Missouri Youth Write

Scholastic Art and Writing

Missouri Region

Honorable Mention

2018
Missouri Youth Write is sponsored by the Missouri Council of Teachers of English (MoCTE). The Greater Kansas City Writing Project (www.gkcwp.org) and Missouri Writing Projects Network coordinate the Missouri Region's Scholastic Writing Awards Contest, sponsored by The Alliance for Young Artists & Writers (http://www.artandwriting.org/).

Editor: Erin Small

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# 2018 Honorable Mention
## Missouri Region

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### Appendix

**Tess Adams**  
Full text of *I Am Not the Chosen One*

**Joshua Gray**  
Full text of *Oddities*

**Maddy Wilson**  
Full text of *Coming Home*
---The Sun, The Moon, and the Mistress of Deceit---
You know the man who chases the sun, can never fall asleep
You know the one who makes the guns, always sells less than he keeps
And a man who broke his hands, is crying in the sheets
Of a world that thinks it’s real, but only is deceit
I once was young and I had a gun, that came from the weak
I thought the sun was the only one, to whom I could speak
But it would seem I got confused, and the moon screams “You cheat!”
You take life and think it’s real, but it only is deceit
And through the day I’d chance upon, men who could not speak
But women’s cries came from their eyes, no one could turn a cheek
Except for those who could persuade, Aphrodite’s heart to peak
She thinks it’s cool to play the fool, but she only is deceit
Some are afraid of the friends they’ve made, and the promises they keep
A poison kiss from every wish, placed on every cheek
Like a fool who lives to die, some only live to speak
But when it’s done its nothing more, no more than deceit
I’ve bought it all the Taj Mahal, was mine alone to keep
An egg was laid in Verrazano’s grave, to give me the Chesapeake
And like a child who lives and cries, they’ll be sold on the streets
To a place where truth goes to lie, with the mistress of deceit
Life is a bust you know it must, it’s romantic and incomplete
If you try to find something good in the world, more than a few will turn their cheeks
There are those who live afraid, and others are just weak
I’d give it all to be alive, to end all my deceit

---I’ve Been Waiting a Thousand Years---
My love got lost on the trail of tears, and won’t walk anymore
I’ve got scars from my back to my ears, and I don’t know what I got them for
And I’ve been rowing for so long, I can’t tell the oars from the sirens song
Oh yes I’ve been waiting a thousand years, but I’ll wait a thousand more
Oh-a-Oh the sun won’t shine, won’t shed no light on this heart of mine
Oh-a-Oh the words I’ve bled, sometimes I think I’m better off dead
But the wind will blow
And fall will the rain
You can’t tell me that I’m not the same
As the bird on the breeze
Or the hundred year trees
That shade the travelers and give them ease
My heart got stuck in a roses thorns, and can’t beat anymore
A devil made come true all my fears, and now I’ve got more than before
And my eyes got stolen by the general’s men, and I ain’t sure if I’ll ever get them back again
Oh yes I’ve been waiting a thousand years, but I’ll wait a thousand more
Oh-a-Oh the skies do snow, but the moons all lost so the snow don’t glow
Oh-a-Oh the seas are high, the rivers run over and the land may die
But the seas recede
And the hearts will be freed
By the grace of men too strong to need
The light horded within
Stolen from other men
I hope one day I’m one of them
My mind is weak from thinking too long, cause all my thoughts were at war
My laugh is quiet cause the jokes sound wrong, but they didn’t sound wrong before
And I can’t help but listen when the bluebird sings, and wonder if I’m meant for better things
Because I’ve been waiting a thousand years, but I’ll wait a thousand more
Oh-a-Oh don’t get cold feet, how can you be fed when you don’t eat?
Oh-a-Oh you don’t need to remind, yourself of the things you’ve left behind
For the rainbow shines
On the ten mile signs
The engine is strong and the silver lines
The clouds blowing away
Forever and today
I would wait forever just to say
That I’d been waiting a thousand years
But I don’t wait anymore

---One Day---
One day I’ll pull the stars from the sky
And then I’ll hand them out
And I’ll look into the eyes of every man
And say have no doubt
You are all children
Locked away inside
You thought you could run forever
But you can never hide
One day I’ll sail across the sea
And bring foreign medicines back here
And I’ll heal the deepest illness
And wipe the saltiest tear
I’ll make up with Cain and Able
But I don’t know who I will find
Locking all the Princes up
In the recesses of my mind
One day I’ll be the governor
And then I’ll give it up
And walk around the streets in a hood
Getting coins dropped into my cup
Then when the days get lonely
Or I reach the nine to five
I'll perform in run down shops
And teach others to survive
One day I’ll see America
Deep inside my heart
I can feel it every now and then
I just can’t wait to start
Many have walked back this way
And none have returned
I only hope to ever receive
Exactly what I’ve earned
One day I’ll breathe in perfumes
Of the one I dearly love
And I’ll do everything for her
My pure and shining dove
Although no one is innocent
So it might take some time to find
One who has the gist of it
On the inside of her mind
One day I’ll be an American
One day I’ll be the same
As those who came long before
To teach of hope and pain
One day I’ll be a savior
Even if I can only be
Savior to one other man
Who needed saving just like me

---Castles In The Sand---
I was born on a bedside table
I lived in a wishing well
Watching the bigger fish go by
Watching the cold coyote swell
I have not met every man
But one things clear to me
The illusions used to buy love and booze
Is a bubble currency
I’m asked if I believe in
Science God and Law
But I can’t say I believe in things
I’ve never seen or no one saw
So I hold a toast to idleness
And try to understand
Why people spend their whole lives
Building castles in the sand
They tell me I’m uncultured
They tell me I’m unwise
For not putting faith in emptiness
Or bowing down to lies
They say kid you won’t get far
At least not farther than me
Because when you learn how this world works
You’ll come crawling back you’ll see
But I don’t care for their selfish words
Because I do not want to be
A man who mistakes putting chains on others
For setting myself free
Can they look in my eyes and tell me
That I’d be a better man
If I spent years just to write my name
On a castle in the sand
Your moneys good for nothing
Except sowing evil seeds
Just ask the man who cuts down the trees
To purchase the air he breathes
Your trophy case is rusted
Your diplomas will be burned
Both the ones you’ve purchased
And the ones you’ve earned
You can’t buy your way to heaven
And nepotism isn’t free
You think you’re on the fast lane when you’re just
Drowning in the sea
In the end you’re left with nothing
But you’re worn and calloused hands
So are you reaching for infinity
Or just castles in the sand
They’ll fake you and they’ll fool you
They’ll tell you they understand
They’ll say there’s more to life than nothing
While binding both your hands
They’ll bleed you for your innocence
And won’t leave you a drop
Then they’ll pretend that yes meant no
And that’s why they didn’t stop
But I can’t say who is guilty
Not you or not me
Sometimes we run away from truth
Other times we cannot see
So I’m looking for the sigil
And burning both my hands
Trying to dig through the confusion
Of castles in the sand
Sometimes I fear forever
Sometimes I lose my faith
In common sense or innocence
When I give up on love that waits
Because the currency of this world
Is the judgment of the common man
Just trying to find his way in life
Trying to find some home land
But it really isn’t that hard to prove
That no man wants to be free
That’s why we build walls and shrouds
To hide our anxiety
But there is no more security
In the emptiness of man
Your either lost in the wilderness
Or in a castle in the sand
I Am Not the Chosen One

Brief summary:

Winston Carlile Redwell is not the Chosen One. And thank Merlin and Morgana for that. He is failing all of his classes, both magickal and normal. His anxiety has gotten to the point where he has to carry around his inhaler everywhere he goes. His wand rarely ever works, and when it does the spells are nothing compared to the power of Finn Tachauer, his jerk roommate or Meg Ferry, his genius best friend. His magick is nonexistent when compared to the power of his sister Winifred Camille Redwell, also known as the “Chosen One.” Winston has wished his whole life to be the Chosen One, wished for that popularity and praise, but his feelings change now that Winifred is seemingly dead and the role of the Chosen One has literally fallen into his lap. With Meg, his best friend, moving to America, Winston has no other choice but to go to Finn for help. In order for Winston to find out what is really going on he must put up with “Trashmouth Tachauer”, go to hell and back, and get help from people he would never expect. It’s a journey full of sibling rivalry, hardship, and unmasking the people around you.

Excerpt:

And then there’s Meg, my bestest friend in the world, the person I’m most looking forward to seeing. Meg is-
Oh, Meg is right there, saving a seat for me. I walk over to her seat, a little compartment with a table in the middle and a large window at the side. There’s a smile on both of our faces, hers more toothy. I set down my luggage and sit across from her.

... 

“Where’s Winifred?”
I stop admiring the countryside. I feel like those words coming out of her mouth were a foot, my mind a forest, my sanity a twig. (Meg’s metaphors have rubbed off on me). I can feel my chest heaving, and I know I probably look really silly, because when I get like this I don’t look angry, I just look like a very upset Italian woman who’s just learned that her son failed his maths class. I look like my neighbor.
“Winston don’t-” She begins.
“You wanna know where she is, Meg? Do you seriously want to know? Is it just eating you alive?! Well I’ll tell you! She’s in Paris! Paris! The literal week before school started she just packed her bags and told us she was going, and would be back by the first day!”
She opens her mouth to say something, but I beat her to it.
“She could’ve taken me with her! I get it, she’s stressed, she has every reason to be stressed! She wants
a break, but who says I don’t need a break?! Huh?! It’s not like I don’t have any stress built up for having to share a dorm with Finn, or the fact that I’m gonna fail my classes again no matter how hard I try, or having someone remind me every two seconds about how important Winifred is-”

For the full text of this novel, please see the Appendix.
When her midnight alarm rings, they pull each other closer, tighter, for a moment. The television screen turns black, offering the young couple a fragmented view of their embrace. Even through the flawed reflection, her swollen under eyes are as clear as the glass walls she had built before him. He fixes her hair neatly behind her ear, but she moves it back. Disarray is a comfort to her, always was. They each stand facing one another, her eyes drop to meet his chest as his search desperately for her familiar gaze. Eyes still fixed to the logo on his t-shirt, she wraps her frail arms around him. Her fingertips have memorized every curve of his spine, his hips, the nape of his neck, every fiber of his coarse, curly hair. He does not struggle to swallow her into himself. He may fold her into himself in an infinite number of ways, but the two will always be two. She knows this. She wonders if he secretly does too, in the darkness of his car on his way home past curfew. Which is better, she thinks between the lines of her poem: to blow out a burning candle nearing the end of its wick, or to let it extinguish itself, completely and indefinitely, drowning in a sweet pool of its own fuel? She caresses the tips of her fingers so she may recall his curly hair one more time, turns to her nightstand, and blows out her candle one last time.
She emerges
from their shared quarters
in her new dress
flowing in silver rivers
to kiss the caps of her knees,
the follicles on his arms
and the back of his neck
excite his aging hairs
and his pulse beats
to the rhythm of love.
The hair that softly kisses
the top of her ears
has been stained
a deep shade of brown
to disguise her lost
pigment with the upbeat
rhythm of her youth.
And his
cascades down his back
splashing across
his shoulder blades
without regard
to the ever apparent deterioration
of the roots.
But still,
they dance
to the sounds of the sixties
with the constrained swings
of fragile bones
yet never missing a beat
to the rhythm
of their intertwined souls.
**Fabric**
We take the run in the fabric
And cover it up
With cute button noses
And open, unzippered smiles
We know that to fix a run
Sometimes
it’s as transparent as clear nail polish
But others
it’s as easy as throwing out your favorite pants

**Queen**
*What have you done?*
Thou art a peasant seeking my doorstep

*Though I am one to talk*
*My doorstep covered in dirt-*
*Same as your raggedy tunic*

What have you done?
A deed for which you shall receive: compensation? of my gaze meeting yours

I am Queen
*But my money does not define me*
I am Queen
*For my confidence?*

The dirtiest I have welcomed
If they were of good heart?
The cleanest I have welcomed too
*Even if they weren't good of heart*
Their seemingly polished, proud personalities
Draws them to me, *me to them*
The Queen sees no one.

I was proud, like them
But there I was wrong
I was proud but not like them
They were proud of money, of looks
I was too

I am proud of who I am
I am proud of what I have done

What have they done?
They've been proud of their poise and possessions
And when it has all been said and done
They will come

And I
Will be Queen
Of this castle
And since I am proud
Not of the things I have but the things I've done
I will be Queen of this castle
I screamed with fear as a human hand reached out to me. The monthly wing clipping is always traumatic. Rosie was paralyzed with fear on her wooden swing, hanging in the back corner of the cage. I, on the other hand, was flying around in the confined space filled with long colorful strands of rope and wooden perches.

In my panic, I flew around a perch and clipped the edge of my left wing on the rough wooden surface. The hand wrapped around me and held me by my neck like a bear trap, but not so tight that I couldn’t breathe. The hand carried me out of the cage, wrapped me in a towel, and carefully extended my left wing to show all my flight feathers. Then the human slowly started to trim them! She did this to both of my wings so by the time I was released, my wings looked like tiny white bat wings!

I quickly climbed the ladder, trying to get as far away from the hand as possible, and groomed in the perch by the mirror, getting rid of loose feathers while the hand turned its attention on Rosie. I knew it would leave me alone now.

Once the whole ordeal was over, I silently scooted over to Rosie and asked her, “Haven’t you seen the outside yet?”

She looked over at me and said, “That would be a waste of time and energy. We have everything we need here. Why do you always want to go outside and face the risk of being hunted by bigger birds?”

“But I’m not satisfied here!”

“You’ll be dead before sundown, Sunny!”

I didn’t reply to that. She had a good point. I couldn’t survive out there for long. It’s quiet for the rest of the afternoon. I dozed off a couple times and went to the food bowl for a quick snack. Rosie was also napping on her swing, softly cooing while she snored. Her glossy forest green feathers gleamed in the evening sun and the black dots on her wings seemed to dance. I stared at her for a while but eventually looked away and continued my snack.

After I finished my meal, I hopped on the ladder and climbed to the highest perch, right beside Rosie’s swing, and looked out between the thin purple bars. I am lost in wonder staring at the different shades of green, blue, and yellows that seemed to power the world outside. I’ve been outside many times in my cage when my human puts us outside, but I wanted to feel the soft green grass under my feet and the cool breeze ruffle my feathers. While I was lost in my fantasy, I didn’t notice Rosie step off her ladder and scoot beside me on my perch.

“I use to wonder what it would be like outside too.”

“Really?” I said in surprise. She always seemed against the idea of escaping outside.

“Nope, I just said that to make you feel better. Did it work?” she chirped with a snicker. I jokingly gave her a quick nip on the head.

“Hey! Watch the feathers!” She whined and nipped me back.

“You asked for it,” I grinned, and we both got into a brawl. The human must’ve heard and came rushing over. We both felt it’s booming footsteps and hastily stopped our brawl. The human slowly opened the door, took Rosie out, and put her in a cardboard box!

“Rosie!” I screamed. I could hear her chirping frantically as she tried to claw her way out. I am suddenly taken back to my time at the pet store, being ignored and alone because my feathers were not green, but bright blue and white.
I tried to fly out of the door before the human closed it but my freshly clipped wings couldn’t keep me up for long. The noise of my faltering wings alerted the human and it came back to close the door.

Why does the human always have to ruin things? Ever since I arrived here, the human always comes whenever Rosie and I are getting along, takes one of us, and puts us in a shoe box! Oh how desperately I wanted to get out of this horrible cage and escape the human.

The human placed our cage right by a big hole in the human house, but whenever it would let us out to explore, the hole was always closely guarded by a giant glass guardian. It wouldn’t let anything in or out unless the human moves it.

After what seemed like an eternity, the human let Rosie back into the cage.

"Now do you get why I want to get out of here?" I asked a little too harshly. Rosie gave me a glare and climbed the ladder to her swing.

"It thought we were fighting and tried to keep us from hurting each other. Not all humans are evil, Sunny," she exaggerated. I sighed.

I went about my day and played with one of the thick colorful things that hung from the top of the cage when I heard a loud boom! It startled Rosie and she fell off of her swing.

"What’s that sound!" She screamed. I scanned the cage and noticed that something seemed different. The door fell open!

I chirped in glee as I quickly climbed out of the tiny cage.

"Rosie! Come out and play!" I chirped as I jumped off the gate and landed on the floor, my nails clicking against the polished wood.

"Don’t go too far!" Rosie yelled. She puffed up and settled on her swing.

"Why don’t you leave your stupid swing for once and explore with me?" I whined. Rosie shook her wings and settled down.

"Fine," I huffed, "But don’t expect me to share my millet with you."

I half walked, half fluttered around the human home, looking for anything that catches my eye, when I felt a slight breeze ruffle my tail feathers. I quickly turned around and saw that the glass guardian has moved, leaving a large gap between the human house and the outside!

I squawked in surprise but quickly quieted down in case the human heard.

"Rosie!" I whispered, "Rosie, get down here now!"

"What, scared to be alone out there?" She mocked as she nimbly made her way to the door. Once she hopped onto the floor, she twitched her beak and said, "Something feels different."

"Look over there!" I pointed my head excitedly at the glass guardian. She gasped, "It moved! Get back in the cage! The bigger birds might come in!"

"Are you crazy? This might be our only chance to escape!"

"Don’t go Sunny, it’s dangerous out there!"

"Well, I’m not going to stay here and be kept prisoner by the humans!"

"You’re not being kept prisoner, the humans just want to make sure that you don’t get into any trouble!"

"Well, then why do they always keep us in a cage?"

"So that we’re out of the humans’ way!"

"Well, I’m going. You can come with me or stay here in this prison," I screamed. Rosie sat there, still and silent. I quickly scrambled to the glass guardian and hopped out. I was free! I turned back to see if Rosie will follow but she stood her ground.

"Fine, so be it," I scoffed. I quickly scrambled to the mossy edge of the balcony and looked down. The feeling of the sun’s warm rays on my back felt refreshing. There were blue wooden poles separating the mossy wood from the steep drop. I shuddered, half because of the strong cold breeze, half out of fear of seeing how high I am with useless clipped wings. I suddenly heard the loud screech of a hawk.

So these are the bigger birds that Rosie warned me about.

I started climbing one of the blue stakes to get a better view of the majestic creature but looked
back half way to see if Rosie changed her mind. The spot where Rosie initially stood is empty. She must’ve gone back to the cage. I continued my trek to the top until I arrived at a long flat surface made of the same blue wood.

I suddenly started thinking about the possibility of jumping into the grass. I carefully made my way to the outside edge to look down from this new height.

Was it soft enough to land on without hurting myself? I quickly dismissed the idea because of the fact that the wind would blow me onto the hard concrete. As I stared in wonder at the world of the outside, I failed to notice Rosie making her way up the blue stake and silently scootching toward me until she stood right beside me. She leaned over and chirped “So this is what the outside looks like!”

Rosie’s voice startled me so much that I jumped and pushed Rosie over the edge.

“Rosie!” I screamed! Everything seemed to move in slow motion. Rosie tried frantically trying to flap her wings to gain some lift, but it was no use. I jumped down after her to try and catch her but my wings failed me as well. Suddenly, everything started moving at normal speed again as we both plummeted to the ground. The wind picked up as we were falling and blew us toward the pavement. I closed my eyes in anticipation while thinking about whether Rosie and I would make it through this. I fell onto the sidewalk on my right side and saw a green flash beside me before I blacked out.

I groggily opened my eyes and saw that a warm cloth tightly wrapped around my abdomen. As I examined my surroundings, I realized that I am in the cardboard box!

“Ugh, what happened?” I groaned. I turn my head to see Rosie, also wrapped in cloth, laying with her wings splayed out before her. Suddenly, the memories come flooding back. I- I made it? I was sure that we were goners.

“Oh my god! I made it!” I chirped in glee. I quickly tried to scramble out of the warm blanket, but suddenly felt a sharp piercing pain radiate from the base of my right wing. I slowly wiggled myself out of the blanket and checked on my wing. I couldn’t see much because a piece of white linen wrapped my wing to my body, but I could see the messed up, featherless, twisted tip of the wing and decided it’s for the best that I couldn’t see it. I slowly crawled to Rosie, making sure not to move my wing, to see if she is as badly injured as I was, or even alive at this point. I stretched my neck forward and whispered, “Rosie, are you awake?”

She slowly mumbled something and turned around. Well, at least she’s alive. I examined the room and noticed a weak lamp shining on the left side of the box, keeping that side warm, and leaving the other side comfortably cool. There wasn’t much light, but the lamp emitted enough to see clearly. After about an hour of relaxing and trying to not move my wing, Rosie woke up. “What, where am I?” She mumbled.

She looked at me and her eyes widened.

“We made it!” she squawked, her voice rather chipper after what happened.

“Are you hurt?” I asked.

“I don’t think so,” she said slowly. She tried to squirm out of the blanket but winced in pain.

“Nevermind, I’m hurt,” she said while gritting her beak. I slowly helped her get out of the blanket to see what she broke. She used her beak to grab onto a hole on the side of the box and tried to pull herself out. We eventually got her out of the cloth and saw that her left leg was wrapped in the same white linen that wrapped around my wing.

“It’s your leg huh,” I sighed, “At least you’re not dead.” I helped Rosie over to the warm side and cuddled by her for a couple hours. She was asleep in a couple minutes.

Later, I woke up to feel our box slightly shaking in a slow rhythm. The lid slowly raised opened until I could see a human face peeking at us. It’s unnaturally long and thin feathers curled down from the top of its head.

I quickly left Rosie’s side and crawled as fast as I could to the darkest corner. Despite the pain, I made it and stayed as still as I can, trying to get the human to not notice me. It’s huge flattened beak bent in a frown and disappeared, only to reappear a couple moments later with a large strand of millet. The human placed the millet so that it’s in the center of the box.

It’s other hand reached over to me and gently held me, making sure not to grip my wing too
tightly. I was too tired to resist so I just let it take me. Once I’m about chest level with the beast, it started gently scratching my head! At first, this confused me, but then the scratching actually felt good! It kept scratching me until Rosie woke up and raised her head.

It gently laid me back beside Rosie and put the lid back on. I was still staring at the lid, still shocked and surprised about what just happened.

“Now you know why I actually like it here,” whispered Rosie. “I told you so!” she squawked mockingly with a humorous glint in her eye.

“I told you so!” I said sarcastically.

“You were perfectly fine here, why did you have to go and try to escape?” she chirped.

“I thought the human wanted to kill me!”

“Well, you should’ve listened to me!”

“Why would I ever listen to you?” I said jokingly.

“Whatever, come closer, I’m cold!” she chirped.

“Fine,” I said. I slowly moved toward her and we ended up cuddling together all day long.
I have always been an extremely loving person. Since I was little I have dreamt of becoming a mother. I cared for my numerous baby dolls, feeding, changing, and holding them like they were real. Of course I didn’t actually believe they were real; I wasn’t insane. But I adored how snugly the cool, plastic heads of my dolls fit into the padded crook of my arm. The rich gurgles of infant laughter echoed in my head, and I comforted their shrill cries with ease. A calming warmth spread through my veins whenever I was with my baby dolls, for this is where I felt natural. I always knew that it was God’s intent for me to have a child of my own one day, for he had given me the gift of a motherly nature. There are many mothers in this world who simply do not have the capacity to give their children the love they deserve. I, however, have an infinite supply of love to give.

