals, so we could share our individual lives rather than pieces of the same one. We laughed as we poked fun at one another and visited Five Below for the fourth time that week. We raced against a 2 a.m. curfew, pushing off my departure until 1:56. We had our first Halloween, Thanksgiving, and Christmas together and took the time to build a relationship with each other's families. I screamed in support at each of his fights, and he stayed on the phone when I couldn't stand to be alone. We spent cold days napping on his living room couch and watching movies.

“What do you want to watch?” I shouted from the couch during one cold, slow day.

No reply. I waited for a few moments, readjusting my blanket.

The steady sound of raindrops against the window was broken by the sound of the bathroom door opening, “Sorry, did you say something?” he asked, walking towards me.

“What do you want to watch?”

He shrugged as he sat down, his skin brushing against mine. “I don't know.

What do you want to watch?"

I threw the blanket over his legs and settled into his chest. "I dunno," I replied, setting the remote in his lap before wrapping my arm around the front of his torso. I felt his lips press against the top of my head. My stomach flared with butterflies as I squeezed his torso and pressed my cheek into his chest. He lifted his arm and placed it around my body, outlining my waist with the crook of his elbow.

"Baby, can we just throw on *The Office* and take a nap?" I tightened the blanket around my chin. "I'm tired," I added, tilting my head to look up at him.

He looked down at me, and the glow of the television illuminated half of his face. Our eyes locked, and a smile spread slowly across my face, turning the edges of my lips downwards. His head tilted down ever-so-slightly, signifying his resignation. "Yes, we can take a nap."

"Yay!" I quietly exclaimed. He laid down, leaving enough space for me to fit between him and the edge of the couch, and lifted the blanket, beckoning me under. I leaned down to kiss his forehead before settling under the blanket and into his body. We both sighed deeply, exhaling the stresses of the week. "Sleep well, beb," I whispered.

"Sleep well, bebs," he whispered back.

No matter how happy those days were, our past cast a shadow that only darkened with time. I struggled to trust him. My fingers twitched each time he left his phone with me, and I expected disappointment at every turn. My patience waned until I was quick to irritation and petty arguments. We were happy, but did that necessarily mean we were healthy? After a long discussion, we decided no, we weren't healthy anymore.

It was a cold night, so I was bundled into my coat. The hum of the heat echoed in my ears and flooded my brain, melting my thoughts into a whirlpool of emotion. We spent about an hour in my car parked outside a random church near his house.

"But what if it's meant to be us?" I whispered, my knees clutched to my chest. My eyes focused on the car door while I waited for a response. "You probably haven't even considered that, have you?" I whispered again, my voice cracking against the thick layer of mucus that now coated my throat.



I heard him inhale sharply and felt the air tighten as if he had inhaled some of the space and time between us. “I’ve thought about it,” he replied quietly.

My breath hitched, taking away more space. “You have?” I questioned.

“Yeah. I’ve considered that maybe it’s meant to be us... that maybe you’re the one I’m supposed to be with.” Our eyes met.

I held his stare, afraid to lose it. “I didn’t know that,” I finally replied.

“I guess I didn’t think to bring it up.”

I dropped my eyes and turned back to the door.

I felt the space return when he said, “I just don’t know if now is the right time. Could this maybe be ‘right person, wrong time?’”

I closed my eyes and took a single deep breath. Tears spilled over the brims of my eyes when I reopened them. “I think it might be.” My bottom lip trembled, “But what does this mean?”

He choked on his next few words before mustering, “I don’t want to say, but...” We crashed into each other. My arms slid naturally around his neck as I burrowed my head into him, and the light cast from Circle K across the street blurred as tears cascaded down my face. I closed my eyes and tried to savor his touch. I focused on the way his muscular arms felt wrapped around my body. I pushed my face farther into him as if increasing contact would extend time—maybe even change it.

We knew we could always find our way back to each other when the time was right and when we were ready. The conversation ended with a pinky promise.