To share some of this love, I decided to become a nurse in the NICU at the local hospital. It was the most delightful occupation. I got to work the night shift caring for the new babies. I fed, changed, held, and aided the smallest premature infants. They were my baby dolls. I craved the smell of baby powder that permeated the room. I remember the sea of clear, plastic boats, each manned by a soft, pink sailor decked in a cotton hat and quilt. These delicate angels were my obsession, and an intense depression fogged my mind when I was not in their presence. Caring for them filled me with an indescribable joy, and every evening in the hospital it was as if I had been lifted to a heavenly cloud far above the worries and dreariness of the normal world. My cravings for this heavenly sensation grew unbearable, so I made the decision to fulfill my dreams and have a child of my own.

My dreams, however, were crushed by my wicked doctor. He told me that I was infertile and that the chances of conceiving were zero to none. Oh, how horrible his voice was with its low pitch and mocking rhythm. His superficial, sympathetic smile may have soothed other women in my position, but not me. I could see where one may have confused his toothless grin and sunken eyes as a visage of compassion, but I could see no soul in the deep sockets of those snake eyes. It was his smirk- his pursed, crooked, menacing smile- that gave away his disguise, for I then realized that I was in the presence of the Devil himself. He visits in many shapes and forms, sometimes as a rabid dog, a criminal, or perhaps an idea that lingers in the idle mind. I had seen him once prior, disguised as a crow perched atop my grandmother’s grave. Fear and hatred coursed through my veins at the sight of him. My legs had a mind of their own as I ran out of the exam room, down the staircase, and across the scalding pavement to the safety of my car. I sped home, still gasping for breath as the grasp of fear and hatred slowly loosened around my neck. Immediately after rushing through the front door of my apartment, I slid to the floor and clasped my clammy hands together against my chest, tears slicing my cheeks. Every frantic heartbeat sent a jerk through my sweaty palms. I prayed that the doctor was wrong, that it was all one of the Devil’s tricks. I did this for quite some time.

The months following this accursed incident were quite troubling. I trudged the rows of tubs in the NICU, and every glance at the infants or touch of their soft, pink skin shot a crippling pain through my heart. The smell that had once pleased me so now sickened me, and the sea of clear boats and their sailors had transformed into a pool of monsters, clenching their fleshy fists around my heart. The idea that I could
never have one of these creatures haunted my mind constantly. I despised the mothers of these infants, even though I had never laid eyes on the majority of them. None of them deserved to be mothers; they didn’t know how to care for a child like I did, or how to love a child like I did. Barely any of them visited their babies at night, despite the hospital being open twenty-four hours. How could a mother bear to part with their child for a whole night? If I was in their shoes, I would never leave the hospital. The fact is that these women were lazy and careless, and none of them were worthy of motherhood. None of them possessed the caring heart that God gave to me. I tolerated the infuriating mothers and the heartache that surrounded my job for several months, praying every night that God would help me fulfill my purpose of becoming a true mother. He must have heard my prayers because, one day, I received the most incredible gift.

Early into my night shift, a new infant was admitted to my room. As another nurse wheeled him in, I caught a glimpse of the top of his head, which was coated in a fine layer of light peach fuzz. As I inched closer to the child, I was taken aback by what I saw. He seemed to glow under the dim lights of the room, radiating a beauty that no other infant had ever possessed. The fuzz on his head caught sparkles of light as he stretched and faded into the warm pink of his skin. His soft, swollen cheeks framed his delicate mouth and nose. The fine lashes on his eyelids quivered as he dreamt. I touched the tip of my finger gently into his wrinkled palm, his miniature fingers slowly curling around my nail. At that moment, I knew in my heart that this was my baby, that God had answered my prayers and had given me this beautiful gift. As written in Psalm 113:9, “He gives the barren woman a home, making her the joyous mother of children. Praise the Lord!” He would be my beautiful baby Noah. His gleaming lids slid apart to reveal his shimmering, godly eyes, staring deep into my soul. I leaned in an inch closer and reassured him, “Mama’s here.”

I spent the next several days tending to my Noah’s every need. In the glow of the NICU I held him to my breast as he fed on my milk. How I was able to lactate was a mystery, another one of God’s remarkable gifts! Noah loved my natural food so much that it seemed his hunger was insatiable. He slowly began to reject the milk of the woman who birthed him, for he too must have known that I was his true mother. I soothed his cries effortlessly, holding him to my bosom and whispering, “Hush now, Noah, my holy child. Mama’s here.” We were one in the same, Noah and I, for he felt every emotion that rushed through my mind. When I was nervous about the health of another infant, he cried. When I was joyful, his blue eyes gleamed and he let out a giggle. When I was at peace, he slept soundly within the safety of his knitted blankets. Our bond was indestructible. I thanked God everyday for his beautiful gift to me, for I was the Virgin Mary and Noah was my Baby Jesus. My child and I grew closer still in the passing days. I stood by his side and lulled him to sleep each night, swaying together in the sea of clear boats. We remained in this blissful state until, one dreadful evening, a monster rocked our pleasant waters.

About a week after Noah had arrived, a women appeared in the window of the NICU in the dead of night. Her golden hair was ratted into a knot atop her head, and her oversized sweatshirt seemed to weigh down her bony, hunched shoulders. Her eyelids hung limply as her dark eyes processed me and then drifted to little Noah, who was in the safety of my arms. Her blank stare unnerved me and my heart pounded faster, causing Noah to let out a quiet whimper. I held him closer to my heart and comforted him. “Hush now,” I whispered, “Mama’s here.” She rattled the locked doorknob, concern furrowing her brow and turning down the corners of her mouth. With my child in my arms, I crept hesitantly to the door and questioned her. Her voice was muffled through the glass, but I could just make out what she said. She wished to see Noah. Confusion rattled my mind. Who was this woman and why did she wish to see my child? Upon further questioning, she claimed to be his mother, and she said she had come because she had a feeling that something was not right with her baby. How dare this impostor attempt to trick me! I could not be so easily deceived! I recognized those soulless eyes, for they were the same eyes of wicked doctor. The Devil had returned to take away my happiness once again, but he would not succeed. “Be gone, Satan!” I cursed, “I will not let you steal my gift from God again! This is my holy child!” I ran to the windows and
snatched the blinds down to shield me and my child, but He continued to pound furiously on the door. I cowered in the far corner, Noah scrunching against my chest, rocking frantically. “Hush now, Mama’s here,” I chanted repeatedly in a muffled, shaky voice, my lips pressed to his soft forehead.

The pounding on the door became louder as the night wore on. I could feel the Devil’s menacing smirk, his presence like snakes slithering under the door and flooding the room with a hiss. The too familiar senses of fear and hatred sat upon my ribcage like a load of bricks. I needed to protect my Noah from the nefarious clutches of Lucifer. Frantically I searched the room for some escape, and then my eyes stumbled upon a small window on the back wall of the room. Of course! I slinked across the cold linoleum floors, Noah sobbing into my bosom, until I reached the frame of the window. I pried it open with my free hand as the intolerable pounding echoed in my head. I squatted on the thin sill and peered at the black pavement nine stories down. “Bang! Bang! Bang!” screamed the door. Silly Devil would never be able to reach me in time. He would never again harm my happiness. He would never again steal my gift from God. I looked upon my beautiful gift, the moon illuminating the soft edges of his perfect body in my arms. He stared back, his wise eyes understanding my every thought as they conveyed his. Through my palms I could feel both his pulse and mine as the beating of our synchronized hearts muffled the wallops on the door. In that moment, perched together nine stories above our heavenly fate, we were inseparable. Noah let out one final whimper. “Hush now, Noah, my holy child” I reassured him, “Mama’s here.”
“Sir, Darren’s still in there.”

“He’s what?”

Kay turned toward the battlefield. Their enemy had practically overrun them. They needed to leave and to evacuate back to the ship. She caught a glimpse of a figure returning fire at the other soldiers. A long sigh escaped her.

Michael spoke up as if reading her mind. “Sir, I advise we leave him. It’s too dangerous.”

Still, he knew that she didn’t hear the words, and if she did she certainly wasn’t listening. All he could do is shout at her as she charged back into the battle. She dodged around the hail of punishing fire that sank into the ground around her and fired off some shots of her own as she made her way over to the last man.

“Come on, Darren! Let’s go!”

“It’s alright, sir!” He shouted over the gunfire. “I’ll cover you.”

“Like hell, you will!”

“I’m already injured, sir. It’s alright.”

She glared. “Like hell it is.”

In one even motion, she hauled him up over her shoulders. He aimed his gun around her head and provided some cover fire as she began making her way back. Up on the ridge, Michael faintly cursed.

“Cover fire!”

Darren gave them a weak thumbs-up. That was the last thing they saw before the artillery shell landed right beside them and they disappeared in smoke and fire.

Her fingers tighten around her glass, and she takes a sip of her drink. The girl keeps singing on the stage, dancing and laughing. Her friends cheer her on, clapping and singing along and dancing in their chairs. They are young and carefree. And why shouldn’t they be?

She takes another swallow to force down the bitter taste in her mouth. Now is not the time. Let them be young while they still can. Let them forget about the rest of the galaxy and its troubles, if only for a night. Isn’t that what she’s trying to do, too?
“I thought I’d find you someplace like this.”

She glances up to see Sam sliding onto a stool next to her, his own drink in hand. It’s a clear liquid swirled through with some sort of colored syrup, undoubtedly sweet and fruity. Sam never did like the taste of alcohol much, just the effects.

He glances toward the stage, where the girl is just getting down, wobbling on her heels. She is giddy and laughing, and he smiles a little, unknowingly.

“I wonder what they’re celebrating.”

She flexes her fingers around her glass, which is nearly empty again. She wishes she could get drunk a little faster. She wants to not have to think of death anymore.

“Michael is looking for you, you know.”

“When is Michael ever not looking for me?” She takes a swallow, enjoys the burn of alcohol on her raw throat. “He probably has paperwork I need to sign.”

Sam hums noncommittally, taking a sip of his drink. The syrup swirls into a new pattern as he does so.

“We should head back to the ship. Sarah is looking for you, too. You need your bandages to be changed again.”

She already knows. The burn has been creeping back into her wound all night, as the numbing cream slowly loses effect. It’s uncomfortable by this point, but she just can’t bring herself to actually go back.

Without saying a word, Sam lets his knuckles brush over the back of her hand. It’s a small, comforting gesture, meant to help her. But all her mind sees is blood on those knuckles, blood everywhere, coating her arms up to the elbow as she tries to help, tries to stop the bleeding, screams for a medic-

A gentle tug at her elbow snaps her out of it. Sam is trying to get her attention. His warm amber eyes are filled with concern when she catches them, but he quickly shifts into a disarming grin.

“Come on, Kay. I’ve already paid. Let’s go back.”

With a sigh, she takes the last swallow of her drink and slides off the stool. Booted feet make their way across the bar floor, the sounds drowned out by another girl singing karaoke.

They step outside and into the rain. It feels good, cool and cleansing, and she turns her head up to meet it. Some last remnant of her desert childhood is telling her to savor water when it comes. Six ducks his head, undoubtedly some instinct left over from his childhood on a planet full of rain. She would laugh to see him like this if it were a different day.

They pick through the muddy streets, heading back to the ship. She’ll have to clean the reddish muck off her boots later. At the moment, she can’t bring herself to care.

The ramp is down, and they climb into the belly of the ship, leaving footprints behind that some misbehaving recruit will have to clean up in the morning. Together, they make their way to the med bay, where Sarah is waiting.
Sarah says nothing, and Kay rolls up her sleeve so she can treat her. There’s blaster burn almost entirely covering her right arm from the earlier mission. A reward for charging into enemy fire to try to save one man.

Sam rests a hand on her shoulder, a silent question. Can I go? She nods, knowing how much he hates the medbay, and he is gone in an instant. Sarah begins to work as soon as he leaves, peeling the old bandages away.

There is silence for a long moment.

“One time, when we were on leave, Barrack 14 and Rex all went to see this fortune teller.”

Sarah jumps a little, not having expected her to speak, but says nothing. She wouldn’t say something if she didn’t think it was important. Even if she’s talking to herself more than her.

“It was Muna that really wanted to do it, you know. I didn’t believe much in it, and neither did Rex, but he got Hevis hooked on the idea, so we went ahead and went with them. It would be fun, at least, to laugh as some crazy old bat told us whatever she thought we wanted to hear.”

She nods, not understanding, but working away. Gently, she rubs a soft cloth over the area to remove the last clinging bits of the cream. Kay flinches but otherwise remains unaffected, continuing to stare at her wound and talk.

“Rex went first. Out of the two of us, I mean. Muna and Hevis and Sam all wanted to get in first, so we let them go ahead. It was crap anyway, so we weren’t in any hurry. Anyway, Rex went first and came out looking spooked. He wouldn’t say anything about it. I was getting a weird vibe off the place anyway, so it unsettled me, you know?”

“I’ll spare you the details, but she told me a bunch of crap about finding love and great changes in my life, revelations, all very vague stuff. But the last thing she told me was that I had a fatal flaw, like all people. That my loyalty would get me killed.”

She glances up, catching the medic’s eyes as she applies the last bandage to the burn. She tries to keep her expression neutral.

“I didn’t think too much of it. I’d forgotten about that whole thing until today.”

Her eyes flit back to her scorched arm again, staring at the white swaths of cloth as if they hold the answers to the universe. Sarah begins peeling off her gloves and disinfecting her hands. She thinks Kay’s done, so when she speaks again, it catches her off guard.

“Now I’m starting to wonder if that old bat was right all along. And, if she was, what that means.”

Sarah frowns a little. “It means exactly what it sounds like, I think. We all die at some point. She thought you’d go out trying to save someone. There’s nothing wrong with that, sir.”

Kay keeps staring at where her wound should be. “I suppose you’re right. If we’ve all got to die, we might as well die bravely.” Her face clearly says she doesn’t believe the words. Still, she’s saying them, and so Sarah will take that as a victory.
“She Died Bravely” the tombstone read. Sam turned those words over in his head as he sipped his drink. It was sweet and fruity and should have been perfect but, he couldn’t bring himself to appreciate it. It felt like there was something missing here, like he wasn’t playing the role he was supposed to be playing.

“Sam.”

He glanced up to find Michael with a whiskey in his hand, sliding onto the stool beside him.

“Sarah is looking for you.”

He laughed then, realizing exactly what had happened. “We switched, Michael. Kay’s dead, so I’m Kay, you’re me, Sarah is you and herself at the same time. It’s the same old patterns.”


“What the hell is the point, Michael? She doesn’t care that she died bravely. She’s dead. She saved my life and now she’s dead.”

“The words are for the living, Sam. You’ve been to enough memorial services for that.”

“It still hurts, though.”

“You’ve been to enough services to know that, too. You also knew her well enough to know that she wouldn’t want this for you.”

“She doesn’t get to want anything, Michael. She’s dead.”

“Come on, let’s go back. I got your drink.”

They stepped out into the rain, and he ducked his head to avoid as much as he could. For a moment, he could have sworn that Kay was beside him, eyes closed and head tipped back to savor the water on her skin. There was a smile on her face and all he could feel was the pain of his broken arm and the scorched skin along his back.

“She died bravely,” he whispered into the night, tears streaming down his face.

“That she did,” the night whispered back.
Some people just weren’t made for Utopia. Leslie Harris was one of those people. Utopia is nice, for a while. You can’t feel pain, can’t feel sadness or anger or anything negative of the sort. In the beginning, it’s freeing. Then, it becomes a norm. There’s no darkness to help highlight the light. There’s nothing to fuel the appreciation of it. She wanted to find that darkness, find that highlight to give her the specialness of Utopia back.

That’s how she ended up staring at the place that was going to cause her a lot of pain. She was standing in the back, facing row upon row of chairs. In the center, a round pit was set into the ground, the bottom covered in sand.

It was a fight ring.

She maneuvered through the chairs, making her way down into the pit. There were two ladders leading in, and she swung herself onto the sand. She found it surprisingly clean, all things considered.

Her boots scuffed through the loose flooring, and she hissed. This stuff would be slick and hard to get a grip in. But at least she’d have a bit of cushion when she got knocked down.

The door opened again, and she looked up to see Bones, the one who’d introduced her to this mess, approaching her.

“Well, darlin’, looks like you’ve got yourself into quite a mess, huh?” He laughed. “You look like you’re going to be sick.”

She shook her head. “Don’t tempt me.”

He settled himself on the edge of the pit. “Aw, come on. Don’t psych yourself out. Here, gimme your jacket.”

She shrugged her coat off her shoulders and handed it up to him.

“Good. Now, this ain’t so much different than the boxing you see on TV sometimes. Only difference is that here, you ain’t makin’ any money, and you’re always in the ring.”

Fear shot straight through her, and her eyes went wide.

“What?”
“Now, darlin’, no need to panic. But’cha must’ve known it wasn’t gonna be pretty. It’s the dark part of Utopia, not fairy tale princess land.

“Now, the good news is there are some rules. No weapons, we ain’t tryin’ to kill nobody. No kickin’ a man while he’s down, ‘cause that’s just cheap. And finally, no backin’ out. Ya go ‘til somebody gets KO’d.”

She swallowed hard. Adrenaline was pumping through her system, which she knew would do her no good. Her hands were already starting to shake, and she sat down at the edge of the ring.

“Oh, will ya stop freakin’ out. Ya knew full well what you were gettin’ into, so suck it up, buttercup, and deal. Now get your ass outta the sand, ‘cause they’re gonna be here in just a minute.”

She stood up, and Bones began to talk slightly faster.

“More good news is that you’ve got me, and I’m your coach. ‘Tween rounds, I can give you a bit of a heads up on who yer fightin’ and what you gotta improve. Do the best ya can, and try to knock a couple people down before ya go out, ai’ght?”

“Alright.”

Then, the door opened, and the people came flooding in. Their voices filled the room, loud talk and laughter crushed the space, making it seem far smaller than it actually was. Yara came in last and came to stand in the center of the pit.

“Alright, everyone, you know how this works.” Her voice carried over all the others, making most of the conversation cease. “This one here thinks she’s got what it takes to be a part of us. And tonight, we’re gonna find out.”

Loud cheering shook the walls.

“Now, you know the rules. Break ‘em, and you let this girl out of the ring for a round so that you can fight it out with me. Do we want that?”

A loud chorus of “No” rattled her, and she swore she could feel every single voice smack against her face. Her eyes strayed to Bones, who gave her a small nod of encouragement. He had a least a little bit of faith in her.

“Alright.” Yara looked around the room. “Who’s first?”

“Me!” A man she didn’t recognize jumped to his feet. “I’ll fight her first.”

Yara grinned and hauled herself out of the ring, and the other man ignored the ladder altogether and just jumped in. Bones began to talk to her as the stranger started showing off for the crowd.

“Ai’ght, that’s Lizard. He’s big, mean, and hits hard, so try to avoid gettin’ tagged. He ain’t real fast, though, so you just gotta float. Stick with body shots; you’ll hurt your yer hand on that thick skull of his.”

Lizard turned to her and grinned. “Ready to go, girlie?”

She jerked her chin at him. “If you’re not too scared.” It was false bravado, but it made her feel better.
“If both sides are ready…” Yara’s voice boomed, “Fight!”

Her hands popped up immediately, but she saw that her opponent hadn’t even put up a defense. Obviously, he didn’t take her seriously. Well, she decided that had to change right there and then.

She darted forward, using speed to her advantage. Pulling back, she slammed her fist into the man’s solar plexus as hard as she could. The crowd roared.

He doubled over, gasping for air, then sunk to the ground. She stepped away from him, giving him some room to breathe. He’d need it.

Eventually, he got his breath back and stood, anger in his eyes. She put her hands back up. This time, he did the same.

He charged, trying to get within hitting distance. She ducked under the first swing to hit him with a hook to the ribs, then danced away from the second. The third nicked her, mostly bouncing off, and she returned with a well-placed fist to his gut. He backed away, trying to get some distance, but she was having none of that. She followed his steps and popped him in the stomach again. Angered, he swung at her and caught, tagging her in the ribs. Pain flared through her, and she backed off this time.

The two circled each other, sweat making their skin shine. She knew he would outlast her with his endurance, simply being able to take more hits. She had to end this and fast.

Again, she darted forward. She faked a punch to his face, and he raised his arms to compensate. While he was off guard, she hit him in the stomach hard enough to make him double over, then brought her knee up to slam into his chin. He reared back and went down.

The crowd exploded. Someone climbed into the pit to drag Lizard out as Leslie walked back over to Bones.

“Ai’ght, ya got the big guy.” He tossed her a towel and a water bottle. “Let’s see who comes next.”

She wiped her forehead and swished some water around in her mouth, spitting onto the sand. The next challenger to come forward was another big guy, hard and mean. He hit her in the ribs, close enough to the same spot that she could really feel it. The next was a woman, quick but unable to take a hit. She actually managed to get one onto the face, and Leslie’s eye was swollen when the next came forward. And the next.

It was just after the fourth round that she really started to feel it. She was tired, her arms hurt, her wrists hurt, everything hurt really. Blood was trickling down her face and congealing in her nose, making it hard to breathe. The sixth challenger had really taken it out of her. She’d taken a lot of hits that time, and she could feel every one of them. As she made her way back to Bones, the world sounded fuzzy and far away. This time, he handed her the towel and bottle.

“Ya okay, kid?”

Reluctantly, she spit out the water. Damn, she was thirsty. “I’m- I’m okay. Still standin’.”

He looked at her strangely. “If ya say so. Now, pay attention, next challenger is comin’ up.”

The roar of the crowd was still deafening, and she could see a figure making his way down into the pit.
Bones was faintly cursing behind her. Dimly, she knew it had to be someone that she knew. Probably Panther, her other tie into this and Bones’s boyfriend, if she had to guess. That would be ugly.

“Ai’ght, kid. It’s Panther. You know him. He’s fast. Deadly fast. He don’t hit too hard, but he’ll hit ya enough times that ya go down. Ya need to try to dodge and get a couple good hits in. Got it?”

She nodded. “Got it.”

She turned and put her hands up, and Bones gave the signal that she was good. Yara had barely given the word before Panther was across the pit and swinging.

The first hit took her by surprise, and she took it right to her already broken nose. Her eyes watered, but she managed to dodge the second one. She tried to hit him in the ribs, but he danced away and came back with another sharp jab. It caught her on the cheek, and she spun away to try to get some distance. Her body felt heavy and slow. Another jab caught her, followed by a cross that snapped her head to the side. She tried to get her arms up, but they were not cooperating. The uppercut came flying in, and she was powerless to stop it. Her jaw snapped upward, and she was faintly aware of her body hitting the sand.

She could hear Bones screaming at her to get up. That she was making an idiot of herself. That this was embarrassing. That there was no way she was going to make it like this.

She rolled onto her side, then onto her hands and knees. She could see Panther shaking his head at her as if he was trying to tell her something. She didn’t know what it was. She didn’t care.

She hauled herself to her feet with great difficulty, swaying a little. Her arms went up, trying to protect her face on instinct. Panther was on her in seconds, a hail of punches slamming into her arms and dropping them bit by bit. She tried her best to shuffle away, but he just followed her, keeping the punishment coming. Eventually, her arms dropped enough that he popped her in the nose again. She stumbled back, slipping on the sand, arms falling to try to catch her, and found her head snapping back again with that same uppercut. Her eyes watered with pain as she slammed into a wall, then slid down to the floor. Bones was yelling again, but she couldn’t understand a word. All she knew was the pain and the sand pressed against her face, worming into her mouth as she tried to breathe.

This time, she did not get up.
Bringing Awareness to All Cancers

On March 21, 2008, my whole world changed. I lost someone immensely close to me. Although it has been over nine years, the loss of my step-dad has truly affected my family. He battled metastatic melanoma. I was only in second grade when Joe passed away, but I remember every detail about what happened on that Friday in March. It was the Good Friday before Easter. I was at my grandma’s house when my step-mom got the call about what had happened. I specifically remember when my sister and I were in the car on the way to go see Joe, my step-mom turned to me as I was crying and said, “I know the angels are singing to him up in heaven.” That day will always be a day I remember in my life. I remind myself that he stopped suffering that day. He did not have to go through all the cancer treatments and hospice anymore.

Although the suffering stopped for him, it was hard for my family to adapt to this new normal. One day a couple years ago, my younger brother had a hard time understanding why we did not acknowledge melanoma in the same way that we acknowledge breast cancer. For a dress up day at school, he was told to support patients fighting cancer and wear pink. Keeping in mind that this day was not even in October, it was hard for him to understand why wearing pink was the only color they could wear even though they were supporting all cancer patients in general. After thinking about this, he decided to wear black. Black is the color that represents melanoma. He wanted to recognize the cancer that had killed his own father because there was not a treatment for it.

Everyone knows that breast cancer awareness month is October. People acknowledge this by wearing pink to support breast cancer patients. At my school, fundraisers and raffles at football games and volleyball games are two ways that we raise money to go towards research for breast cancer. I am not discouraging support towards breast cancer patients. I am, however, encouraging support towards patients fighting other cancers. I wholeheartedly support breast cancer for I know that numerous people suffer from this every day. My grandmother battled through breast cancer; after treatment, she was lucky enough to overcome it. On the other hand, how many people know the awareness month and color for melanoma, lung cancer, ovarian cancer, thyroid cancer, or leukemia? The list of cancers goes on and on. Melanoma is May and black. Lung cancer is November and white. Ovarian cancer is September and teal. Thyroid cancer is September and pink and blue. Leukemia is September and orange (“Calendar”). These are just a few cancers that people battle every day.

Cancer costs the world more money than any other disease. Annually, cancer costs about $895 billion. For example, pancreatic cancer surgery costs approximately $56,587. Colon cancer surgery costs around $31,738. Chemotherapy for just one month in a doctor’s office costs about $10,764. Radiation therapy for one month in a doctor’s office costs near $11,472. The costs for both chemotherapy and radiation therapy will differ depending on the type of cancer that is being treated (Elkins).
The funding for every cancer type is different. The cancer that receives the most money per year is breast cancer with about $572.6 million. Prostate cancer receives near $285.4 million. There is a significant difference between the amounts of funding between those two cancers. Leukemia receives around $216.4 million. Some cancers do not receive near as much money. Melanoma receives about $110.8 million. Bladder cancer only receives approximately $24.1 million (Thompson).

Some of the rarest types of cancer to have are foot cancer, chordoma, and mesenchymal chondrosarcoma (“5 Types of Rare Cancers”). Since these cancers are rare, it is difficult to study and understand them, especially without funding to help.

It is obvious that one person will not know every single type of cancer and show awareness towards them. Support towards a larger variety of cancer patients is better than supporting only patients affected by one particular cancer. Funding can go towards general cancer research. Other fundraisers can be advertised for more cancers other than just breast cancer. I am encouraging support for everyone affected by the murderous disease called cancer. I want my brother to be able to wear black in remembrance of his dad and my step-dad without feeling like an outsider. I want people to feel supported and get the same opportunities for research towards their disease.

Works Cited
“5 Types of Rare Cancers.” Step To Health, Step to Health (USA), 9 Aug. 2016, steptohealth.com/5-types-rare-cancers/.
“None of this will matter after high school.”

My mother repeated the mantra of every adult in the world with a kind smile, pity in her eyes for my youthful ignorance. I returned it easily, feeling not regret or sadness, but fire in my belly. Telling my mother about the only social drama to ever occur in my short, reclusive life was not meant to evoke sadness or empathy. It was a chance to brag. Finally, I had snipped the girl who had been my best friend from my life, discarded our friendship like a piece of scrap paper. The night before, the night I had ended things for good, I couldn’t wipe the vindictive smile off of my face; it once again spread across my features as I thought of my own personal brush with justice. Hidden below the surface, however, was a grain of doubt. I buried it under a mountain of hatred, under an ocean full of vengeful fire. Still, it pulsed with the heaviness of guilt that, eventually, crumbled the mountains within me under its crushing weight. I wanted so badly to hate her that, for a while, I did. Every mention of her name brought the wounded rage back to my gut, adding fuel to the flame that I thought would be eternal. It was possible that, after months of pure contempt, I became exhausted of the vengefulness that coursed through my veins. But looking back, the fire in my veins was never meant to be thrown.

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I met her in seventh grade, during that trademark period of emotional turmoil and utterly mortifying behavior that only an eleven-year-old can experience. I was lonely and somewhat outcast, having unfortunately developed a unique blend of narcissism, overwhelming self-consciousness, and debilitating shyness that, over the years, has made me appear either aloof and haughty or completely socially inept (or in some scenarios, both). In simpler terms, it was a rough time. I wasn’t completely isolated, but the unfamiliar hallways I walked and the crowds of people that passed me by were overwhelmingly large. I was a tiny castaway, somehow unable to dive into this vast sea of new faces. I’d drifted apart from the people I had truly been close to, and was now simply floating in the space between tight-knit groups, attempting to find just one person I could truly feel connected with. I was quiet and shy, and cared what others thought so deeply that it might as well have been rooted in my bones; my few new friends were loud, bold, and unashamed in a way that made me question whether their confidence was truly a positive thing. I felt as if none of these new people could ever become a true friend. I was simply too different from this eclectic group of brazen outcasts. My luck changed, however, with the rising tide of new friendship.

“This is Chelsea, who is the only one we haven’t entirely tainted yet,” said Kate with an easy yet distracted smile, surreptitiously searching for the first available route out of this introduction as she spoke. I wrung my hands and nervously smiled, making hesitant eye contact despite every instinct my brain could produce screaming to look back down at my ratty, sharpie-colored Converse. I gave a small wave and made an attempt at a greeting, releasing instead a quiet, incoherent squeak of a hello. The girl with thickly applied cat-eye makeup and an oversized black sweatshirt looked me over not unkindly, but with an air of judgement lingering behind her neutral expression. Having completed her mission, Kate flounced away, and I was left to shrivel under the gaze of this intimidating stranger.

“Chelby? Did she say your name was Chelby?” Her voice was incredulous, and I forced down a wave of anxiety at the prospect of actually having to respond.
“Chelsea, actually. It turns out my parents weren’t that crazy.” A moment of silence passed as I waited with bated breath for her reaction before she burst into friendly laughter, lifting an anvil of weight from my shoulders. I grinned as the girl extended her manicured hand.

“Oh, my God, I’m glad. That would’ve been so awkward.” The relief in her voice was palpable. “I’m Haylee. Nice to meet you, Chelby.” The butterflies in my stomach floated away with the giggles I could no longer hold back.

Haylee was the version of myself that I desperately wanted to be. She was introverted, yet sociable; a bit of an outcast, yet still cool; confident, but not brash. I was over the moon, having finally discovered someone that I wasn’t ashamed to be seen with. I felt guilty for thinking it, but she was one of my few friends who was normal, or at least close to it. When I was with her, I never had to feel myself burn red with embarrassment or hide my face in shame. That same normalcy which I so craved, however, came with a price tag. I was never the type to be involved in drama, unless it was of the sort that occurred on our low-budget middle school stage. This isn’t a statement to my credit; I was, and still am, so terrified at the thought of direct confrontation that arguing with friends, even if warranted, is completely unthinkable. I couldn’t, I wouldn’t, I won’t. Haylee, it seemed, was almost the opposite. She never wanted drama, but was somehow always tangled in another web of conflicts, constantly venting about other friends who never seemed to stop antagonizing each other. It was a world with which I was uncomfortable; for a long time, I didn’t mind, and it never quite affected me. I listened to the stories, I offered my clumsy advice— but I never wanted to be a part of any of it. I was a sponge for all the dramas, all the emotions, all the things that I never quite knew how to deal with. I thought I was happy to simply be a friend, to listen and never speak. But the sponge filled up with emotions that were not my own, and the seeds of resentment began to weave their way into my thoughts. As hard as I tried to resist them, the vines gripped the back of my mind every time I saw a new text bubble, and my rose-colored vision was tinted with darkness.

“I’ve been feeling… bad lately, I guess. I don’t know,” I said with a shrug and the beginnings of a mist in my eyes at lunch on one cloudy and hopeless February day. “I’m probably just being overdramatic. Or maybe it’s the weather. I don’t know.” I glanced at Haylee as she spoke, carefully watching the casually concerned expression that seemed to only slightly shadow her perpetually made-up face.

“I don’t know. That sucks, though. I know I get super depressed in the winter, too.” She returned to her bagel, the concern on her face fading so quickly that I wondered if it had been there at all. “Did I tell you what happened in English? I’m so mad at that class.”

I plastered a smile onto my face, and shook my head no, shoulders hunching as I listened. The words swam in and out of my ears as newly restless fingers tapped the linoleum table before me.

_It’s nothing. It’s nothing. It’s nothing._

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I hesitated for a moment on that fateful November night, staring at the message I’d typed on my screen with my finger hovering over the button, not quite able to press send. It felt as if the world had stopped for a moment; as if the universe had given me a chance to turn back. I remembered the first time we’d laughed together, the times we’d texted back and forth long into the night. These memories filled me with a warm glow of nostalgia, but they were stained with the inky black of resentment. I remembered, too, the times she’d undermined me, the times she’d ignored me. The times that I had felt tiny and insignificant. The memories were quick to rekindle my fiery resolve. I stared at my indomitably shining screen for only a few seconds before I struck the final blow.

_You’re not my problem anymore._ The message whirled away into permanence as I smiled the ferocious leer of a crocodile at my own reflection. My eyes shone and my face flushed with the adrenaline rush of victory. A laugh rolled off my tongue into the crisp, silent air in the room where I’d spent so many nights awake, listening to her problems but never courageous enough to share my own. I was free at last from the girl whose name burned black in my mind’s eye; free to rejoin those very same friends of whom I was once so ashamed.

I couldn’t sleep for hours for the disbelieving shakiness of my limbs, the rage-fueled pounding of my heart.

_I finally did it._ I thought, pacing the disheveled ten feet of my messy room, _it’s finally over._ In my mind, I
had become an avenger of myself, the pinnacle of middle-school righteousness. I took all the things I had begun to hate about her and shot them back into her face, barely stopping to think about whether my actions were unjust. I believed that my vicious cruelty was my right. Beneath the grin that hijacked my features, there was a vindictive yet glowing happiness that wouldn’t let me be still. Several restless hours later, as I drifted off into the sleep of the satisfied, kept warm by that fire burning in my gut, the backs of my eyelids were tinted with rose.

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I can never quite even type out the words that I want to say to her now. I repeat them in my mind often, but my courage only stretches as far as quiet thoughts about regrets and apologies. Still, I don’t know whether I would be happier. Whether that same, kind girl with the cat-eye makeup and the girl who his beneath her own cowardice could have stayed just as they were. Happy. My mother has always said that ‘if something was meant to be, it’ll be.’ Try as I might, I can never quite believe her. Nothing is meant to be. There are only things that you work for hard enough and things that you let slip through the cracks of your own heart. Haylee was of the latter. It was never her trampling me underfoot; it was me throwing myself to the ground. The problem of our friendship was never her blocking out the words I tried to say; it was my own voice not quite being loud enough. And the resentment that boiled in my chest was no fault of her own; it was the fact that the words never made it past my lips.

After that night, it took months for the hatred to wear off, for the rose-tinged scents of ignorant bliss to sniff the tsunami of regret that slowly infiltrated my system. That night, I took the only person that tied me to something and I cut myself free to float in the vast expanse of unhappiness I had for so long traversed. That fact is what tortures me, what keeps me awake at night with a sickly pain in my chest. I know that the same block in my throat that couldn’t tell her why I was unhappy is the same one that keeps me silent and isolated in the shell I’ve built for myself. No one but me is to blame for the empty home that it seems as if I never leave. If I could say it, maybe I wouldn’t be an island so deep in the sea. Maybe someone would understand why I am the way I am, take pity on the lonely life that I lead. I cling to the hope that after I am on my own, after I graduate, things will change. I will be able to shove down the fear that confronts me at the nuances of real friendship. I cling to the hope that someday, I will be brave enough to speak. Either that, or I will drown in a sea of my own creation.

Dear Haylee, I write in my head, I’m sorry. I don’t know what to say besides that. I was an idiot in eighth grade. You didn’t deserve that. It was never your fault. You don’t have to read this. You don’t even have to acknowledge this. I just wanted you to know that I’m sorry.
President Baker Orteez sighed as he leaned back in his cheap, uncomfortable recliner. It had been a long day in the oval office, doing… [REDACTED]. It was so classified, he wasn’t even allowed to think about it. *The U.S. government is much more paranoid about the Illuminati than generally believed*, Baker thought from under his tin foil hat. Alien paranoia was just another stressor in the most stressful office in the nation.

“Goodnight, Bakey.” Melissa strutted into his office, head held high in her long, silk robe. She patted him on the shoulder, lips turning down at the tension she felt beneath her strong hands. “Get some sleep. You have a big conference tomorrow.”

Baker forced a smile onto his tired features and pecked her goodnight, watching forlornly as she breezily walked back to their bedroom. He longed to be so quickly free of the stress and worry of the day. Unfortunately, relaxation didn’t come nearly as easily for Baker. He remained still and silent in his chair until the first snores emanated from the bedroom in which Melissa lay, fast asleep in the folds of their presidential waterbed. He eased himself up, tiptoeing down the long hallway, passing by the door where his wife lay resting. He was almost there. Baker glanced around the hallway, senses on high alert, before sliding his key in the lock of a nondescript white door and surreptitiously slipping inside.

The room, formerly a presidential broom closet, was covered wall-to-wall with posters from boy bands and reality TV shows, all mysteriously missing from his daughters’ collections. A floor-length mirror hung on the back of the door, and Baker looked into his own tired eyes for a moment before retrieving what he had really come here for. A shoebox lay in a back corner of the room. Baker opened it delicately and felt a warm glow illuminate his very being. A smile, the first he had smiled in days, spread across his face as he slipped on his babies. They strengthened his calves, made him tall and strong. Satisfaction washed over him as he once again studied his own reflection. The high heels were six inches high, adorned with a faux fur zebra print exterior. The stiletto outline elongated his legs as he posed them in the mirror.

“You are a model,” whispered Baker to himself, “a beautiful, beautiful-”

“Baker?” Melissa stood in the doorway, blearily rubbing her eyes. “What are you doing?”

Baker froze, hand on hip and leg outstretched. “I-Um- I mean- I’m...”
There was a long silence as the First Couple stared at each other, the leader of the free world caught like a deer in headlights mid-pose. Melissa began to back out of the room.

“I’m just…” Melissa fell into disbelieving silence once more, rubbing her eyes in confusion. “I’m just going to assume this was a dream.” She nodded, having found a reasonable solution, and left the room silently. Baker remained frozen for a second more before slowly straightening himself. He slipped the shoes back into their box, hands shaky and slow. As he walked back to his bedroom, the tension returned to his shoulders, head drooping in front of him; his presidential relaxation for the night, ruined.
The man with the gray balloon 
glued to the grip of his fingers 
with the hollow whiteness pasted across his curling teeth 
because he (of them all) 
is masoned that his is just as beautiful

His parched hands lay beneath 
(crackling and bitten) fingers 
fenced from the nourishment of creativity

He (of them all) taught to measure his worth 
from how gray, worn down, and out of breath he becomes 
how he is to mimic his (their) balloon 
with a dusty mind and soul

He (of them all) be damned 
from the rest of the world of clenched gray balloons 
if he unlock his (their) broken fingers 
to thirst upon the renewal of original idea

Envy the man without the gray balloon
“Get in! Get in NOW! HURRY!” an unknown voice screeched at the crowd of people desperately running towards the large metal opening. The stench of napalm hung in the air, and the red sky shone through the thick, gassy clouds like like the slits between fence pickets.

“Go! Get in the bunk - - -” The voice was cut off by a blinding white flash, immediately accompanied by a wave of sound that shook the fluids in your ears. It was hard to notice the blinking lights and clashing of gears and pistons, but the few other people whose gaze was taken away from the explosion caught your attention. You sharply turn your body and bolt toward the box. As you get closer, the ringing in your ears grows louder, and you start to feel the pulse in your head. Suddenly, there’s a tickle in your skin’s peeling. Your hair is singed. You start to feel nauseous. The light gets brighter. You are going to die.

But you don’t.

You clamber into the closing doors of the bunker like a drunk, and your body hits the floor with a thud. A loud clunk of metal tells you that the door is locked. You can hear the muffled screams of your past neighbors outside as you hear another loud bang. They will die today. But not you. You give the floor a grim smile, and then you pass out.

You wake up after a couple of hours with a spoon full of a warm liquid in your mouth. You spit it out in a startled fit. You feel the presence of multiple bodies around you, but you don’t want to open your eyes to check. A cold hand rests on your shoulder in response to your outburst.

“Shhhh…. Stay calm…” a distant voice calls. The hand starts to feel colder. Colder. It’s so cold it burns. You instinctively shove the hand off your shoulder. You hear something about radiation poisoning, and the hand pulls up yours, and another, different hand clasps the bare side of your hand. “Does it…cold…” the voice echoes. The cold hurts worse than before. You let out a dull moan and try to move your hand away. The two hands let go. Pins and needles goes through your body, and you shiver to release them. Another moan slips out of your mouth and someone puts a blanket on you.

A faint whistling could be heard outside the bunker. Someone inside yells and a blast vibrated the walls of the bunker. Another, louder blast rings in your ears, and you’re startled out of your trance. After everyone starts to get up from their crouched position, you begin to recognize some of the faces, including the one the hands and voice belonged to. John, Thomas, Lillian, Janet… your neighbors. They’re all your neighbors. All. All. A silly word, you think, for a group of just seven.

At lunch, your long time friend, Don, tries to help you with your speech therapy. The voice, Lillian, said that you swallowed some ash from a fire when you were running towards the bunker. “It would have been fine,” she’d told you, “if it was just ash from a normal fire, but somehow whoever bombed us irradiated their smaller bombs. Some of the ashes got irradiated too”

So here you are, your timid, anxiety-ridden friend attempting to help you speak as he constantly trails off into his own little world, thinking up worry-induced horrors, his round glasses almost sliding off his face. You eventually give up on trying to snap him out of it, and just accept that you’re just going to have to re-learn to speak later. The soup burns your throat. Going in for another sip, an explosion from outside
shakes the can out of your hands. Tomato soup spills everywhere, and there is an awkward silence. People have gotten used to the explosions, but they still don’t like what little food they have being dropped onto the musty ground.

Richmond, the designated janitor of the group, sighed and limped over towards the mess, a dirty rag hanging loosely in one hand. He was injured in an explosion, it was a miracle that he made it to the bunker before everyone else. You try to apologize for the mess, but the pain in your throat is too much, and all that comes out is an exasperated moan.

“I know what’ya mean. Don’t hurt yourself,” Richmond muttered. He looked up at you after the mess was cleaned up and gave you a half-smile. You give a subtle nod back.

“Damn, you could cut the tension with a knife,” John sarcastically chimes. John was a nice guy, but he had a knack for saying things that got him into trouble.

“It was just a bit of food. We’ll be saved before we run out.”

“What makes you so sure, John?” Janet spoke up, “There’s only seven of us, sure, but the bombings have already been going on for a day now.” There was a hushed murmur among the group. Janet was the only one who had a watch, and had been filling people in on how much time had passed. Apparently she had been lying.

“I-I… I didn’t want to scare anyone…” Janet stuttered out in response to the whispers.

“Nobody really cares, Jan,” Richmond called, “I , for one, knew that more time had passed. Just be honest in the future.”

“The f-future!?” Ron cried, “We don’t have a… we don’t have a goddamned future!” Everyone was taken aback. Ron usually zoned out for conversation. Not this time. “We’re g-going to die!”

“Calm down, Ron,” Lillian said in her usual, quiet tone.

“Calm down?! Calm… d-down. No! I won’t c-calm down. We keep talking about these tri-trivial things like, wh-who took an extra can of soup and who b-bombed us! Bu-but it doesn’t matter! All that matters is that w-we w-were bombed, our families are d… dead… and… and…” Ron sighed, “There have been so many explosions, so much terror. I-I just can’t take it anymore. I’m sorry, everyone…”

As soon as he finished, there was a loud clanking at the door.

“Well, it seems to me that conversation was all for nothing,” John clucked.

Some gears started to turn, and the four bars holding the hatch closed started to turn.

“Thank g-god,” Ron whispered.

There was a loud creak and a sliver of light appeared opposite the hatches hinge. The sliver grew wider until you could see two figures in black and green armor poke their heads in. One of them shines a flashlight in your eyes. The other says something in a foreign language. The flashlight man responds in the same language. As you’re trying to think of what they could be speaking, the flashlight man pulls out a small black handgun. The other one pulls out a long shotgun. You duck.

The loud ringing of gunfire disorients you as you instinctively run towards the back wall of the bunker. You turn around to see Ron with a large bullet hole through his chest and John trying to run towards the hatch. He gets shot and killed. As you try to dart towards John a bullet pierces your calf. You fall. The pain makes you sick. You want to throw up.

You are going to die.

And you do.

A blinding white flash erases all, in one fell swoop.
Scout Bennett

Grade 10

I Come From Coordinates
Poetry

Jefferson High School
Festus, MO
Teacher: Nicole Boyer

I come from coordinates

I come from latitude 32.274598, longitude -94.978551
A part of East Texas that I finally get to when the parts of my legs that I can still feel are buzzing,
And my eyes feel waxy from looking at nothing but road for 10 hours.
A small town where I learned the people you love can have an infestation of hate inside their mind.
Where I learned their stinging exertions were well hidden behind a veil of the sweet, God-fearing
fragrance they secreted.
Where the tea tastes like honey.

I come from latitude 38.384853, longitude -90.498902
An old car shop on Old 21 that I share a name with.
When I owned the rose-tinted glasses all children don, it was more than a car shop.
I lost the glasses;
now it’s just a car shop.
Most things these days are “now it’s just this” and “now it’s just that” …
I wish I could find those glasses.

I come from latitude 38.130536, longitude -90.309742
And latitude 38.107747, longitude -90.307710
Two sets of coordinates instead of one because sometimes wholes become halves.
My home started to have cracks in it when I was about 4.
But if it’s not broke, then don’t fix it.
When I was about 6 my home had holes, clefts, rips, and fissures covered by bandages and promises to try
better.
But if it’s not broke, then don't fix it.
I was about 8 when I realized there would never be enough night shifts to take and money to spend to
repair my home.
My home was shattered.
It was broke.
And it couldn’t be fixed.