I stared at him for most of the drive home. The streetlights illuminated half of his face, the half I found myself memorizing. I stared at the mole on the side of his face and his ears that slightly lift when he smiles. I tried to remember the shape of his jaw and the texture of his skin. We chuckled and reminisced on the steps of my home, our eyes brimming with tears. He went home, and I sank to the floor, resting my head against my folded knees.

At first, I could only take my days a couple of hours at a time. My finger hesitated over the call button at every minor event. I missed the reassurance his

presence provided me and the safety I found in his arms when he held me against his chest. I craved his gentle touch and vibrant nature. I spent hours in bed thinking about us and wishing now could be our time until my thoughts would seep out of my brain and down the side of my face.

It took a few weeks before I felt like I could catch my breath. I stopped mulling over what had happened and started focusing on what could happen. I honed in on what I wanted to do with the space apart—specifically, what I needed to do to heal from our past. My biggest concern was my trust issues. When we were together, I was always waiting for the next shoe to drop. I expected it to, so—in response—I became hyper-vigilant. I cringed when he mentioned a girl in a story and held my breath when I saw a notification cross his phone. I made petty comments in a feeble attempt to express my anger and hurt... an anger and hurt that surrounded my very being and clouded my perception.

I slowly realized that not everything can be healed and folded nicely into a box. Sometimes, people say and do things that stick with you for the rest of your life. Some words are absorbed into your soul forever. Some things have no deeper explanation and give you no chance to wrestle with a greater meaning. The only options then are to dwell or forgive and forget. I cried when I finally realized this. I cried until I was sure my soul had begun to cleanse itself from the damage only time can cause. Then, I chose to forgive and forget... or at least try to. I'm forced to confess that I will forever be learning the delicate art of forgetting. Where do you draw the line between forgiveness and forgetting? What deserves to be forgiven, and what should just be forgotten? What should never be forgiven or forgotten?

Presently, Landon and I are friends, like we swore we would be. We stop when we run into each other and make sure to set time aside to talk about important things. We probe each other with questions and uncertainties until our minds settle. We still laugh and share secret smiles. We check in on each other because we care—if nothing else, we have always cared, and I know we always will.

I cannot speak for the future. Some days, I am overwhelmed with gratitude for this time. I relish the hours I have for myself and rejoice in the chance to analyze my heart. On other days, I wish I could fast-forward and discover how everything ends. Do we end up together? Will my heart break any further? My head remains on a swivel while I yearn for direction. I often wonder if I am making the right choice when I work through this, because what if we aren't meant to be? But that question is always countered by, what if we are? I cannot say when this story ends any easier than I can say how it ends. Perhaps it ends tomorrow or in six months or three years or, perhaps, it is never-ending. I do not know, but



I'm learning to be okay with that. I'm learning to accept the unknown and the uncontrollable. My efforts and worries will not help me predict the future or hasten time. I just hope I'll be ready when the time comes... if it does.



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ABOUT RIVERRUN

The UCCS student literary and arts journal, *riverrun*, began in 1971 when Dr. C. Kenneth Pellow became the first faculty advisor. The first *riverrun* journal was published during that year, but it did not become an annual tradition at UCCS until the 1980s. For more than 50 years, the journal has been published and circulated at the end of every spring semester and showcases poetry, fiction, nonfiction, and visual art created by UCCS students and alumni.

The *riverrun* Literary & Arts Journal is designed and published each year by an editorial class as a part of the ENGL3170 course at UCCS. All submissions are reviewed according to a blind review process. No member of the editorial class reviews submissions in a genre to which they also submitted work.

If you are a UCCS student or graduated alumnus who is interested in getting involved with *riverrun* in the future, or if you are simply curious about the journal in general, visit the *riverrun* website at www.riverrunjournal.com. There, you can find more information about the submission process, the ENGL3170 class, and upcoming events, as well as digital copies of previous editions (including this one!). Our submissions are open year-round, and it is free to submit. We encourage you to share your creative work and become a part of the *riverrun* community!