I come from latitude 38.145969, longitude -90.310821
A place that allows us to give in to our wanderlust.
A place that changes with the seasons.
In the spring, we grow goosebumps as we fly through brisk air on worn bicycles. Racing on back roads to the field of wild sunflowers; We like to watch the flowers as they watch the sun. In the summer, we sit smushed in the trunk of an old Jeep with packets of Dippin’ Dots on our laps. As the humid night explodes with color, we look up in wonder With our sunburnt cheeks and ice cream dribbled chins. In the fall, we stick our muddy feet into the cold river and listen to the silence that always comes with autumn. Usually we like to make noise to distract from silence, But sometimes it’s nice to just *be*. In the winter, we lose feeling in the bottoms of our feet and the tips of our noses as we slide along the frozen lake. It never bothers us because we’re too busy having fun. And too busy worrying if the ice might crack and send us plunging: The ice never cracks.

I am going to latitude XX.XXXXXX, longitude XX.XXXXXX An unknown set of coordinates because I have no clue where I’m going. I’ve began keeping company with soothsayers, oracles, and crystal ball gazers. We often discuss my uncharted future...just for fun. They chart my trajectory using tarot cards, runes, and the allining of stars. They’ve never shown me what they see, And I never ask them what they see. I say I’m too young to know, But I think I might know subconsciously. Or maybe I don’t. I can’t be sure of the path I must take to my destination, But I am sure that I will reach it.
If you are in search of a happy ending, then her story is not for you. Her story is a reminder that reality can never match the artificial exquisite endings in every other book; or my reality at least. If I could erase every woe and change it into joy in her story, I would do it in a heartbeat.

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The sun glared above at its highest peak in a small town called Haql, Saudi Arabia on June 15, 1759. Not a single cloud in the sky revealed itself, and sand covered every inch of the ground.

“Hey lunatic!” Three girls shouted from the corner of the market. They stood on top of a bed of jagged rocks and stones. One girl picked a rock and threw it at Luna’s left shoulder.

“I’ve heard that she’s got rocks for brains,” another taunted.

“Well, rocks for brains thinks that an eclipse happens in three more days. What a weirdo. What a freak.” They giggled and laughed hard at that last statement.

Luna kept walking with her head down, and she sulked. She untied the band keeping her wavy black hair up and let it hide her honey brown face. Her hands buried themselves deep in her pockets. She stared at the sand road that carved its way into the market, not once looking up.

She did, however, stop at a particular stand carrying rows of lush and fresh grapes, watermelons, dates, and cucumbers. She plucked a long slender cucumber and ran traced fingers around its smooth green edges.

Suddenly, a massive hand gripped Luna's tiny left wrist. “You gonna pay for those you little thief?” The stand owner bellowed as he rose from behind the booth and spit on the ground. “I just turn my back for one minute and you think it’s okay to take my stuff?” he hollered.

A black beard covered his chin, a turban hid his head, his milky brown and wrinkly skin stretched across his face, and he stunk of alcohol.

Luna instantly dropped the cucumber and tried uselessly to break free from the man’s unbreakable grasp as his hold on her tightened.

“I did not plan on stealing, and I have money,” she snapped. The man’s grip loosened, and she snatched her hand away, rubbing her red and light purple wrist.

She reached into her pant pocket to fish for a coin and slammed it on the counter. “Will this cover it?” she asked, annoyed.

The stand owner speedily whipped the coin away and picked the smallest and most rotten cucumber from
the pile of fruits.

“Hey!” Luna whined.

“No refunds,” the man grunted, now shining a metal lamp.

She stared at the cucumber distastefully, taking in the dried and wrinkled skin, squishy brown spots, and the fact that it barely outsized her hand. She wiped the sweat now forming on my brow and still pocketed it along with the star charts, wooden stick, and ink bottle.

Luna strolled away from the stand and out of the market as every head turned, every set of eyes stared and every mouth flew.

“Luna!” I shouted while I waved both hands over my head just when I entered the market.

She turned and smiled, presenting her brilliant white teeth and dimpled cheek. She sprinted to me and hugged me.

“Well, this is a nice welcome,” I teased.

She looked up. “It’s pretty hard when you’re the only outcast in a village,” she replied, straightening herself. Her eyes drifted to the side. “I’d better get going,” she oddly rushed. “I must finish my equations.”

“Wait,” I suddenly called as Luna glided away. She stopped and turned around as I caught up with her.

“Hey Makin!” a fake princess like voice sounded before I could tell her something to comfort her.

Luna groaned and curled her hands into fists. The three girls sauntered in front of us in their fancy thin colored robes. I held her tense wrist in my calloused hand.

“Makin, why don’t you ditch her and come with us?” a girl in stunning maroon robes cooed in a dreamy voice.

“Sorry, not interested,” I stated sternly.

They all gaped at our hands and wore their grim and disgusted expressions well. The girl in navy blue robes and another in forest green gave Luna death scares. The other walked forward and sighed.

“You don’t get it, do you,” she frustratedly addressed me and tore us apart. “People like her belong in asylums, all locked up,” she stated, bending Luna's arms into an arm lock, yet Luna acted so unusually calm, almost bored.


“You know what happens to people in there, don’t you?” the girl in navy robes purred next to Luna, stroking her beautiful and flawless face. “Wasn’t the crazy old hag or what you call father shipped there? Just as insane as you.” She spoke every word as if she were lulling a baby to sleep.

“Natural death, was it? But we all know that old age doesn’t come with snake bites.” the blue girl slapped Luna across her cheek. Luna’s bored expression remained, and she stared at the girl’s soulless eyes with her fierce amber eyes, challenging her.

“The biggest problem is getting them into the asylum,” the girl in green declared before she jerked Luna’s hair. “Makin,” the witch barked. “Take her to the asylum for us. Get rid of the burden,” she ordered.
I was about lash out, but Luna immediately twisted her arms back to normal and tackled the red girl.

“No one is taking me anywhere,” Luna alleged while furiously pinning the red girl’s arms.

The red girl smirked instead. “I wouldn’t be so sure.”

I then spotted the navy girl advancing on Luna with a big, sharp rock. “Luna!” I screamed, but she kept holding the girl down. I tried to get her but tripped, so I spun to see the witch’s foot sticking out. “Luna!” I yelled, but the rock already collided with her skull.

I scampered to her as she collapsed on the coarse sand, blinking her painful tears away. “Luna?” I shrieked. I shook her, but she already fell into the dark eerie void.

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Luna groaned as she opened her eyes. She squinted at the lab’s cave ceiling in the dim light and shut her eyes. After a minute, she reopened them and sat up on the floor, clutching her head and gritting her teeth.

She pushed the linen quilt and wobbled when she stood. Luna laid a hand on the cave’s wall to regain her balance, but she plunged to the rough ground after her first steps. She crawled over to me instead.

I was sleeping shirtless. A small blue crystal necklace that Luna gave me years ago hung from my neck. My unruly black hair stood up in tuffs as my head rested against the wall. The circles and freshly sprouted tears made me look much older than eighteen.

“No… no… Luna… no,” I murmured in my sleep.

“Makin,” Luna urgently mumbled while shaking my bicep.

My eyes immediately flew open. “Luna?” I rasped.

She nodded, and I speedily pulled her into a hug.

“This is a nice welcome,” Luna repeated.

“I was so scared,” I explained. “You lost so much blood, your heart almost failed, I was so afraid that you’d never wake up or that you wouldn’t remember a thing.”

“What time and day is it?” Luna inquired.

“7:40ish and May 18,” I yawned, remembering the totality of the eclipse started at 8:03.

We sat through a long-lived moment of listening to the furious wind of a sandstorm. “Was your dream about losing me?” she asked.

I hesitated. “It doesn’t matter because I won’t lose you,” I declared.

Luna slipped out of the embrace, wiping a tear. “I’m going to Greece like my father after this eclipse… alone,” she stated.
“But what if they seize you and turn you into their slave?” I frantically questioned.

“They at least treat slaves with some respect,” she replied.

“Then take me with you, please,” I begged.

“No, Makin. I can’t because you have a life here with fame, wealth, and people’s love. I get in the way of it all,” Luna explained, drying another tear.

I lightly clasped her hand. “I don’t deserve any of it and you know it. Remember, you’re the one who helped me build those fresh-water wells and you fixed all the errors in my work. You need to take me with you or stay with me. Please don’t go, I... I-”

Luna covered my mouth with her hand. “Do you hear that?” she warily questioned, rubbing her eyes. I strained my ears, only for them to be deafened by the screeching wind.

“Luna, this-” I began before she hushed me.

“Footsteps and-,” she stated, taking a big gulp air like it was her last. “Cooking oil,” she noted, alarmed. Luna quickly tossed me a handkerchief, followed by a pair of makeshift goggles, putting one on herself. She dragged me out of the lab, covering her mouth with her thin mud shirt.

“Luna! Wait!” I screamed through the handkerchief.

“Duck!” she shrieked before she toppled me to the ground, shielding my ears from the ear-splitting explosion that erupted only seconds after.

I slowly regained my senses. I peered up to find the sandstorm gone with Luna who zoomed away to the village.

“Luna!” I called. I raced after her. She didn’t look back or slow down as if she heard nothing. I instantly caught up with her, but she stopped her stride and scurried the other way.

Luna hastily crouched under a house on stubby wood stands. I foolishly sped past it and around every other clay house in the tiny village.

Luna peeped at the dusk surroundings. Once she was certain I left, she skittered to the market where the best view for the eclipse was promised.

Luna nearly crumpled when she reached the village. It seemed as if she had recently bathed and forgot to dry herself. She looked up and quickly looked away. The moon almost transformed the sun into a gorgeous ring with a fairer gem on top.

Luna hastily scampered to the fresh water well and reeled the bucket up. Instead of water, Luna came face to face with a poisonous Bitis Arietans snake. The slender and patterned snake hissed vigorously and snapped at her.

Luna held the snake back, but it curled around her hands, bounding them together. Luna desperately tried to fling it off, but the snake bit her on both her hands.

It promptly slithered up her arm, even though she uselessly tried to uproot the snake with her swollen and numb hand. The snake wrapped around her neck and sunk its fangs into the dead center of her heart. Luna slumped,
and she struggled to get one deep breath. She wept at the pain that spread like wildfire.

Luna took her star charts and ink bottle from her pocket and flipped the charts over. She shakily scribbled a note with her tears constantly rubbing the ink away.

The note crumpled in her hand as she laid back on the sand, watching the moon overcome the sun. The stars twinkled and danced in Luna's vision before it darkened.

I zoomed into the market, where I think I'd heard someone sobbing. I avoided the snake while I rushed to Luna. "Luna?" I voiced shockingly when I saw her as I did three days ago the same way.

I felt for a sign of life, but my breath hitched as I discovered that I couldn't hear or feel any sign of life. "Luna?" I whispered, shaking her like I did before. Last time she twitched, but this time, I didn't see anything.

I hugged her as tears spilled into her soft hair. "This is a nice welcome," she would say. This is the only one that counts, I would think.

I set her down on the wet sand and plucked the note from Luna's limp hand. I read the sloppy words:

*Please forgive me for being a foolish blind girl. You are my sun that I cannot leave. I won't leave ever. But please forgive me for no longer being your moon. Look to the sky before its too late. Isn't the view something to die for?*
I had never felt so strongly for a being aside from myself until the day I first saw Myra. Her soft green eyes were as light as air and warm as the sun. Her skin was fair, her figure dipping in the most beautiful waves, and her heart shining through her smile, filtering through in each bright laugh straight from her joyous soul. Her hair, however, was my favorite feature. It was the color of hayfields, of firelight, of nighttime’s moonbeams. The palest yet most vibrant blonde, all in curls softer than the breeze.

The day I first fell for Myra was the day I found my way, the day I knew what my future would hold for me because there wasn’t a single thing I could imagine doing that didn’t include her. Her hand extended towards me in greeting, and grasping onto it, I found myself pulled from a torrential sea and upon the calm sands, breathing clear air beneath a myriad of stars.

In classes, she would take up a seat beside me. At diners, she’d slip a fry from my plate, and I’d love her all the more for the giggles that came afterwards. Every movement Myra made had my heart beating, its imprint left in my chest along with the bruises from where I clutched at the skin above it, desperate for the air that Myra never failed to steal away.

Our lives were comprised of each other’s joy; we revelled in each other like we revelled in the simple act of living. Of course, there were days where our time was spent apart, but they were so seldom to me that they blew past my mind quicker than the breeze. The time we spent together, no matter what it was we were doing, was the time I valued the most.

Myra was my everything, the air I breathed, the sights I saw, the sounds I heard. It was all her, in every single aspect of every single thing in my life. I loved her with all of my heart, and I know that she loved me, too. There was no other option, no other choice — a connection like ours was once in a lifetime. Still, she was delicate, both in appearance and in mind. On occasion she would wilt, the flower that she was, and I would have to give her a nudge in the right direction. I would give her more attention, bring her light and love and she would return to the beautiful centerpiece of our garden that she was meant to be.

I remember the first time she began to wilt, a few days before Christmas. Our movie plans were postponed, something she never did, and I came to find that she’d spent it drinking warm cider at a parade. With another man. I don’t know why she didn’t think to take me, why she thought he was the one she should go with, but when Christmas came about, I lavished her with heaps of gifts, and the other man seemed to be long forgotten as we caught up on our movies, drank our own hot cider and ate our reindeer cookies.

The second time, I knew it had to be his fault. My dear Myra, holding a valentine with his name scrawled upon the card. Why she smiled I couldn’t fathom. Why she tried to keep it I’ll never know, but again, I let my emotions pour out in the form of treats and trinkets that left her smile larger, left her heart happier, reminded her that I was the one she was meant to be with. Jason was a foul name, anyways, fitting for a foul bout of weeds in our garden.

By the third wilt, I came to realize it wasn’t just him. He’d poisoned my lovely flower, and she drank it knowingly, willingly. She invited him to dinner, and the two enjoyed a nice evening. I never would have known, she would have kept it from me had I not seen the two on my way home.
How dare she. How dare she go to him, how dare she toss away what we had as if it were nothing more than a mere trifle of her time, as if we weren’t perfect as we were. How dare she, and how dare he, who plucked her, roots and all, from my garden and planted him in his own. He didn’t deserve my beloved Myra.

I had to steal her back, clear out her roots and remove his filthy poison from her. I knew, I knew she loved me. Kindness and love, affections and objects simply weren’t enough for someone like her. Her fragile nature had her swaying in the wind. I had to block the wind, keep her petals in pristine place.

Warmth had trickled down my fingers, a feeling I knew too well. I clutched my chest when I saw her, and the same red droplets would appear on occasion. Now, as I clutched at the house key she’d proffered to me, the same pain flared, and I realized what it was. Even I, sturdy as I was, could be nothing but fragile in the light she radiated. I simple had to let her see me in that same light, make her feel the same unbearable ache as I when her gaze fell upon me.

When she arrived home, she smelled of his cologne, and he followed her through the door, seemingly shrouded in her perfume. It took mere seconds to uproot his tainted being while my dearest Myra was facing away; I couldn’t bear for her to fall ill at the sight, but it was necessary if my dear was ever to escape his hold. Still, when she turned, she leapt, seeing first me, then the blood, and then—I covered him with my own lower half, stepping closer and closer. She tried to scream for him, but I refused to let his name pass her lips.

My poor, poor Myra fainted then, having strayed so far from me that my touch so suddenly drew her breath from her lungs. Yet, I knew she still had his poison in her veins, and so I did only what was necessary.

When she awoke next, it was only us, her basement lit by a small bulb, our beds on opposite ends of the room. Mine rested beside the door, for I had to block the wind. I had to keep her safe, keep her fragile heart in place. Still, Myra wept, she begged, she tried in vain to pass me, to leave. I, the man she loved, to be left behind? It was then that I understood she didn’t feel it; love’s truth, love’s ache that left those in its grasp a sobbing mess, that left us completely at its mercy.

My name falling from her lips was the sweetest sound, but I closed my eyes tight. It had to be done, else she’d never feel the love she was meant to feel, never relish in the light we’d once had. One hand fell behind her head, stroked through her hair, and came down to close around her throat. The other I let press against her chest, nails digging, digging, clawing. Her eyes were wide and tear-blurred, but I knew she had to feel it. I felt it, the same ache in my chest. I let her know, I told her in whispered words that this is how she made me feel, that this is what we had.

She didn’t understand. Too delicate, too fragile. She needed to toughen her skin in the face of love, to learn to bear it so that she could be happy. Myra, Myra, she had to learn, and I, despite how her pain wounded me, had to teach. I kept her there in our little garden, the wind far away, the poison long removed, and taught her what love was. The burning, stabbing ache in her chest, the gasping breaths, the blindness that made the feelings all the more felt.

I remember how cold she was that last day, how she stopped looking at me, stopped begging. I remember how she was ever more fragile, never once toughening, never once learning what the love was no matter how hard I tried to teach her.

The flower couldn’t withstand the garden. My beloved Myra was too delicate yet for love. I remember… I remember her chest didn’t heave as it was supposed to, her heart didn’t beat, and her chest didn’t ache. I… remember that she wasn’t… the garden was not for her, and she… I… she wilted, that beautiful flower.
The garden… the garden, I planted a flower there. The garden, there was one with beautiful petals the color of nighttime’s moonlit beams, a stem of emerald, a warm and sunny center, all of which were streaked with red. Planted atop the poison that left it too fragile, it never blossomed again, poor flower. Poor, poor flower.

I remember walking down the street, and seeing it there: the most beautiful flower I had ever laid eyes upon, one that could certainly stand in the face of love, one that knew, that knew what it took.

I had never felt so strongly for a being aside from myself until the day I met Elinor.
I woke up shaking; drenched in sweat. Relief washing over me as I realized I was ok. I quietly got out of bed not wanting to wake Mason up. I walked downstairs to get a glass of water to calm my nerves. I’m tired of having nightmares every night. Tomorrow I’ll go to the healer, and ask him to fix this. Walking back up stairs I slowly contemplated what I was going to say tomorrow. I’ve never heard of anyone having nightmares in the sector. Maybe it’s normal and people just don’t remember theirs. I got back in bed quietly, willing my brain to let me go back to sleep.

I woke up in the morning to the sound of birds chirping, and sunshine streaming in through the blinds. I got up and put on my blue uniform to signify that I worked for the sector’s school. As I was walking down the stairs I started to hear humming coming from the kitchen.

“You’re up early,” I said to Mason giving him a kiss on the cheek.

“I thought you might want breakfast on your first day back,” he said handing me an omelet.

“Thanks, but I will have to eat this on the way. I can’t be late,” I said rushing out the door.

I walked outside at just the right time, the bus was waiting for me. I boarded and took a seat in my usual spot. Everyone rides the sector’s bus, because that is our only mode of transportation. At an early age you learn that walking or taking something else could result in severe injury, and if you are caught roaming the streets you are sent into the unknown.

I waved the bus good bye as I stepped onto the designated school walkway. I walked up to the front doors to the school, and noticed a flicker of light in the sky.

I must be crazy I thought to myself, nothing could be up there.

I walked into the classroom with a smile plastered on my face, “Good morning class,” I said as I sat down at my desk.

“Good morning Mrs. Myer,” they said in unison. I noticed one child in the back who hadn’t said good morning to me. “Michael I noticed you didn’t say good morning to me, do I need to refer you to the council?” I said as he straightened up in his chair.

“No Mrs. Meyer,” Michael said.

“Good, now class today we are going to talk about how the outside world crumbled, and how civilization only strives to survive in the sector,” I said as I pulled up the presentation for the class.

As the class flooded out of the classroom for lunch I gathered my things, ready to go to the healer. I walked outside and waited for the bus on the designated square, it arrived within minutes.

“Hello George, I would like to go to the Medical building please.” I said taking my normal seat.

“Sure thing Lucy,” George said as he set the bus into motion.

We arrived at the Medical building within five minutes. I stepped off and waved good-bye to George. I walked into the medical building, and it was surprisingly busy for this time of the day. Walking up to a virtual secretary I noticed one of the many pamphlets laying on the desk, asking anyone to report anything out of the ordinary going on in the sector. That’s odd, nothing ever strange happened here, why would the council be worried about it?

“Lucy Meyer for healer Brown please,” I said to the hologram.

“Do you have an appointment?”

“No.”

“What is the purpose of your visit?”
“Nightmares,” as I said that the hologram glitched. “We will be with you in a moment.”

I turned to sit down, but saw a couple of men in black uniforms slowly walking toward me. “I have to go to the bathroom,” I said to the hologram as I speed walked to the bathroom. I entered the bathroom, locked the door, and started to look for an exit, the only thing I found was a small window. There’s no way I could fit through that. After about five more minutes of trying to find a way out I heard a loud knock on the door.

“Mrs. Meyer, are you ok in there,” a rough male voice said. It probably belonged to one of those men. “I’ll be out in a minute,” I tried to say in my normal voice.

What do I do now? The window definitely won’t work, shouldn’t there be a vent in here. I stepped into the first stall and looked up at the ceiling. Great, all I see is a bunch of gunk. I walked in the next stall, nothing changing. Finally I got to the last stall, I looked up, but was distracted by a series of loud thuds against the door. They’re trying to break in. I quickly closed the door in the stall, and stood on the toilet. Listening to what was happening my foot slipped into the toilet. I sucked in a breath as I heard the door violently open, waiting for what was going to come next. I watched through the gap in the door as he walked around the bathroom. He slowly one by one opened all of the stall doors, stopping with a smirk right in front of mine.

“I know you're in there,” he said tauntingly.

Putting my feet on the stall walls I started to climb my way to the top, but I started to slip. I took my shoes off, and placed them in the toilet, and climbed to the top of the stall.

The man slowly opened the door, a look of confusion plastered on his face when he didn’t see me. He peered into the toilet, noticing the red heels, and slowly looked up.

I let go, grabbing him as I dropped down, causing his head to hit the toilet violently.

I slowly got up, blood pouring from my lip. I poked my head out of the bathroom, there were two men standing by the front desk. I casually slipped out of the bathroom, heading in the opposite direction of the men.

I slowly climbed down a staircase that led to the emergency exit. Bracing myself I opened the door. The alarms started blaring, as people flooded out of the Medical building. I quickly walked across the grass, and made my way down the street.

Great, first I have scary guys after me because I’m having nightmare, now I’m breaking the law and walking on the streets. Luckily I watched where the bus went when it picked me up, so I knew how to get to my house.

I opened the door quickly and rushed inside, Mason was sitting on the couch reading.

“Mason we have to leave, I don’t have time to explain now. The council is after me.” I said as I packed the necessities.

“Why didn’t you tell me about the nightmares, I could have helped you, warned you,” Mason quietly said that as he slowly came toward me.

“Mason, what are you doing? I didn’t tell you about the nightmares, and what do you mean you could have warned me?” I backed away slowly, stopping in front of the door. I took one last look at Mason and opened the door.

Everything turned black.
More than anything else, it was cold. The lightweight ship was trapped beneath meters of ice and snow. Arish’s one threat, his captor, wouldn’t last much longer. However, the likelihood of getting off the planet dwindled as each second passed, leaving his captor in a horrible situation.

The captor was indeed humanoid, the lack of humans this far out was evident. They were annoyances, but those who served the humans were simply a disgrace. To lower themselves to that of slaves… it made Arish sick.

But he was helpless, trapped in a glass box. The humanoid was simply sitting in the pilot’s chair, head in hands, contemplating the situation as it had been for the last few hours. Though he couldn’t see the creature’s face, Arish could clearly sense the hopelessness of it. Without any way out of his cage, Arish was forced to lie still, seeing each pane of glass fog up slightly with each breath of himself and his captor. It was sad, to simply wait for death.

Nara knew that it was hopeless. Two of her ship’s engines had been blown off by meteoroids, ensuring she and her bounty were encaged by the very ship that had been her home for the majority of her life. Nara sat slumped over the ship’s console, coming to terms with her own mortality. The unfortunate truth of her situation would ensure her own demise: the distance from any interplanetary civilization would spell her own death, along with that of a highly valuable bounty. The worm had been enough of a pain to find, and ended up killing others of its kind to chance a longer escape.

The authorities wouldn’t be happy to find that she’d gone off the grid, but they would only notice after a few months, and by then she’d be long gone. If she kept sending a distress signal, combined with the heat lost to the broken engines, the power would be gone within a week. But Nara was stranded in lawless space, full of planets too dangerous for humans or too unstable to be conquered- even the humans had their limits.

She’d wanted to do so much more with her life. It was such a shame, to die an unfulfilled life. To die as a prisoner, knowing each moment would lead her closer to her own death.

Arish was only faintly aware of the crying at first. His captor had sat still for so long that the thought that it had already died was not an improbable truth. The uneven breathing was at least a welcome change. It took too much effort to move in the cold. The glass was fogged up, so he could only see the vague shape of his captor. If there was going to be a chance to take his captor, it would be soon.
Nara simply let the tears flow. Her eyes were open floodgates to the flooding dam. There was no reason for her to resist it, no one would be able to hold it against her. She was so very alone. She half expected the tears to freeze before touching the ground.

Nara leaned back in her chair, it was easier to let go. To simply exist for however much longer she’d exist for, even if that wasn’t for anything.

A thought crossed her mind unexpectedly, but it… felt right: She could let the worm out. Why not? The only consequence would be quickening the inevitable. If it killed her, then what? It would be just as stuck as before.

She gathered herself, and moved.

His captor had taken the bait. The thoughts that he had influenced towards them took root, slowly guiding his victim towards the cage. It wouldn’t be much longer now, before he could sink his teeth into the warm flesh of his captor. It would be a just revenge, taking his captor under his own control.

She slowly reached towards the case. It was mostly fogged up, concealing the captive from the captor. Her fingers skimmed the surface of the Plexiglas case, clearing some of the condensation from the lid. The worm looked pathetic in this state: She could just barely see was the slight movement of its breathing. Its protruding eyes were nearly shut, staring lazily off into space. She couldn’t see its mouth, and she hadn’t bothered to find where that was.

Nara felt calmed by the sight of the worm’s state. It must have been as hopeless as she was. She slowly removed the latches from the worm’s case. There wasn’t any sign that the worm was aware of its cage becoming less secure.

Arish felt the change in warmth as the lid came off his cage. There would soon be nothing stopping him from taking over. They really were all just the same. Just as pathetic when it came to resisting his kind. The lid dropped to the floor of the ship with a clatter. His captor was slowly reaching in. Its fingers felt like ice against his skin. His influence was strong on the humanoid.

The moment Nara pulled the worm out of the case she felt a moment of unrelenting clarity. She was doomed. She had been used. There was no escaping the now inevitable. Her fingers felt numb, but not from the cold. It was as if from a toxin, slowly shutting down her body.

The worm’s eyes were wide open, staring directly into her eyes. She could now see the wide mouth of the worm slowly opening along the bottom half of its body. The worm slowly revealed its numerous, needle-like teeth. She understood in that moment the terror that every one of the worm’s victims had felt.

The numbness was spreading across her body. Her hands shook violently. This was her end. Naras fingers loosened. Desperately she grasped harder on the worm. The worm slipped out of her grasp, flying towards her face.
Arish latched his teeth onto the humanoid’s chest. His teeth sliced easily through his prey’s soft skin, allowing him to climb to the ideal vantage point. The humanoid thrashed around, screaming in pain, attempting to pull him off.

Arish reached the back of the humanoid’s neck: the place he could assume permanent control. He attached himself firmly, then made the incision, then grabbed the spinal cord.

He had assumed control.

Nara’s body went limp. She collapsed down to the floor, still in pain from the worm’s march across her body, but her command of her own body was gone. She felt like an insect attempting to lift up a drenched raincoat. She couldn’t budge even her finger. She couldn’t blink.

He indulged in the feeling of having a greater presence, of becoming larger than himself. He’d cut off his prey’s control. No impulse could escape down the creature’s nerves without his awareness. All the information the creature observed was his to observe as well. Arish began to test the waters: he sent a twitch. A finger moved. It was indeed a worthwhile decision.

Nara felt her hand move. It was an unreal feeling, seeing her limp hand moving without decision. She could do nothing but watch and passively feel her own body betray her. She was helpless to only play audience to the marionette movements the worm made of her body. The worm sat her up, if only to keep her arm from going more numb than it already had. Every movement felt hesitant, unsure of if the right muscles were being pulled. She- or rather, the worm- blinked.

Nara hadn’t realized until then how dry her eyes were becoming. It seemed such an ordinary action that in the noticeable quarter second of darkness, there was a small amount of concern for the condition she was in. The thought both disturbed and comforted her. She was its tool, only useful if intact.

A faint movement in her throat jolted Nara out of her thoughts. It… was attempting to use her vocal chords, her voice. It slowly began to make audible noise: unfamiliar sounds barely heard over the hum of the ship.

It came to Nara, that she’d heard similar sounds, on the worm’s native planet, from her informants. She began to make out a phrase, easily, horrifyingly understood through her time learning the natives’ language: ‘You are a foolish child.’

Nara felt conflicted. She desired to shout how wrong it was about her, about everything.

She was still trapped, alone with a monster.

His host still resisted. Perhaps some encouragement would change things. He released his view of pain receptors, then swiftly encouraged her to break one of her fingers.

She was tormented, desperately trying to scream, but to no avail.
He calmly spoke through her, ‘You are powerless. You are mine. You are nothing.’

No, she tried to shout. I am this ship's captain. You are only in control of my body. Without me, you are nothing.

Nara refused to disregard everything she had lived for, the few friends and family members that remained. But she was still trapped. The ship was still irreparable. The planet was a frozen wasteland.

If nothing else, her sacrifice would ensure an eventual death of the parasite on this desolate planet. Her ship, destroyed, would ensure a righteous fall from the power the worm held.

She would only need to hold out, seeing its eventual demise as a result of her own. Such thoughts were solace in her capture, for though slow and arduous, death would surely come as the return of an old friend.

It was cold. Weeks had passed, and Arish had struggled to confront his own demise. Supplies dwindled and the ship grew ever colder. Nara had seemed to stop resisting long ago, though her body never seemed to stop annoying him. Hunger, thirst, pain barraged him endlessly. Throughout his entire life he had never felt endangered, yet now he was… dying.

This was the end, and he was afraid.
“This state has a serious crime issue that I intend to fix,” She sat and listened to her father’s speech after his election as senator. She sat and listened to his lies. She saw right through them. She was the only one. She was the senator’s daughter. She was Rachel Callahan. Rachel sat backstage and listened to the lies spilling out of his mouth, like oil out of a pipe. “I would like to enforce a bill stating that non-violent crimes will earn no jail time.” She knew damn well his intentions were nothing but evil. If anything, he was going to increase the crime rate. Shut up. She thought. I wish you were dead. Her father droned on.

Her mother, Sherry, seated next to her, suddenly began to violently convulse. A flood of panic rushed over her as she watched her mother convulse, remembering having been told to never touch someone having a seizure. Security ran over, but Rachel held them off. She held them back for some unexplainable reason, unbeknownst to even her.

“Stop!” She yelled, putting her hand against the security guard’s chest. “Let her sort herself out.” The words surged out of her mouth like a waterfall. What am I saying? She thought to herself. Your mother is having a seizure and you’re telling security, the people who are going to save her, to stop?!

Suddenly, Sherry stopped convulsing. Just stopped and laid completely still on the cold floor. Rachel kneeled at her mother’s side and touched her wrist. To her surprise, her wrist was ice cold. As if she had been dead for hours. To her surprise, Rachel didn’t cry. She wanted to, but she couldn’t. She wasn’t in shock, she wasn’t sad, or anything. She was just… numb.

“Mom?” She whispered so quietly, only her mother would hear. “Please…” She pleaded. Security crowded over her and her mother’s body. “Back off,” She muttered. But they didn’t move. They stood there looking over them. “I said back off!” She screamed. Security moved away quietly and left Rachel laying there with her mother.

Without warning, her mother shot straight up. Her eyes still closed. Her ice cold skin becoming warm and the color returned to her face. “Mom?” Rachel muttered. Without saying a word, her mother pushed her hair out of her face. Her eyes snapped open and Rachel made direct eye contact with her mother. But her eyes weren’t their normal warm hazel hue. They were red. Blood red. Rachel could see herself in the reflection of her mom’s eyes. She recoiled in fear.

“Mom?” She asked once more. This time, her mother’s head cocked towards her and smiled and eerie, sinister smile.

“Hi, kid.” Her mother said. That wasn't her mother's soft and innocent voice. The voice was rough and gritty, but still her mother's. Rachel didn't know how to react, nor did she know what was going on. Her father continued his speech in the distant background. "Some bullshit, huh?" Her mother scoffed.

"What?"

"Your dad," She slowly stood up and brushed off her skirt. "all that comes out of his mouth is bullshit and lies."

"Y-yeah," Rachel agreed hesitantly. "Mom, are you okay?"
"Hmm?" Sherry turned around in confusion and came face to face with Rachel. "Oh! Am I okay? Well, here's the deal, kid: I'm not your mom." She chuckled. A low sinister chuckle. "W-w-what?" Rachel stuttered. "Do I need to talk slower? I'm not your mom."

Sherry sat down in a chair adjacent to Rachel. She sat leaned back in her chair with her legs crossed. That was not how her mother sat. Her mother sat with her back straight and hands folded neatly in her lap. "Then who are you?" Rachel cautiously walked towards Sherry. "I'm the devil, Rachel." Sherry said, copious amounts of pride in her rough voice. "The devil?"

"Your favorite adversary." She sneered. "No. The devil doesn't exist." She paced anxiously. "Oh, I'm very real. Eons of convincing people I don't exist is possibly the cleverest thing I've ever done!" The devil laughed. "What do you want with me?" Rachel asked, her voice full of anger, sprinkled with heavy hints of fear. "It's not you I want," She fiddled with her nails. "it's your dad."

"My dad?"

"Yeah. The corrupt politicians are the best. Hell needs more of those pigs. Plus, I know you want him dead. You are special, Rachel. You see right through his happy facade. You see past his bullshit. You see his lies. Let me help you." She sighed and shifted her position in her chair. "I'll scratch your back if you scratch mine."

The devil, eyes blazing red once more, rose and sauntered over to Rachel. She brushed Rachel's hair out of her face. "How's that sound?" The devil said in a low, sultry voice. "I'm in." Rachel confided.

The devil smiled and she snapped her fingers. On the stage, she heard her father scream in pain. Inside, Rachel felt nothing. Absolutely nothing. She was completely empty. She held a blank expression on her face as security rushed past her to get to her dad. She had no soul.

"Quid pro quo." The devil whispered.
Life is weird. So is death. Death is the one thing that brings people together. I mean, think about it. Really think about. Death means funerals. Funerals mean people coming together to pay their respects and eating finger foods and celebrating the life of someone they knew who has since left this earth. And we all share one thing in common. Every single person in this world has something in common. Can’t guess what it is? None of us know what happens when we die. Nobody does. Not a single person. Is there a Heaven? What about a Hell? Nobody knows. It’s one big mystery. The scariest thought I can fathom is dying and being on my deathbed when I’m old and decrepit (probably closer to, like, 25) and not knowing what comes next for me. Do I get reincarnated? Reincarnation is a thing, right? Like that little kid who believes he’s Lou Gehrig reincarnated? Surely that’s not fake, right? How do you fake something like that? I know kids say the darndest things, but I feel like that’s where the line between cute and creepy is drawn. Or do you go to Heaven and party it up with all your dead family members and cool dead celebrities? Or do you go to Hell, and listen to Taylor Swift’s entire discography on an endless loop? Nobody knows! And that’s equal parts cool and weird. Cool, because we all share this great mystery. Weird, because there are 7.6 billion people in this world and nobody knows. You see the people who say they died and went to Heaven or Hell, like that [Heaven Is For Real](https://www.heavenisforreal.com/) kid who “died and went to Heaven,” but how can you believe them? You can’t. How do you know they’re telling the truth? You don’t. Cool and weird.

Death is actually scary when it comes down to it. You don’t know where you go. It’s a gamble! One big terrifying gamble. I mean, you could die (I don’t know why I say ‘could’ because you will die. Like... that’s a stone cold fact. Ain’t no cheatin’ death. Can’t deny the inevitable!) and get to Heaven and see the pearly gates and then all of the sudden, God’s just like, “Hey, do you remember when you paid to go see one movie but then after it ended, you snuck into another theater and watched a second movie without paying for it? Yeah, I’m gonna have to banish you to eternal damnation for that.” But who’s to say God will be the one to tell you that? It could be, I don’t know, Jim-- God’s attorney. If there even is a God.

See, there’s another thing all of us have in common. We don’t know if there is a God! Sure, we have the people who believe in God or some kind of higher power or deity, but we don’t know if they actually exist or not. There’s no hard proof when it comes down to it. You could find a dollar on the street after realizing you were a dollar short for your venti iced skinny vanilla macchiato, sugar-free syrup, no ice, no vanilla, no whip at Starbucks and call that proof God exists. An act of God, if you will. Is it? Or is it just luck? I mean, you can look at a dog and take that as proof that a God of some form exists. “I am convinced that dogs are proof God, or something similar to a God, exists in this world.” That’s the mentality of it all. “I am convinced that Ewan McGregor (or any good looking actor of your choice. I just chose him because he kinda looked like Jesus when he played Obi-Wan Kenobi and that fits into this equation) is proof that a God, or something similar to a God, exists in this world.” I mean, there’s no
videographic evidence of God making dogs and then looking into the camera and saying “Look what I did! I call it a dog! It’s God spelled backwards! Because the dog is heavenly.” But I didn’t come here to rant about the complexities of religion. That’s another story that I don’t have the mental capacity or patience to write.

Getting back on the thought train, (choo choo!) death is really, really weird. Your soul (presumably) leaves your body and goes to an unknown destination. It is the weirder equivalent of getting on a plane, bus, or train and having no idea where you’re going. Or maybe… your soul doesn’t leave. And you stick around and haunt stuff. How cool is that? Instead of being banished to eternal damnation by God’s attorney for seeing two movies at the price of one, stick around your childhood home and haunt a creepy ass doll! On a side note, it’s always the antique dolls that are haunted. Have you ever heard of a haunted Barbie? You have not. Or maybe don’t inhabit the doll and just roam around in ghost form. Being a ghost would be cool in retrospect. You could do anything you wanted to anyone and nobody would know it was you. You could see every movie at the movie theater without ever paying for a ticket in the first place. No eternal damnation required! True scammer style.

Life also tends to amaze me. Because, think about it: we are manufactured inside of another human. We humans are manufactured inside of other human beings! Biology! Crazy!! But what amazes me about life and we as humans isn’t the fact that we have thousands of neurotransmitters (that’s probably incorrect, I passed biology with a C-) telling our lungs to breathe and our heart to pump blood and keep us alive. No, what amazes me more is the stupidity that humans are capable of. I have seen far too many posts on Facebook and tweets on Twitter that make my IQ drop with every word and now my IQ somewhere in the negatives. The one that always just astounds me is “How come women never have to get a DNA test to see if the kid is theirs?” It hurts. That question physically hurts me. It is incredible that we all descend from the same ancestors who made the wheel and created fire and did everything else to get us to where we are in society and somewhere along the way, we dropped the ball and got “How come women never have to take a DNA test to see if the kid is theirs?” One step forward, two steps back. If survival of the fittest was still a thing, these people that post and tweet stupid stuff like that would be the first to go. We need to bring back survival of the fittest. Weed out the stupid and the weak. It’s funny I advocate bringing that back because in all actuality, if it was brought back, I’d be royally screwed. I’m stupid and weak. Double whammy.

But life and death are two incredible things. Because we don’t know what either one holds for us. That’s the beauty of life and death. There’s an incredible mystery surrounding both. When you’re born, you don’t know what life has instore for you. Well, you don’t really know anything at all when you’re born. Which is another incredible thing! You start life with a clean slate. Unless you’re the reincarnated Lou Gehrig kid. But when you’re born, you harness the incredible capability to be anything you want to be. It’s all about the paths that you take. Everything you do in life has a meaning and has contributed to you being at the place in your life that you’re at right now. Then there’s death. And death is a double-edged sword. Because everything you do in life could lead up to how you die. Or it couldn’t. If you decide that you want to be the president and you work your whole life to eventually become president and then one day, you get shot in the head simply because you’re the president, then, yeah everything you do in your life could affect the way you die. I mean, it definitely worked that way for JFK. Not a good example, but that’s just what shot into my head. (Not the best choice of idiom, I know…) But you could also live your
whole life eating nothing but fatty foods like bacon and fries and bacon fries and have everyone think that someday, you’ll die from cardiac arrest but you live to be 210 years old! If that’s the case, then, no, the way you live your life has no affect on how you die. Double-edged sword! Crazy how that can work, huh?

Live your life the way you want to. Live without consequence. Live like no one’s watching! (That’s not how the saying goes, is it?) And try not to think about the weird, dark void that is death!! Death is the final frontier and that’s a fact. But just because no one knows what happens when we die (except for maybe the Lou Gehrig kid. And that’s a hard maybe), doesn’t mean we should live our lives in fear and try to be the best you you can be. You shouldn’t be nice to everyone because it’s what God, or something similar to a God, would want you to do. You should be nice to everyone because you _can_ be nice to everyone. You should eat that second piece of cake because you _can_ eat that second piece of cake. Regardless of if God, or something similar to a God, wants you to or not. You have the ability to, so do it! Prove to the world you can eat that second piece of cake! Go live your life the way you want to and put death on the backburner. Sure, death is lurking around every corner waiting to strike, but who cares?! Live in the now! Don’t think about the great paradox that is death! Go seek into that other theater and watch a second movie when you only paid to see one! Live your best life!
My dad charged down the path ahead of me, not bothering to accommodate my more leisurely strides. I bristled with annoyance and attempted to catch up to him, but every time I got within a few feet of him, he sped up and left me behind again. I crunched my teeth together and tried to keep my mouth shut, but after a few minutes passed with silence stretching out between us like taffy, I couldn’t help myself.

“Stop that!” I called, indignantly running up to meet him when he stopped moving. “Are you gonna spill whatever you dragged me out here to say, or are you gonna keep acting like a… like a whiny little pissed off toddler?”

My dad turned to face me, his suburban look overtly out of place amongst the reaching trees and dappled light. His futile efforts to manifest an outfit appropriate for hiking would have usually been endearing, but because of the strained, bitter look on his face and the unexplainable, petulant way he acted, he only annoyed me. He opened his mouth for a moment, then closed it.

“Listen,” I started. “I have a lot of homework to do, so if you’re not gonna talk to me, I’m going home. Okay?”

“Anna… I, um, I have to tell you something,” he said, lacking all of the eloquence by which I defined him.

“I know. So tell me.”

“I’m just… You’re… You might not see me the same way after. So forgive me if I take a moment.”

Sweat lingered on my dad’s forehead, his eyes trained on his feet as he fidgeted with his hands. I couldn’t get over how pathetic he looked: my father, a lawyer and a scholar, reduced to such an unsettled state. A sudden self-awareness caused me to uncross my arms and soften my gaze. In the pause that followed, a kind of unfolding seemed to take place within my dad. His back straightened, his hands dropped to his side, and the sweat seemed to evaporate right off of his skin. He became himself again.

“Look, the whole shtick about how I had to tell you something… It was just a ploy to get us some quality family time together,” my dad said. “With school, and soccer, and your friends… I barely see you anymore. It makes me sad, that’s all. I hope you can forgive me.”

I narrowed my eyes. I couldn’t get the way he’d just looked out of my head. He wouldn’t be that upset over something so simple.

“You thought that would… change the way I see you? Something like that?” I pressed, searching for his explanation’s Achilles heel.

“Yeah… I know it sounds ridiculous, but I can’t help but worry. It’s just something parents do. You’ll understand someday.”

“Wait, if you wanted quality family time, why didn’t you ask if Mom wanted to come with us?”

“I…” he began, his eyes darting back and forth as though he would find the right words dangling
from the trees like ornaments. “I thought we should have some time together. You know, some father-daughter bonding. That’s important, don’t you agree?”

“Sure, Dad, but… I don’t know. You’re acting weird.”
“I’m sorry,” he said, seeming to mean it. “It’s been a long week.”
“How so?”
“The usual. Work, mostly.”
“Oh, yeah, I get that,” I replied, even though I didn’t. My dad always talked about how much he loved his job. He once told me specifically how privileged he felt to be able to take slow but meaningful strides towards creating a more just society every day.

We moved onwards, bird calls sounding above our heads and brittle leaves breaking under our feet. Looking over at my dad, I noticed tears dusting the bottoms of his eyes. I hadn’t seen him cry since my grandma died. The red face, puffy eyes, runny nose… they didn’t suit him. His features matched best with more dignified feelings, like contentment or certainty.

“Dad, is everything okay?” I asked, now sure that he hadn’t told me everything.
He stared straight ahead, his eyes fixed on the path in front of him. He stopped walking.
“Do you remember back when you first got your driver’s license, and you were driving my car to Sarah’s house, and you called me in a whole mess of tears, apologizing and apologizing before you even told me what you did wrong?” His voice broke a little, and I pretended not to notice.
“When I thought I’d popped a tire? I was so worried you’d be mad at me…”
“And I took off from work to drive down there with a spare, meeting you in this little neighborhood where you could have just walked the rest of the way to Sarah’s, really, and when I got there, it turned out that all your tires were fine. There was nothing wrong with the car at all.”
“Well I heard this nasty noise, and I just thought—”
“You were so convinced. You wouldn’t even believe me when I told you that the car was fine. If it wasn’t the tire, you kept saying, it had to be something else.”
“God, I didn’t know anything about cars.”
“No, you didn’t. But you just knew something was broken. You believed it so strongly that you didn’t even check once you’d pulled over to make sure you were right.”
I laughed. “Yeah, I really should have cleared that up before I called you. I was so embarrassed. And I felt terrible for making you take off work.”
“Not terrible enough to ask your mother for help, though,” he mused, sounding inappropriately wistful.
“I’m sorry about that. It’s just, I was scared that you would be mad at me, but I was sure that she would be. Even though I hadn’t done anything wrong.” I paused, looking at my dad, half of him lit by the sparse sunlight and the other half of him darkened by shadows. “You didn’t question it. You didn’t even suggest that I call her. You just showed up.”
“I did,” he answered, still not looking at me. Tension laced the air; he was still keeping something from me.
“Seriously though, what’s bothering you?” I pressed. “You can tell me, you know. I’m not gonna judge you, or whatever you’re worried about me doing.”
“That’s not true. I wish that were true.”
“Dad,” I urged. “What aren’t you telling me?”
“I… Fuck… I cheated on your mom, Anna,” he choked out, crumpling the second words left his mouth as if he had been emptied by the confession.
The forest blurred into a mess of brown and green around me.

“I don’t…”

“I know how this makes me sound. Believe me, I do. But please, just try to—”

“Why would you tell me this?” I tried to yell, but the words came out in hoarse whispers. “I don’t want to know, why would you think that I’d want to know that, I…”

My dad lurched towards me and grabbed me by the shoulders. Revulsion pushed vomit up my throat, and I choked it down.

“Look, Anna, please just listen to me, please… I needed you to hear this from me so you wouldn’t think that I was one of those guys, one of those guys that, though I’m sorry to say it, that you’ll probably date one day. I just… I need you to understand. I’m not like that, Anna, I’m not…”

“You can’t say that—you can’t! What makes you any different than…” I trailed off, thinking of Mark. We’d dated for eight months before I found out that he’d been sleeping with some girl he met at church camp the entire time. Embarrassment stopped me from telling either of my parents why we actually broke up; I didn’t want anyone to know that I’d let that happen to myself. But just as I’d wanted to show Mark the extent of the hurt he’d caused me, I longed to push all of the pain I’d felt then onto my dad, so he’d know, really know what he’d done, and feel crippling guilt over his actions. Of course, though, just as with Mark, my fury made my tongue weigh too heavy in my mouth, and I stayed silent.

“I didn’t seek it out. You have to understand that. Most men, they seek this stuff out. That’s cruel. I’ll always condemn it. But you don’t understand how hard it is to say no to—”

“Who?” I asked, more like a demand than a question.

“What?”

“Who was it? Who was worth this?”

“I don’t want to tell you, and I don’t think I have to.”

“I think you owe me—”

“I don’t owe you anything. I didn’t even have to tell you in the first place. But I did, and now I’m trying to explain myself. You’re just not listening.”

“There’s nothing, nothing…” I trailed off, suddenly aware of feeling ridiculous and feeble, screaming at my dad and waving my arms in a hopeless attempt to get him to listen. I paused to calm down, then continued: “There’s nothing you could say that would make this okay.”

My dad shook his head. A change had come over him; he no longer looked pitiful. Instead, he looked angry, which only made everything worse.

“I’m going to tell her,” he asserted. “It’s the right thing to do.”

“Please, Dad… Don’t act like you’re being moral. Just…”

“But, I am. I’m not claiming to be a saint, but I’m not the worst I could be. I’m being honest with you. Doesn’t that count for something?”

“I don’t want to talk to you anymore. Go home.”

“But Anna, I can’t bear you thinking that I—”

“Please, just go. I need to be by myself, okay? Please.”

And after a long, unbearable moment, he did go, leaving me alone with the rapid unraveling of a once stable family that I’d always taken comfort in belonging to.
Carina Cisneros  
Grade 7  

*Lucid*  
Short Story  

East Middle School  
Joplin, MO  
Teacher: Nina English

As I wake my mind yet has to process what my lucid dream has just unfolded. I wake up in a pile of what I have to hope is sweat, but cold sweat. It was the most unexpected trauma that set my mind ablaze. I was walking through my neighborhood knowing my brother Neo was coming to pick me up for school. Which was unusual since we are not supposed to make ourselves presentable together any more than we have to. I was aware of it being a dream just by looking up at the sky for it to look like a messy painting and my body not being completely on the ground. Hearing the traffic and the birds singing their early morning song. Nothing was sketchy so I make a left to stop by Starbucks to get drinks for “breakfast.” I didn’t pay, I didn’t need to knowing it was all a dream, nothing could hurt me. The people there were merely blank faces past. But something inside me shifted as I walk in and see an old friend, someone who I did not even need to see to know they were near.

“Hey Tess,” I say on instinct,

“He’s about to die,” she says flatly without looking up to me from reading,

“Who?” I ask curiously. I hear a crash, instinctively I turn my head toward the noise. I turn back towards Tess but she’s gone, just like that, and everyone else is frozen. I run outside to the scene where I heard the noise. Yet everything was so quiet now, the world is immediately a dark void. Then I see the smoke, the flames and the raining ashes. My brothers car collided with another vehicle. Neo was gone. I awaken.

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Once I processed what just happened, I tear up just at the thought of losing my brother. I’m not that much of a soft guy, but when it comes to my brother, things are tough. Having your parents abandoned you at 7, leaving you with your 10 year old brother in a pile of unwanted trash, it hurts. He was the only one. The only one who protected me and cared for me. If people were to find out we were brothers and we didn’t technically live with our parents... I quickly blink away my upcoming tears. I check my phone to see the time and look for any snapchats I missed from falling asleep the night before. Of course I have about 50 which are mostly streaks so I don’t even bother. Except when I notice I got a text from my brother, “Gonna pick u up today, don't ask questions.” This suddenly shocked me having my dream and now this. We don’t take chances, I guess today was a different deal. Everyone sees us as merely casual friends, but more than an acquaintance. Were not to involved in school or with each other around school just to keep a good reputation but a low profile.

After I read the text, I delete it for safety and finally decide to get up for school. I hear more traffic and more birds singing their morning songs once again. My head was spinning with more unease as I stretch and yawn from the early sunlight seeping through my blinds. I just remembered it was Friday. *One more day.* I thought. I get off my bed turning off my music and make my way to my closet to get ready for school. I dress myself, grab my backpack, phone, ear buds, cash and head out the door.

Suddenly to see my surroundings are the exact same as my dream.. It's an early morning, but it almost looks as if it's the evening. With the orange sky, the black birds traveling in front of the huge yellow sun rising, places opening for business. The birds are singing their song once again. I see the exact same traffic, and the Starbucks building out of the corner of my eye. It settles me with a distant feeling, *this*
isn’t right, I thought. Yet curiosity kills the cat. Once again I decide to make my way to Starbucks for me a Neos breakfast. I got our beverages, and I awaited for his text. I noticed a clan of nerds from school walk in but nothing suspicious. except I notice the same girl. The girl I will always remember. Never have to see her face or hear her to know she’s near.

“Tess,” I say.

“Hello,” she replied but she doesn’t bother to look at me. She’s so small like a bird, she has pixie cut brown hair, dark blue eyes and super pale skin.

“I’m sorry,” she says with no external emotion towards me, then I hear it. I could only imagine from memory of what I was about to see.

Instead I run, ignoring the people from school in groups hanging around, ignoring the honks and yells I receive from running, ignoring my mind telling me that it’s irrational and that I’m being ridiculous, that I need to stop. I make it through streets right to where I know exactly what was gonna show. The police are nearby, the siren blares and everything goes blurry for me. I had no idea if it was from shock or my tears. I was so fatigued, but I run anyways. I dash into the neighborhood darting back towards the direction of our school. My thoughts are racing to a point where I don’t even know if I am thinking or not. It’s all happening so fast and I don't know what to do, it doesn’t feel real. The pain grows I know I must stop but I cannot. In the distance I see my school, just wanting to throw up at the thought of walking through those doors. I am unaware of how long I have been running, but I give myself a minute. This is not the time, you cannot discuss what just happened, people don't need to know. I breathe in, breathe out and make my way towards the school. I try to make myself appear normal once again walking with confidence as I at least try to slide past my friends. That did not go so well.

“Duuuuuuude, what are you doing?” Tyler asked while on the inside I question what he is thinking on his own, “Why are you so sweaty and red tomato-faced and...”

“Just making my way to my locker, “dude””

“Even without saying hi to us man? That’s messed up, you okay?” My semi-concerned friend Jackson chimed in,

“Yo, I’m good dude, glad it's almost the weekend too,” I respond.

“True story,” He says.

“So what’s going on with you?” Andrew insists jumping down from the bench full of all my “friends” also known as the football team. You do not have the time or energy to deal with them, him or this right now.

“Nothing bro, but I have to go, Ms. J is gonna yell at me if I don’t turn in my late assignment, today is my deadline.”

“Fine whatever, but I need to talk to you later” Andrew says being impatient as ever. And that was that. I quickly make my way past them into my school avoiding anyone's eye contact. I slip past everyone towards the bathroom.

I stand by the dim light with my hands over my head leaning against the grim sink trying to let my mind and heart slow. This cannot happen. Dream, car, morning, crash, reality. Just one big thing happens, then the next. It all comes crashing down when you have so many things bottled up. I don’t come across as a type of guy who would care so much. I keep up this reputation that I’m just one normal guy trying to make college on football. It’s not the real me. Desperate, I go against my hot tears and get angry. I punch the mirror furiously till the next thing I even see when letting go of my squint is my blood and shards of
cut glass. I turn on the faucet, rinse my hands and face and charge out the door, crunching on the mess of my anger, the glass.

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After school, I check my phone in my locker for any sign from Neo. Nothing. Except to get a slam on my locker coming from someone I know all too well.

“I need to ask you something,” Andrew demands.

“Uh.. okay,” I reply with hesitation, my neck already sweating as I open my locker again taking a deep breath behind the small metal door hardly separating us.

“Look, there’s a party tonight at Roller City-” He started

“There’s always a party at Roller City on Friday night,” I complained irritated. Apparently it’s the number one best place to hangout. I don’t blame anyone because it can be fun, as long as you’re hanging with the right people.

“Dude, I know but tomorrow night is an all-night skate,” he explained aggravated.

“Yeah well why do I have to go?” I asked, “I was gonna-”

“But I would rather not spend 10 hours of my life from 8pm to 6am skating and having to deal with yours and everyone else’s drama!” I was starting to get angry as I was raising my voice, my brother is in trouble and I am stuck here pretending like it’s nothing. No one even knows, I’m on my own. I have no brother to help guide me through life anymore, I’m the one saving him.

“I’m asking for tonight because everyone is going! Not to mention Keira will be there and I need you,” He only sounded like he was begging, but he was really threatening.

“Fine,” I say, “I’ll go,” I end that with a slam to my locker and a swing of my arms to head out this place.

“Love you too bud!” He shouts with a smug smile as I exit.

***

Finally, I make it home still knowing I have to go to the all-night skate. I walk into my bedroom contemplating myself, asking why I even agreed to tonight.

You know you could just not go, my mind told me, what’s it gonna hurt? Not going would mean disappointing my friends and drawing attention to myself. I walk into the garage towards my bedroom to see all my possessions. My computer desk, surrounded by football posters and streaming lights, clothes within a my long-warn dirty laundry hamper. I’m clean, but not to clean. I turn on my computer, sit in my wicked old chair, and search to see if there’s any article on the incident involving my brother. There was no sign of a single page, except for a file connection to the police for them to know the incident actually occurred. My stomach turned, back flipped and dropped! If people find out, it’s major consequences for him and me. I don’t want everyone to know what we’ve been through. I frantically shut down my computer, run my hand through my thick black-blue hair as I prepare myself for tonight.

Starting my evening after getting my homework done I get a text message from a group chat with Jackson, and Andrew.

“R we all going or is it just me and Zen?” Andrews messages first.

“I am but with Blakeley,” Jackson says in the chat.
“Guess I’m going too,” I finally decided to answer.

“Of course you are, you already agreed,” Andrews said, “c u guys at 8.” He ended the conversation.

***
Later, I finally start preparing to get ready for whatever I have to face tonight. I take a shower trying to forget my thoughts for at least a little while. I throw on my hoodie once again, throw on black jeans and actually fix my hair. The usual 21 century haircut with short sides and hair towards the top. I comb it over but for a second I actually look at myself. I notice the dark deep circles under my eyes, Two pimple next to my nose on my fresh tanned skin. But I look straight into my eyes and that’s when I see they’ve turned a deep dark midnight blue. I stumble back at the sudden surprise, breathing heavy I take a closer look. My usual icy grey-blue eyes are no longer there. But right now I no longer care. I give out a sigh and run out the door.

***

Now Lucky me for living a block away from the skating rink so I can walk. I see it in the distance, Already hearing the music blasting and people yelling to get inside. Hopefully I don’t crash and burn. As I step inside, Andrew was standing there waiting. He winked at Jerry, the guy that basically owned the place, who opened the doors with a click as we waltzed right inside.
“You finally made it!” Jackson shouts “We were looking for you.”

“Yeah, and I’m lucky I made it inside before everyone else,” I yell over the loud music

“All thanks to me,” Andrew said smoothly with confidence. Then he was gone running to her. Keira a nice girl, nicer than the people she hangs out with. Pale, blue eyed, small, blonde haired, good girl.

“So.. Andrew made you come? I thought he hated these things,” Jackson said surprised.

“Yeah well, he’s only gonna hate it if she’s not here,” I say with a look on my face, my mouth slightly twitching. All the sudden Jackson backs away while looking at me as he bumps into a table spilling a drink.

“Oh my god dude!” He yells, pointing a finger at my face.

“Uh what,” I answer trying not to sound suspicious. He steps closer looking directly into my eyes.

“Yo what is up with your eyes?!“ He yells in question, his hands clutched to his face.

“Dude it’s probably just the lighting,” I start to fidget with my knuckles and fingers trying to act normal.

“Um okay then.. I think I’m just gonna go to Blakeley, see ya,” He speaks, quickly making his way to the girl next to the good girl. Brown hair, freckle face, small. Tan, well-known social girl. After our awkward encounter I notice Maddy in a corner taking selfies on snapchat. No surprise there.

“Hey Maddy,” I approach her.

“Wow hey Zen!” She greets me with a hug.

“Having fun yet?” I ask with a smug smile.

“Yeah well there’s already drama and I’m just trying to have fun tonight,” She tightly smiled. Well she sure sounds irritated.
“Maddy!” A few girls shout while crowding around her.

“Oops, sorry zen,” Brooklyn apologizes after bumping into me spilling her drink all over me while joining the circle of Maddy Wilson, a girl with Strawberry blonde straight hair, olive skin, blue eyes, the fun and popular girl. While Brooklyn, carmel skin, big dark hair, lovely style.

“Uh seriously Brook-” I start, but they’ve already gone off together. I stomp my foot and trudge to the bathroom. Turning on the faucet, the sound somewhat comforting, not only was it quiet in the bathroom, I was alone. Rinsing off my clothes, only for it to not do much good, I look at myself again. Something about me doesn't feel right. Yet it doesn't feel wrong. The feeling of numb.

BUZZ. My phone vibrates with a ring as I fix to open it, but what I realized was an unread text from an unknown number.

“If you want him, come get him.”
“Where to find him.”

I lock myself in the last stale and start to get angry once again. I throw my phone with so much force. I hear the exact crack that takes place once the phone hits the floor with a bang against its smooth case. I see its glass sprinkle around as it shatters bouncing a third time. The phone goes dark and I exit the bathroom.

***

Now, I try and keep my breathing steady. So many people. Everyone and everything starts to go blurry..

I run outside ignoring everyone reaching for me. This party is not where I belong right now. I have to find my brother. So I run and run, ignoring my blurry vision, the purple and black I start to see forming around the edges of my eyes. Feeling helpless, I run even faster. I know exactly where to go. Sharp quick pains form directly in my chest causing my ache and stumbling. The junkyard, train tracks. The place I dread the most. The place we were left because our parents didn’t want me. They didn’t want us.

***

I make my way towards the moving boxcars. Running to catch up against it as I hop on grabbing the cold rusted metal with my calloused hands and bruised knuckles. Finally swinging open the cart and sitting down with a thud, my hair in front of my face. The tears come and don’t stop. I look up at the streaming stars and huge pale blue moon in the midnight sky. So dark and calm as I listen to the midnight creatures and crickets. My phone blinks and I see the time, 12:00, midnight. I wipe my face with my sleeve. I lay in silence for a bit..

***

Soon, I see it. I jump down from the slowing cart next to the woods. Seeing all the junk makes my heart ache. I walk with my head down, checking my time once again, 3:00am. I sigh and walk through. Seeing old signs and cars. One squirrel perched up on an abandoned toy house. I fold my hands in front of me. I see my brother laying still, cold on the ground. Not moving. Not breathing. I fall on my knees, collapsing, give up and everything goes black. I wake up.
“SCREECH!” the black hanger says.

“Sorry, Harry. You just have too many knots in your fur!” I say, pulling the brush through his soft, yet knotty, black fur. Who would have known brushing a bat would be so hard?

I bit my tongue. “OW!” I yelp. Stupid fangs. I always find myself biting my tongue or lip, especially when I don’t mean to.

I stand up and look in the mirror that’s slanted, hugging the black wall of my room with spiders and cobwebs hanging. The gray, torn curtains blow in the wind that is not there.

I stick out my tongue, it has small holes that don’t dig too deep to cause blood, but almost looks like the space in between two red hills.

I sit back down in my red chair and grab Harry, who tries to fly away, but is too late. I brush him gently until the knots gradually go away.

“There, you’re all done. Now get back on your post and eat your moths,” I say, watching him fly to his post.

I sigh. “Harry, do you promise to be my only friend forever?” I ask, leaning back in the red bean bag chair. He neither stops, nor does his green eyes look up.

I bury my head into my hands. Halloween is tonight, well right now; yet I can’t go trick or treating for I will most likely scare some little kids. I mean, if I scare the kids in my class, I’m pretty sure I will scare everyone else.

I look out my window to see a bunch of smiling kids dressed up as anything they want to be. Kids ringing doorbells, receiving candy, for the one similarity I see in all is happiness. I cannot find my happiness.

“It’s all my parents’ fault. They’re both vampires, which makes me a vampire. So thanks to them, I have no friends!” I pout, looking at the dead posters in my room. If I wasn’t a fanged, blood-sucking girl, I would probably scream and run away from just one look at those posters. Or even one look at me.

I stand up and look in the mirror again. My black hair falls to my shoulders while my eyes stare a bloody glow against my pale skin. The black shirt against my skin droops, looking grayish from being worn so much.

I turn away. I was right. If someone did look at me, they would scream in terror.

“Some kind of 5th grader I am. Run away kids! Don’t look at that girl, Vanessa because she’s so ugly!” I grumble, swinging my arms to my side.

I turn back around to look in the mirror. I’m not that ugly, right?

I grimace at my look. I want friends. I need friends.

A lightbulb pops over my head. “That’s it! If I trap some of my classmates, they will have to be my friends!” I shout, gleefully. Harry jumps up, startled. I pick up our class picture and scan over all my classmates. My eyes meet the eyes of Ellie, Marcus, and Bella.

I smile. They would be perfect friends for me. Ellie is kind and smart so she could help me on my homework. Marcus is athletic, so then he can help me in Gym. Then lastly, Bella is fashionable so then she could help me with my clothes and stuff like that.

All of a sudden, I frown at the thought. What if it doesn’t work? What if I get in trouble?

Harry cocks his head, like he knows what’s going on, but doesn’t quite understand.
“Don’t worry, Harry. You will still be my best friend, but you will have to accept that I will have other friends. Now-” I stop myself.

I hear my mom walk past my door. She can never know about trapping people. Of course if I tell her, she won’t understand! She must never know.

The footsteps fade away.

Phew. Good thing I have excellent hearing and smell. Ha! Not only could I be able to smell a girl with a lollipop a mile away, but I could also hear her licking that lollipop too.

“Like I was saying, I should probably trap them right now. I would fit in with the crowd of kids, plus I’m really anxious to have friends!” I whisper to myself, a big mischievous grin plastered on my face.


Harry clicks his tongue in excitement. Who knew a little black hanger could agree with you on something so genusly-dangerous?

I gesture my bat to go back on his post, so he flies there. I quietly open my cobwebbed door and sneak down the creaky stairs. *Creeaaak. Creeaaak.* Luckily, no one hears me. I slink to the front door and open it ever so slightly before I slip out and close it behind me. Phew.

“Come on, Vanessa. You can do this,” I say to myself. I walk out into the darkness; the smell of Halloween is in the air. Well, mostly just fresh costumes and candy, but you get my point. I look around at kids dressed up as ghosts, zombies, fairies, werewolves, and vampires. This is where I belong, yet my parents keep me away from it.

As I pass by some kids, they stare at me. I hiss at them to make sure they don’t think too hard about what they’re looking at. They run away screaming as I sigh and keep walking.

I turn a dark, foggy corner and find Ellie’s big, blue house. I slowly walk into their backyard, each step quieter than the other.

I stop and transform into a bat. My hands turn into little black claws attached to wings as my head becomes a smaller black head with big ears. I fly up into the night sky.

The sky is dark; the trees blow in the wind.

I look down to see a bunch of fog, dancing around all the kids trick-or-treating.

A bunch of leaves fly by me as the wind whips around me.

I swoop down and fly quietly to the window of Ellie’s house. I slip in through a crack and sit on her window sill. I look around her pink room and find all three of them talking on Ellie’s bed. Phew, they’re all here.

“Marcus I’m sorry, but I just love your costume! I mean, I love yours too, Bella, but I can’t stop being amazed at his,” Ellie says, her blue eyes glowing against her black costume with ears and a tail. She looks over at Bella in her ballerina costume.

“Thanks, but I like Bella’s costume too,” Marcus smiles, his brown, shaggy hair falling into his eyes. He grips his surfboard with his painted green hand and moans like a zombie.

Bella laughs, smoothing out her pink skirt as her golden hair shines in a bun.

I fly quietly over to her light switch. *Here we go.* I flick it off.

They all scream in terror.

I put them in a bag, but it’s kind of hard when you have little tiny feet. Plus, you have people running around and squirming. After I finally get everyone in the bag and zipped, I slip out of the window and carry them off.

As I fly to my house I look down to see all the kids again, smiling, asking for candy as sweetly as they can. I must have my happiness. Now that I have friends, *I will* have it.

I open up my window and slip in with the bag. I turn back into my human self, throw the black bag into the cage with all my might, and unzip the zipper quickly. I step back and slam the cage door.

I lock it quickly while they struggle out of the bag.

“Why are we here!!” Bella questions, looking around the room wildly, standing up.

“Vanessa? What do you want, you fanged girl!!” Marcus shouts, banging on the bars.

Ellie starts to cry, her whiskers smearing down her face.
“You know how I’m always sitting at lunch, alone? Well, that won’t happen anymore because you guys will be there with me. So, you’re now my friends!” I answer, grinning. I dance around, pumping my fists in the air, smiling wide.

“Seriously? This is how you want to get friends? By trapping them?” Marcus roars, pushing back and forth on the bars.

I stop in mid-dance and frown.

“Well, this is my only idea. So, I’ve gone with it, and now I have friends. At least I think I do. How do friends work anyway?” I ask, feeling dumb to not know the answer when I have done such a thing. I’ve trapped people, and yet, I don’t know how friendship works.

“Well, first of all, you do NOT trap people! Second of all, you introduce yourself to your classmates and ask them if you can hang out with them. Third of all, you need to be kind to them. All it takes is one little smile,” Ellie answers, sniffing.

Marcus hugs her while Bella nods.

I blink, my mind going totally blank. I walk over to the window and look out, seeing the kids again. Happiness. Do I have my happiness?

I turn around to see my new friends, each one looking sad, worried, or angry. Marcus is hugging Ellie, who is crying, while Bella pats Ellie on the back. They all are there for each other. I caused this. I have caused ALL of this.

My eyes grow big. “I am so sorry! I-I just wasn’t thinking! I-I’m so stupid for doing such a thing! Now I will n-never have ANY friends!” I cry, quickly unlocking the cage.

Everyone stumbles out, yet they don’t run away. They hug me. I hug them back, without realizing it at first.

Then, I push back, violently shaking my head, “Wait! Why would you hug me if I have done so many bad things to you!?"

“Well, you realized what you did was wrong, and ended up doing the right thing. Most of all, you may be different, but that’s what makes you special. You’re our friend,” Bella answers, smiling.

The others nod, grinning.

“Really?”

“Really,” they all say at the same time.

We hug again, the spider-shaped fan swinging above our heads.

Harry flaps over to me, and my friends pet him. My friends.

I give Ellie the bat while I headed over to the mirror one last time. If I was the Vanessa from before, I would have still seen the ugliness. Now, I see the light that has been hidden so long, bursting out into flames and taking over the darkness. The happiness in me would be no longer lost, so deep in my soul.

All it takes is one little smile.
Narratives of Different Cultures Throughout History on the Life and Legacy of Joan of Arc

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Grade 11

Narratives of Different Cultures on the Life and Legacy of Joan of Arc
Critical Essay

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Members of the enormous crowd are jostled violently. Everyone strains as they try to get a closer look at the woman in chains on the platform. Earlier, the thud of footsteps from the eighty men escorting her pounded in the ears of the crowd as a sickly, pale, and haggard looking woman was brought before the judges. She did not seem to be much of a threat, given the state she was in. In fact, she looked petrified as she looked at the platform behind her that was piled high with kindling. The judge now drones on about the transgressions of the woman, which are met with mixed reactions from the crowd. Some are cursing the woman vehemently, while others cry out in disbelief as her conviction and sentence are read. The woman mutters a prayer as her fate of death by fire is sealed. When eventually given a chance to speak, the woman argues for her innocence ardently, until the armed English soldiers at her side grow impatient and throw her to the platform. Devout to the end, she begs for a cross to hold, and she is handed two sticks from the ground (Robo). The fire is lit at her feet and she moans and cries out in agony. The crowd hears her exclaim, “Alas! am I to be so horribly and cruelly treated? Alas! that my body, whole and entire, which has never been corrupted, should to-day be consumed and burned to ashes! Ah! I would far rather have my head cut off, seven times over, than be thus burned!” (Shopkow). Finally, as her moments on Earth dwindle, some in the crowd cry out in anguish while others cheer, but over all of this can be heard a shrill voice as it screams, “Jesus! Jesus!” many times until it finally falls silent (Robo).

Jeanne Darc, later called Jeanne d’Arc, and eventually Joan of Arc in English, was a woman who would live a very eventful life and would eventually inspire many (Banfield 18). Born in Domrémy, on the border of the province of Lorraine, she was raised to be a very devout Catholic. While resting underneath a tree at the age of thirteen, she received a vision. The vision was full of bright light and she heard the voice of St. Michael, along with several angels identify themselves and tell her to “be a good girl and go to church often” (Banfield 20). Joan continued to hear voices in her head that she claimed were the voices of St. Michael, St. Catherine, and St. Margaret, as they guided her and advised her (Banfield 21). When she was sixteen years old a rather specific message from St. Michael came to Joan, saying “Go, go daughter of God, into the realm of France… You must drive out the English and bring the king to be crowned” (Banfield 21). At the time, Domrémy France was under the control of the English, specifically the Duke of Burgundy. She decided to listen to the voices in her head and stopped in the town of Vaucoulleurs to receive help in the form of an escort, finances, and resources, from Robert Baudricourt and traveling on she ventured to Chinon to meet with the Dauphin of France himself (Banfield 28). When there, after hearing her case and having her examined by his learned men of the Church, Charles believed Joan’s story. She kept insisting that she was sent by God when questioned about her intentions and motives (Pickels 30). After she tells him that she has been sent to help him win back France and to see him coronated, Charles gives her a standard and makes her “chef de guerre (chief of war)” (Pickels 30). She went on to fight for France, ensuring their victory in what would later be called the Hundred Years War, and she was present at the coronation of Charles VII, the former Dauphin in 1439, thus fulfilling the wishes of her voices. The voices, never left her however, and she continued to serve Charles as a commander of his army until she was captured by Burgundian forces in 1430. England bid ten thousand pounds for Joan and thus they were given the prisoner. She was transferred to many prisons because of
her many escape attempts. Throughout all of this, Charles VII offered a ransom for the woman who secured his sovereignty. After being brought to Rouen for her trial, she received the verdict of guilt for relapsed heresy, incurring the punishment of death by fire for her crimes (Pickels 76).

Throughout history, Joan of Arc has polarizing to many cultures and people. She has been labeled and characterized as being a hero or a heretic, a saint or a witch. as a hero, a saint, a witch, and a heretic, to name some. The differences in these narratives often reflect the values of the cultures and people that wrote them and can be used to understand the reasons for their views about and actions towards Saint Joan of Arc.

The myth of the Hero’s Journey is a literary theory postulated by American mythologist Joseph Campbell, as a way to examine the plot of many different stories throughout time and analyze their interconnections and similarities. He noticed that many stories that arose from cultures that were completely isolated from each other, often shared many themes and characteristics. Two aspects of Campbell’s journey of the hero are the call to adventure, essentially what incites the hero to begin their quest, and the elixir that the hero brings back. In his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, he claims, “The hero is a personification of a culture’s ideals, as embodied in its mythology” (qtd. in McBride). By looking at how different cultures view these two aspects of the Hero’s Journey in respect to the life and legacy of Joan of Arc, much can be revealed about the natures of those societies.

Cultures around the world often have very different, and even contrasting views due to the fact that they developed while isolated from each other. Shalom Schwartz, a prominent social psychologist argues that values are “concepts or beliefs about desirable end states or behaviors, that transcend specific situations, guide selection or evolution of behavior and events, and are ordered by importance” (qtd. in Hitlin and Piliavin 362). Steven Hitlin and Jane Allyn Piliavin argue that values in modern psychology often misleadingly carry a positive connotation, unlike attitudes, which carry both positive and negative connotations (363). They also explain the system that Shalom Schwartz created for empirically ordering the values of a person or group of people by their importance to those persons. Among his ten central values, which he found to be recognized in many diverse cultures around the world, he includes tradition, which he defines as: traditional and religious activities, power: status and prestige, to be able to control people and resources, and security: stability, safety, and harmony of society, relationships, and self (Hitlin and Piliavin 364). These values will be clearly reflected in different narratives of Joan of Arc throughout history and will show how those cultures values affected their view of her.

The English in the 1400s viewed Joan of Arc through a very specific set of values. During Joan’s trial at Rouen in 1431, she was examined harshly by many English judges. They kept extensive records of the proceedings and transcripts of those proceedings are constantly being used to make arguments about Joan’s innocence or guilt. At the time of her trial Joan was weak and sick from the unhealthy conditions that she was kept in for the two years. From the time of her capture in 1429 to her trial in 1431, she lacked sunlight, proper exercise, and nutrition. Her English examiners constantly tried to make her openly admit to heresy and even witchcraft, to try to quash the idea that God somehow interfered with the “elixir” that Joan won from the English. The judges asked her specifics about her Voices like, “The Voice that you say appears to you, does it come directly from an Angel, or directly from God; or does it come from one of the Saints?” and, “How long is it since you heard your Voices?” (“Trial Records”). Providing a similar answer to all of these questions, Joan gets impatient and tells her examiners, “I will say willingly what I know, and yet not all. I am come in God’s name; I have nothing to do here; let me be sent back to God, whence I came” and “You say you are my judge. Take care what you are doing; for in truth I am sent by God, and you place yourself in great danger” (Shopkow). The English examiners were unsure about Joan’s Voices which were her call to adventure that brought her to fight for Charles and for France. They thought that they might be from the devil, that she was mad, or that she might have been lying, so they try constantly try to catch her in a lie and lure her into perjury or confess to conspiring with the devil (Shopkow). The English examiners actions and questioning reflected their values, which were impressed upon them from the society that they grew up in. The Schwartz core value of tradition was very prevalent in France and
England in the 1430’s. The Roman Catholic Church was very powerful and had many strong traditions at the time. Joan started to challenge those traditions by being a woman who led men into battle, wore men’s clothes, and spoke so openly in public, that she began to be seen as an unnatural creature. This connection to witchcraft led to her guilty verdict. The natural product of the fear that Joan was an unnatural thing caused the English to put her to death (Sorensen 79). England clung to the value of tradition so much, that when Joan showed that she valued something else more, she became their enemy and her terrible fate was sealed.

The English during the Renaissance viewed Joan through a very different set of values. Joan of Arc became more widely known throughout England during the Renaissance through works of art. She was often painted, many poets and songwriters used her as their muse, and many literary giants used her in their works. In England, however, during the Renaissance, Joan of Arc, and indeed all French Catholics, were demonized by the public. With respect to Joan of Arc, they often believed that she was a mad witch, and they were bitter about the outcome of the Hundred Years War. England would frequently demonize French Catholics after the Protestant Reformation in England. England was an Anglican nation under Elizabeth I and she was legitimately afraid of the power the French Catholicism was able to wield due to their strong connection to the resources of the Vatican. Elizabeth was also a patron of the literary arts and after William Shakespeare grew to fame, would commission plays from him. The play Henry IV, portrays Joan of Arc as a whoring witch. Shakespeare probably wrote her that way because he wished to appease his queen, or to make Henry IV seem more heroic because he felt that his audiences would not want to support a play about a Catholic king (Sorensen 79). Shakespeare may have also written Joan this way to help ease English guilt about the way that Joan was treated in the hands of the English. Sexual abuse by her guards may have occurred because of their belief that her virginity was what gave her such a powerful and commanding presence, similar to Samson’s hair (Sorenson 76). Shakespeare had also grown up in a culture that despised Joan of Arc and French Catholics, and he likely did as well. They saw her call to adventure, her voices, as being a form of witchcraft sent from the devil, and the elixir that she brought back to France, her victory in the Hundred Years War, to be therefore the opposite of God’s will.

The ways that English society viewed Joan of Arc during the Renaissance shows that the Schwartz core value of power was very prevalent in their culture. Power was a value that was very prevalent in Renaissance England because Elizabeth I was a monarch who did not believe in the divine right theory of kingship, or the theory that it was the will of God that she rule. She knew that she was the most powerful woman in England and was therefore its ruler, which was a new idea at the time. Also the old prevalent value of tradition was breaking down from the time of Joan’s original trial to the English Renaissance, because there was a female monarch and the religious affiliation of the nation had changed from being largely traditional Catholic to Anglican. English society, unconsciously, displayed the growing value of power in their culture by trying to show their dominance through demonizing French Catholics, including Joan of Arc.

The core values of Europe by the 1900s had changed significantly. On the sixteenth of May 1920, Joan of Arc was canonized as Saint Joan of Arc, in the Roman Catholic Church. The process began in 1457 with her rehabilitation trial (posthumously). Joan pleaded to be held prisoner and tried under an ecclesiastical, or Catholic court, but her request was denied, which was very strange. Brother Ysambard de la Pierre of the Order of Saint Dominic, of the Convent at Rouen explained that he tried to get her to submit to the church when he testified during Joan’s rehabilitation trial, but “To which she replied that she would willingly submit to the Holy Father [the Pope], requesting to be taken before him, and to be no more submitted to the judgement of her enemies” (qtd. in “The Rehabilitation”). Also, during Joan’s rehabilitation trial, Brother Joan Toutmouillé of the Order of Saint Dominic relayed what he heard Joan said just before her death:

Alas! had I been in the ecclesiastical prison, to which I submitted myself, and guarded by the Clergy instead of by my enemies, it would not have fallen out so unhappily for me. I appeal to God, the Great Judge, for the great evils and injustice done to me!...Alas, if you had put me in the prisons of the Church Courts, and given me into the hands of the competent and suitable ecclesiastical guardians, this would not have happened: for this I summon you before God (qtd. in “The Rehabilitation”).

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Pope Calixtus III reversed the verdict of 1431 because of the obvious hostility and unfairness of the judges, the irregular trial, and incompetence of the court, which culminated in what was deemed to be by his holiness, an illegal sentence and an irregular execution (Robo). Joan was canonized in 1920, a significant because World War I had just ended, in which Britain, France, and Italy, along with others, all fought against the Allied Powers (Williamson). The Vatican used the canonization of Joan of Arc as a unifying event displaying the Schwartz core value of security because the Roman Catholic Pope consulted with Protestant Queen Victoria of Britain before finalizing the canonization and effectively improved relations between the nations of France, Britain, and Italy in one move. By 1920, the death penalty for the crime of witchcraft was unpopular, and more was understood about mental conditions like schizophrenia which might cause someone to hear voices like Joan’s. The Vatican in 1920 saw Joan’s call to adventure, the voices that she heard, as a divine occurrence from God and thus a miracle that would make her worthy of sainthood. Also, the Roman Catholic Church saw the alliance between England and France during World War I as a sign that that the blow of the Elixir that Joan brought back to France in England was no longer smarting, and England was ready for a St Joan of Arc, showing that they prized the value of security.

By examining the differences in values among different groups of people, their motives for their actions can be better understood. Similarly, the narratives of Joan of Arc throughout time can be examined to better understand different cultures’ motives for their actions. As cultures’ values changed, their view of Joan also changed. In recent times, society has had problems understanding other cultures’ actions. One culture may cry out in anguish while others cheer, much like the crowd that was present at the execution of Joan of Arc. Whether Nazis or terrorists, analyzing the values of their culture and the society that they come from, allows understanding of the reasons for their actions. The study of the life and legacy of Joan of Arc reminds us that that a culture’s opinion changes as its values change, over time.
It was a sunny day, and I was in my dad’s car, and we were driving to Sophia’s house. It was a Sunday
morning, and since neither of us had much homework, we decided that I could come over to her house.
This was not too unusual on the weekends, since Sophia and I were best friends.
“Hey Emma, is it left or right here?” my dad asked me.
Sophia’s house was not too far away from mine, but my dad insisted on using my memory rather than
using the GPS on his phone, that I told him could be connected to the car. He wasn’t too familiar with
technology and didn’t really want to learn. At least my mom would heed my technology advice.
“Left,” I replied.
Thinking about his phone brought me onto another train of thought, how much I wanted one. Ever since I
was in 5th grade, 2 years ago, I had wanted a phone. And not an old flip phone like my dad had, but an
iPhone, like everyone else had. I remember one of the most mortifying events of 6th grade was when I
had to ask a teacher if I could use their phone to call my parents and say that I would be staying after. I
had to ask a teacher! Sophia had an iPhone, which I was a little jealous of, but at least she allowed me to
see what was going on on social media. My dad would barely let me go online, save for homework,
convinced I would get a computer virus.
“Hey, I know what I’m doing more than you know what you’re doing on there,” I would say, which
would only earn me a frown and a good headshake. I jolted back to reality, and realized that we were
almost past her house.
“Stop here,” I said quickly.
The car came to an abrupt halt, making me lean forward, and I unbuckled and climbed out, hearing my
dad mumbling something about kids these days and not paying attention to their surroundings. I ignored
him. That was another habit he had; he was a mumbler. I walked along the short walkway to Sophia’s
door and rang the bell. The muted ding followed almost immediately by the sound of their creaky wood
door opening.
“Hey, Emma,” Sophie said.
She was medium height, with shoulder length perfectly brown hair, that was perfectly straight. That was
something that I could never get my hair to do, being halfway between brown and blonde and halfway
between curly and straight.
“Hey,” I replied.
I stepped inside, and we went straight up the stairs to her room.
“So, how is your history project going?” Sophia asked me.
“It’s going ok although the rest of the group was using Skype, so they had to email me to talk.”
She took her phone out of her pocket and handed it to me.
“Ugh. Your parents are soo much nicer than mine. They actually allow you to use social media and they
got you a phone,” I complained, scrolling through Sophia’s phone.
“Yeah, well I don’t use it much,” she replied “And your parents are nice too. One time when-”
“Whoah, did you know that Olivia got a new phone? I am so jealous!”
“Oh, I almost forgot,” she said, taking the phone out of my hands. “I’m going to be staying after school
tomorrow, so I need to make sure it’s charged in case I need to call my parents.”
“But, it’s only at 67%, and you know you can still use it when it’s charging, right?”
“Well, yeah, but my charger is short, and it will charge faster if it’s off,” she told me, getting up with her phone in hand.

She walked out the still open door and down the hallway and into another room.

When she came back in, we started talking. Or more like she did. I occasionally interjected something, but my mind was on other things. After, Sophia’s mom called that pizza was ready, and we went downstairs to eat. Sophia’s charging cord sat unused on the counter. Maybe she is using another cord. Sophia had always charged her phone there. Everything was changing.

We sat in silence eating pizza and drinking soda, until we both finished eating.

“What’s on your mind?” Sophia asked me, back in her room.

“What?” I asked back. I hadn’t really been paying attention.

“You seem to be thinking about something.” She looked at me quizzically, though I don’t know why.

“What do you mean?” I asked her. I had been thinking about how everything would be better if I just had a phone.

“I mean that you haven’t said a word to me since I put it away,” she said angrily.

“I thought it was charging,” I asked back. Why was she getting mad?

“Oh, it is.” Now she was clearly angry. “And I don’t plan on getting it out while you’re here”

“Why?” I asked her. It’s not like I had done anything wrong.

“Ugh! I need to use the bathroom.” She said, practically stormed out the room and down the hall. When she came back, she was more composed, but she just sat on her bed, looking at me.

I was almost relieved when I heard a knock on the door announcing my parents’ arrival.

Sophia didn’t say goodbye.

When we were near my house, my mom told me “We have a surprise for you.”

I looked at the back of her seat, confused. What would they give me?

When I got inside, still trying to figure out what was going to happen, I almost bumped into my dad, smiling. It took me a moment to realise he was holding something. I looked down and, in his hand, was a phone. A flip phone. Now I was even more confused.

“What?” was all I came up with.

“For you,” he said, thrusting the flip phone at me.

A moment later, it all came together.

“I figured that you need some way to call us, or your friends, if you want to. And I need some way to reach you at school.” He stopped smiling when he saw the wide eyed look on my face.

“Do you understand what would happen to me if someone found out my parents gave me a flip phone!? I would be the talk for days!” I said, staring down at the phone. “And, I wouldn’t even be able to see what they were saying, because I can’t even access social media.”

“I don’t care whether they announce it on the PA system, young lady. You are bringing this to school.” My dad never raised his voice, and now was one of the times when his voice assumed a kind of dangerous tone, something that usually told me I was going too far. I barely even noticed.

“When I was your age, we didn’t-”

“I don’t care what you had, I want a phone!”

With that, I stomped all the way to my room, slammed the door and jumped on my bed, before I realized I was still holding the flip phone. I wanted to scream. I wanted to smash something. My parents were the only thing blocking me from... Everything! Why did they do that? Did they just want me to be miserable? So I took some deep breaths, and did what I usually did when I was upset.

“Well, one thing this thing is good for,” I said to myself, as I dialed Sophia’s number.

“Hey it’s Emma,” I said, hearing my voice faintly through the speaker.

“Oh hey, Emma. I didn’t recognise the number. Did you get a phone?” Sophia said, kind of worriedly, for some reason.

“Kinda,” I replied.

So I told her the whole story, about arguing and then my parents getting a flip phone, and even after that,
we kept on talking.
Until Sophia told me “Well, I need to get ready for bed. It was nice to actually talk for once.”
“What do you mean? I was at your house earlier today. We talked.”
“Not really,” she muttered, “It’s fine. I’ll talk to you tomorrow. Nevermind.”
She quickly hung up.
When I laid down on my bed, after brushing my teeth, I was surprised to find that I wasn’t too angry
anymore. I did like talking with Sophia. Although what did she mean by ‘not really’? Those were my last
thoughts before I drifted off to sleep. My sleep was troubled and filled of nightmares, mostly of my
parents blocking me from something, something I really wanted.
I didn’t talk to my parents that morning, but other than that it was normal, and I knew that the flip phone
did not appear right by my backpack just by chance. I sighed as I dropped it into my bag.
When I walked to the bus, my backpack felt heavier than usual with the flip phone in it. I knew it was just
my imagination, and it would be a lot safer, for me, if it was in there instead of my pocket.
*There was something about it*, I thought as I rode the bus to school. Usually I tried to talk to get the latest
news, something that was not usually physically spoken, but now I just stared out the window. *Something
wasn’t right.* I thought back to previous arguments with my parents. *What did I want? I wanted a phone,
so I could fit in, and be like everybody else.*
Wait, I didn’t want to fit in. I just wanted to be able to see what other people were texting about and if
they were talking about me. My fist clenched, thinking of the extra item in my backpack, of my parents,
how they didn’t understand what I was going through. They were the things blocking me from getting
what I wanted. Just because they hadn’t grown up with it didn’t mean they should just block me out.
When I got off the bus, I had no trouble making my way through the usually crowded hallways. Most
people got out of the way of a clearly angry girl marching towards them. I had cooled down by lunchtime,
but I quickly heated up again as I sat down and looked over a table and saw all the kids with their phones,
showing each other funny posts and laughing. How I envied them. Someone must have felt my glare
because they glanced up at me, along with another person. I turned around so quickly that Sophia, who I
was sitting next to, gave me a curious glance. I looked back quickly to make sure that they were not still
looking at me, and to my relief, they were looking down at their phones.
“What are you doing?” Sophia hissed at me.
“What?” I asked.
“I need to talk to you,” she replied.
She then got up and walked over to a part of the lunch room where there were no people. I followed.
“What were you doing?” Sophia asked me.
“You literally just asked me that,” I replied.
“Looking at them. And it’s pretty easy to see when you’re angry.”
“Look, I don’t know what your talking about.”
“Phone!” she whisper-shouted. “You need a phone so badly that I feel like you don’t need me anymore!”
Then, it all hit me. How I had been acting, how I had been treating her. I felt terrible.
“I’m sorry,” I muttered, hugging Sophia.
“It’s ok,” she replied “When I first got my phone, that’s all I did. Go online. Check again every 5 minutes.
But then I realised that I wasn’t spending time with you.”
I remembered that time, last summer at Sophia’s birthday party when she got a phone, when I had been
happy for her instead of jealous. I had slept over at her house, but instead of talking and playing and
watching a movie together, like we usually did on sleepovers, we, or more like she, had stayed up posting
and chatting online. The next morning, I had been really disappointed when I left. I realized, with a shock,
that was what I had been doing at her house. Was that really how it felt?
“I- I don’t know what to say,” I said, and I meant it.
“Really, it’s ok. I know how you felt, and now you know how I feel.”
Sophia giggled, and we both sat back down. Lunch was great, I felt so free.
The rest of a day was a blur, me feeling so free, until when I was getting on the bus, when it stopped me
dead in my tracks. My parents. What would I say to them? I knew I had to apologize, but I just didn’t know how.

“C’mon, move,” irritatedly said the person standing behind me. I came back to my senses and quickly sat down in a seat. After the bus closed its doors and started moving, I was almost to the point of thinking of the exact sentences that I would say, when I realized that the bus was at my stop. What would I say? Why had I acted so mean? All of those thoughts vanished when I walked in and saw my parents, looking serious and worried at the same time.

“Look, Emma, your dad and I have been talking, and we’ve decided that if you really want a pho-”

“No,” I interrupted.

My mom and dad looked confused. “I thought that was what I wanted, but then I realized that what I really wanted was to be accepted, and I already am.”

They barely had a chance to cast startled glances at each other when I threw them in a big hug. Then, like with Sophia, there was more hugging and soft murmurs of apology.

When we finally stopped, I looked up at the clock and realized that it was already getting kind of late. So, I hurried about doing my homework, and then put on pajamas and brushed my teeth, and when I laid down on my bed, sleep came easily.

Not much was different the next morning, although there was a sense of peace, of a tension gone. My parents smiled and said goodbye as I left for school. The rest of the day was normal, too, but I had a spring to my step, and school seemed nice, not like a social contest like it used to feel. At lunch, I sat right next to Sophia. I looked over a few tables at the people texting or playing games or doing whatever on their phones. I thought back to when I envied them. Now, I felt kinda bad for them, because they thought all they needed was the plastic and glass rectangle that was always with them, that was always there for them. But now I knew that all I needed, was sitting right next to me, my friend.
I am the shadow of a wanderer. My skin follows along on the hot pavement or the sticky grass, destined to chase the curious. Step by step, we are stuck together for the unknowable future. Although the adventure thus far has been full of bumps and twists the rewards reaped are far deserving of the trip.

I am the shadow of a vagabond man. I see the earth far different than he, for I can see it from the dirt, not the sky. I have his massive looming form in my vision as it steps over the earth and unknowingly destroys everything in its path. He leads the way and me, having been glued to his shoes, am only able to witness his actions.

I am the shadow of a rolling stone. While the air is rich with dewy petrichor, I follow him like a loyal puppet. The days pass and although I can see he is above me I begin to speculate,

Is it possible the wanderer is my shadow?
They pick through me.
As if they're trying to find a clean shirt-
In a pile of dirty laundry.
Setting aside the good:

The Clean.
The Pure.

And plucking out all the bad:

The Tarnished.
The Poisoned.

They throw me in the wash
In hopes of making me clean.
Inside and out.
It’ll spin me around and around and around-
Drowning me in Expectations.
Soaking into me.
They hang me up to dry
Forgetting me in the wind.
Until I am just another-

Clean.
Pure.
Possession.
Sheets are scattered
lights shattered,
mirrors tattered,
Stuffed animals ripped and sliced to shreds.
Nothing is left, no memories

I wake up
in a destroyed hell
my room
is like a common horror movie
that has come to life

I close my eyes
Trying to erase the memory
Slice it away slowly from existence
It never happened
If it did, it didn’t

Do what you’re told
Keep it to yourself
And No one gets hurt
But someone always gets hurt
Their heart pummeled in the dirt
Or eyes covered in soot
Or legs draining in quicksand
Leading to their doom
Someone always gets hurt,
When it’s nothing but a dream
There is a certain breeze that is my childhood. The gentle breeze that promised a change in the seasons. My father has always preferred the windows and doors open, making every dark and neutral house open up and feel lighter. Even if that house was 30 years old, it never felt stuffy or musty; we always had warm air flowing through. The breeze that seeped in from our old windows, taking the maroon curtains with it as my mother exclaimed “Rheanna, get up, spring cleaning!” The open window revealing the crickets’ symphony as my dad played along with his acoustic guitar. All of my karaoke sessions with my CD player outside with nothing but the wind to listen to me screaming lyrics from 2008. But, it didn't take long for someone to shut the door. I remember when my dad announced that he was moving out, that my parents were splitting up, there was no warm air flow. The house was dark and the artificial sticky cold the air conditioning spit out was suffocating.

We lived in a musty apartment for a few months, then my dad moved in with his girlfriend. He got kicked out more times than I can count. Then finally after a whole summer of searching, my dad got his own house in Hallsville. “It’s not perfect, but it’s ours.” That’s what he always said when he looked at the house from the street. I thought it was perfect. The walls were three similar shades of grey: steel grey, prison grey, and dark white, as we called them. The scratched oak floors spanned through the open kitchen and living room. We always left the lights off and let the breeze carry in sunlight. The air lifted my hair and mood when we baked family-favorite snacks. Warm summer air filled the garage as my dad waxed his Monte Carlo and we traded sarcastic comments. My sisters often occupied the living room with annoying cartoons, and my turf was the fenced-in shaded backyard. I had a hammock that fit perfectly between trees. That was my favorite spot, the wind shook the leaves rhythmically along to the same music I played every day. But then, my dad slammed the doors shut and put the house up for sale.

Now, I live with my mom in a cold, sticky, over-crowded house. My stepdad hates having the windows open. He thinks the summers in Missouri are too hot, and has the air conditioner on full blast. The artificial cold air sticks to you, and it easily becomes uncomfortable to breathe. The beige walls are the same color as any other basic house on the block, and only display outdated pictures when we all used to get along. I now try and carry the sunlight and air into my crowded room, filling it with several house plants and opening the curtains to my huge window. It only creates the illusion of the warm breeze I grew up with, but it’ll work for now.
For as long as I can remember, my father (whom I often call Steve) and I have rebelled against my mother in an unusual way. We stay up until the wee hours of the morning talking in the kitchen. To me, my father is a walking encyclopedia of information -- almost like my own personal Wikipedia. I can ask him anything. Sometimes I feel like I have learned more from him than I have from school. As I’ve grown older, I’ve begun to teach him, too. He’s as eager for my well of expertise as I am for his.

My father and I share a unique trait: an insatiable craving for knowledge and a love for learning. While we talk, I often have to pause and write down all of the thoughts and questions that whiz through my mind, just to make sure I don’t forget anything. My uncle (Greg) suffered from pancreatic cancer for four years, and Steve went above and beyond trying to save him. He learned almost everything there was to know about his brother’s disease and new treatments, organized a scientific advisory board, and recruited a team of leading researchers and clinicians to develop a variety of personalized therapies. Then Steve shared what he learned with me through countless conversations over many years. And although it sounds morbid, it helped us bond. Steve has also taught me about geothermal HVAC systems (the best part of our house, apparently), the market for and mechanics of LED lighting, and how to change a tire, to name a few. I’ve heard family origin stories and drawn out lineages. My dad has spent hours editing my papers and subsequently reviewing his suggestions with me. I used to hate the constructive criticism, but I realize now that it has shaped and improved my writing tremendously.

I’ve taught Steve a fair amount, too. Every time he sees me making a study guide, especially for science, he asks me to print him an extra copy. But more even than reading them, he loves when I directly explain what I’m learning. I’ve taught him about neuronal synapses and action potentials, the grammar of Latin, how the digestive system really works, and so much more. My dad turns into a kid in a candy shop when I start telling him about something new. He often says that he wishes he could come to school with me or go back to college.

Our late night conversations aren’t always academic, though. I often give him parenting advice. I was pretty harsh on him when I was in my younger, more rebellious years, yet many of my suggestions seem to have sunk in. Now that I am a less hostile offspring, Steve often asks for my advice on how to deal with my younger siblings. Even if he doesn’t ask, if I feel like he’s being unfair, I let him know. Thankfully, Steve values my opinion. Landscaping is another topic of conversation that arises. Sometimes he dragged me out to our front yard to admire the bushes. My dad takes our greeneries very seriously and I try not to laugh too much.

But we don't even always talk. I’ve been playing backgammon with my dad since I could sing the ABC’s. We play for hours and keep huge tabs that are often conveniently lost. We also play cards -- Pitch when my brothers are around, and Rummy 500 and Gin when it’s just us. We always have a bowl of popcorn and often end up breaking out into dance parties. Sometimes we just silently stay in each other’s company, doing our own work. I like being in his presence.

No question is stupid. We jump from topics with absolutely no relation to one another. Our conversations might not even seem coherent to many people. Steve and I can almost read each other’s minds; I usually know what he’s talking about and can, for the most part, predict his next thought or finish his sentences. The best part about our conversations is that they are completely unfiltered -- unlike how they would be anywhere else. We talk about our true views and real questions about about politics,
society, money, and right and wrong. We trust each other, and use our kitchen as a conversational safe haven.
You wake up in an office. You look around a bit, trying to remember your surrounding. You suddenly remember that you have a meeting and that you must have dozed off while filling out paperwork. You head out into the hallway and see two doors, one on the left and one on the right. You decide to go into the room on the left.
If you want to continue on the correct story, go to paragraph A.
If not, go to paragraph B (please don’t).

A: You find yourself in the lounge. Would you like some coffee? Probably not, the coffee there is terrible. You move on into the next hallway and forward into the conference room. However, when you get there, no one is in the room! Then again, you haven’t met any people here since you started making your way into the conference room. Well, you decide to start looking for your friends, starting by going into the first door you see.
Again, if you want to continue on the correct story, go to paragraph C.
If not, go to paragraph D.

B: Did you have to go against my wishes? I mean, I am doing all this work narrating for you. I would expect more respect from you. You know what, let’s try this again. You go back into the hallway.
If you choose to follow my instructions this time, go to paragraph A.
If not, go to paragraph E (you wouldn’t do this to me after all I’ve written, right?).

C: You find yourself in another room. What? Did you expect a secret passage? Come on, this is an office building. Now, let’s get on with this. You think that your boss should know if anybody is here.
If you decide to go to your boss, go to paragraph F.
If not, go to paragraph E.

D: Wow. I honestly thought that since you were being good so far, you would go to C. But, now I have to deal with you. Come on, let’s go into the door on the left. That will take you back on track.
If you decide to be nice, go to paragraph C.
If not, go to paragraph E.
E: You disrespectful, scheming reader. I bet you think you’re funny. But, I will have you know that there is a choice up ahead. And, if you choose the wrong way, you will be scarred for life. So, go STRAIGHT down the hallway.
If you are nice, please right yourself and go to whichever paragraph you messed up on (either A, C, or D).
If not, go to paragraph G (WARNING).
F: You find your boss’s office surprisingly empty. And clean. Now what to do? Well, you could always search around. Let’s see here… a computer, a notepad, an encyclopedia, and bingo! A hidden staircase beneath the bookcase! Good job finding it (because I obviously knew it was there). Let’s go down a level. Ooh, a fork in the road. You know what, let’s take the right passageway.
If you decide to go right, go to paragraph H.
If not, go to paragraph G (if you do this, it would be the same as choosing the wrong way every time).

G: Well, welcome to the useless paragraph. Nothing will happen here, because there is nothing to write about. You know, this wouldn’t have happened if you had chosen the correct way every time. I don’t even know why I give you choices. You really don’t care, do you? You know, you are lucky that you can still turn back. So, go ahead. Turn back if you want to. I mean, there is nothing else to do.
If you go back, go to paragraph E.
If not, you will sit here and rot. The End.

H: You find yourself in a mysterious computer room. After a quick examination, you find out that your boss was involved in a heist a year ago! And what's worse, everyone who he employed had their own evil part in this plot except for you, the newest recruit. However, as you are looking around, you don’t notice someone creeping up behind you. That is the last thing you remember. Now, go back to the beginning.
The steep driveway levels off
in front of a dark oak wood door, the porch flooded
with cosmopolitan flora seamlessly adopted from an array of origins.

Felines scattered about, our silent protectors,
Their known aloof nature disregarded
For high spirited companions.

So this is my home. A medley of odd parts put together,
One lonesome grandmother alongside an equally as desolate mother joined
as one to oversee the lives of two adolescents, one by blood and one by compassion

Residing behind the back walls of my home is a fenced in
garden consumed with strange vines, adjacent a rock wall separating
It from elevated ominous trees who thieve light from their companions below

You feel like that; like being at one with love and nature,
Like letting yourself seep into the woodwork to become apart of
The walls and land no more than the cats and the trees,

Gently humming with wind chimes or
biting into a fresh apple or caressing a fat old cat in your lap
while he bathes in honey light. You feel like

Laying out as a care free feline. You feel like crying out to the sky
From the overwhelming feeling of joy and content. You calmly stride back
Through the oak door instead crossing the threshold into a world of your own.
The drawings fade into the environment as the audience views the credits of the movie while a short montage of the camera reveals the setting of the story. A rickety old house is still filled with many items and necessities. Pan over to the window in which a group of humanoid bugs crawl over the sill and enter the kitchen area. Freeki is at the second in line with Sarge leading. Like a SWAT team they scourge the area until Freeki finds a cup containing sugar cubes.

Freeki - “Hey Sarge! I found something!”
Sarge - “*exclaim* In all my days in the land of House, I’ve only heard tales about this ambrosia before!”
Sarge examines objects
Sarge - “Sugar cubes! All right men! Single pattern! You! with the scratch! get at the bottom of the wall!”
Scratch falls to the bottom of the ground with the cart waiting for them. the rest of the ants start hauling the sugar cubes back to Scratch. All of a sudden, a bird swoops down and proceeds to attack the ant squad.

Freeki - “LOOK OUT!!!”
The bird pecks furiously, but the ants are able to escape the bird and distract it. The ants then retrieve the rest of the cubes and climb down the wall. They go into the secret passageway to their little village. The camera sweeps over to establish the detail put into the construction of the village. The ants start setting the sugar cubes into the Queen’s pulley system to be delivered to her castle. Freeki starts heading back to his home.

Sarge - “Hey, Freeki!”
Freeki turns around, and Sarge tosses a sugar cube bit to him. Freeki fumbles but catches it. He looks questioningly at Sarge.
Sarge - “You tell that Pappy of yours that you worked hard today. You hear?”
Freeki - “Thanks, Sarge!”
Sarge salutes him and enters his house. Pappy is reading over his document when the door opens and his pulley basket drags him over to Freeki.
Pappy - “Well it’s about time you got your sorry bum back in here, Freeki. What did you bring home today?”
Freeki then unceremoniously throws the sugar cube bit over his shoulder to the delight of Pappy.
Pappy - “Well, I see you brought something of worth back here! Our bloated beetle we call our queen won’t spare us a bread crumb let alone a sugar bit. I’ll be able to make something sweet for supper for once.”
Freeki - “Say uh, Pappy,”
Pappy - “WHAT?”
Freeki - “Might I ask why you’re planning on eating supper here instead of at the Queen’s ceremony?”
Pappy - “I refuse to support that sorry swine we call our queen! Don’t you ever wonder why we can’t eat more than a full stomach’s worth? She runs the kingdom of House like it’s a secondary option. All she ever does it eat and overpopulate the village.”
Freeki - “Isn’t that her job as queen, to populate our village?”
Pappy - “Feh! She uses her pregnancy as an excuse to stuff herself silly and lie on her bed while everyone else works tirelessly long to harvest! I swear, when the great king Behemoth was in charge, everyone had a fair share. But then he ran away, probably to get away from Beatrix.”

Freeki - “I see, but can we still go to the ceremony just to socialize? I haven’t met anyone outside the army scouts in over two summers.”

Pappy - “Freeki! I said no! You’ve worked hard enough today there’s no point in wasting a good night’s rest to meet with a bunch of judging residents.”

Freeki - “Is it alright if only I go? So you can escape the…”

Pappy - “For the last time, I said no! Go to your room to get some rest before tomorrow!”

Freeki - “Yes Pappy, I’m sorry.”

Pappy - “Feh”

Freeki goes up to his room defeated and sits down on his bed. He gazes out the window and lays on the bed until he hears the march of the other villagers going to the ceremony. He checks up on Pappy, who is proofreading a document he wrote. Freeki then quietly sneaks to the door…

Pappy - “You must think I’m really stupid, don’t you Freeki.”

Freeki - “Well…”

Pappy - “GO TO BED!”

Freeki makes a mad dash to his room, petrified with the close encounter. He gets into his room and falls on the bed. Pappy then comes up and locks the door.

Pappy - “Your disobedience has made my distrust in you go deeper than the roots of this house! Oh, and don’t bother attempting to exit your room again, because like the house, you’re also grounded.”

Freeki - “You’ve already grounded me!”

Pappy - “Feh”

Freeki sits on the bed and contemplates his situation. Pappy on the other side, makes a disgruntled but depressed sigh as he turns around and heads back downstairs. Freeki then lays on the bed perturbed until he remembers that the roof isn’t structured that well. He jumps on his bed until he grabs the roof frame and passes through a secret hole in his roof. He crawls out and runs to the remaining crowds. Freeki stops near the outskirts and observes the castle in the sky as the camera shifts there to the view of Queen Beatrix. The disgustingly fat Queen Beatrix is sitting on her lounge bed ordering servants around to her bidding.

Queen Beatrix - “You there! Get me more of those sugar cubes! My children demand it! And you there! FAN HARDER on my backside! My children can’t be born into this putrid world with the intense heat you’ve all cursed me with!

Servant #1 - “Yes, your malevolence.”

Queen Beatrix - “Where’s my favorite child? I wanted her down here minutes ago!!”

The princess Mothra then walks down the hallway into the queen’s bedroom.

Princess Mothra - “May I ask the questionable request of my presence at this hour? I must get ready for the ceremony tonight.”

Queen Beatrix - “Mothra, you haven’t gotten dressed up for the ceremony! Your servants have slaved endless hours preparing your dress and you haven’t even obeyed my first command!”

Princess Mothra - “The dress is much too revealing, Mother! I don’t want to attract a mate at this age! I want to focus on my political education on how to run the colony.”

Queen Beatrix - “To heck with your so called education! You have no use for it in my line of work! What you need is a worthy mate, plenty of food and a wide belly to further our population!”

Princess Mothra - “I refuse to seduce myself to gluttony and lust to become ruler, Mother! The people want someone to trust and follow, and they definitely don’t do that with you.”

Queen Beatrix - “You stupid girl! Why can’t you do what I ask the first time?!!”

Princess Mothra - “Because your illogical demands don’t make an ounce of sense!”

Queen Beatrix - “Don’t question my authority, Mothra! Now put on the dress and change your attitude!”

Princess Mothra - “Gah! To heck with you!”

Queen Beatrix then adjusts herself but then has a spasm of birth pain, the nurses rush over, before
realizing it was just a scare.

Queen Beatrix - “Despicable brat, she is the only competition in my superiority on the colony. Heck, she’s getting too smart for her own good. If Mothra realizes that she will never take my throne, she could challenge me and I couldn’t stand up to her. ‘Eh,’ she’ll never find out, I will rule supreme forever there isn’t a thing she can do to stop my--”

Princess Mothra then walks down the stairs in her dress. A moment of awkward silence follows.

Queen Beatrix - “Oh darling! You look absolutely lavishing! Let me get a good look at you!”

As Mothra walks closer, the queen starts to moan and her gargantuan body gurgles and quakes. The nurses tend appropriately as Mothra looks in disgust.

Princess Mothra - “Will I be able to congregate with the townsfolk this ceremony?”

Queen Beatrix - “Absolutely not! You won’t be socializing with commoners. I made that mistake in my youth and I shan't have you be with some mediocre mongrel!”

Princess Mothra - “It doesn’t matter who the heir is mother! You’re just going to have the guards throw him into jail until I’m older! Why will it matter?!”

Queen Beatrix - “Why do you continue to question me Mothra? Go to your room and do not return until the ceremony begins!” (rebellious teenager)

Princess Mothra angrily walks up to her room. She picks up her political novel written by her father, Behemoth, and reads it a little bit.

Princess Mothra - “A good leader knows his entire legion by name, he takes the time to know each member personally to understand how each member will benefit the community.” “I shall do just that! And nothing will prevent me from doing it.”

Princess Mothra then observes the situation of her captivity, she eats off the bars on her window and crawls out under the tower. She then surveys the long drop and quickly scurries down the castle wall into some shrubbery. It is at this time when the ceremony is about to begin when Freeki joins the others in the crowds of people. He recognizes Sarge and politely greets him.

Freeki - “Evening, Sarge!”

Sarge - “Quiet you...Oh hey! Freeki nice to see you here at the ceremony!"
Freeki - Yeah I was able to sneak out and…
Sarge - “Hang on a minute, it’s about to begin,”

The salute of the majesty is played by the guards at the top of the castle and Queen’s bed is rolled out in unison, she is then reclined to face the audience. She then begins her speech.

Queen Beatrix - “Dear villagers of the kingdom of House! Today is the 237th ceremony our humble and blooming colonies, and I’m happy to say that we have established ourselves as a beneficial society.”

Sarge then abruptly asks the Queen which surprises Freeki and causes an uproar amongst the class.

Sarge - “Beneficial? Then why haven’t you dispersed the food my team has been collecting evenly with the rest of the colony?
Crowd - <uproar>

Queen Beatrix - “I can assure you dear citizen that we have experts preparing your worthy supplements as we speak!”

Scratch - “Prove it! My entire scout troop is starving to death because of you!”

Queen Beatrix, at a loss for words, then signals the trumpeter to restore order to the crowd as she stutters the rest of her presentation

Queen Beatrix - “Without-further-ado-I-announce-your-princess-Mothra!

The light fixture then goes to her tower but is revealed to be empty.

Queen Beatrix - “Come on sweetpea, come on out, <angry growl> Gone Again!”

A murmur of concern goes through the crowd.

Sarge - “If we can’t trust that your daughter is out there, why should we assume you can control our society’s poverty status?

Queen Beatrix - “Since most of you are CLEARLY in need of stuffing your faces, I present to you, your dinner!”

The hidden doors of the wall then open to unleash a long table which lengthens to the extent of the crowd.
A conveyor belt then pathetically rolls out: two bowls of tomato bits, one bowl of cabbage bits, and two sugar cubes to the gawking but silent crowd. A servant then comes out and grinds cheese onto the cabbage.

Cheese Joke Servant - “Just tell me when to stop.”
Awkward silence as the servant grinds the cheese.
Random Villager - “Is that all?”
Random Villager #2 - “You greedy hoarding maggot!”
Scratch - “Out of way you lot! Free food!”
The crowd then turns to chaos as the entirety starts swarming to try and get a share of the food. Sarge tries to make himself heard as he and a majority of the group stays to look disgusted at the queen and at the desperate selfishness brought up by the crowd.

Sarge - “This is your best attempt to resolve the colony into a beneficial society?”
Queen Beatrix then shuts herself back up in the castle.
Queen Beatrix - “Well that escalated quickly, I mean that really got out of hand out there, those peasants are simply too malicious and wrathful to think of anyone above themselves.”<groan from birth again>
Sarge - “Get back out here you maggot of no virtue! Do something about the damage you’ve caused! What else could demonstrate your lack of control over our colony???”
On cue after that phrase, the ground begins to shake like an earthquake. Everyone notices as some structures begin to crumble and a crack in the ceiling becomes bigger.

Freeki - “What madness is this?”
The crack in the ceiling then lengthens up to unleash swarms of the Horned Roaches. The entire village begins to react to the incoming monsters.
Random Female Villager - “What in heck are those?!”
The masses of Horned Roaches begin to hurriedly scuttle downwards to the village, some even dropping from the sky to attack the poor town.

Sarge - Freeki. Listen to me, get your Pappy and get out of here as fast as you can you hear me?!”
As more Horned Roaches evade the village and literally fall from the sky, they begin to attack and eat people. Sarge then defends himself by skewering one with his spear.

Sarge - “Go on, get out of here!”<concern><confident grunt>
Freeki then runs out but not before looking back to see Mothra fighting with the guards and helping the civilians. They make eye contact for a brief second. Freeki then sprints back to his house. Camera then cuts back to the fight. Guards also rush from the castle to defend the villagers. Two noticeable roaches then descend carrying a wooden masked freak on their backs.

Sarge - “By the giants!”
The wooden masked character then reveals himself as the Necromancer and starts destroying the village with a flame-throwing green-glowing sceptre.

Necromancer - “I was once known as <noise blocks out word> but I am now the nefarious Necromancer! The Destroyer of Races! The Chaotic Corruptor! And would you like to know something, my brave knight?”
Necromancer - “What?”
Necromancer - “I’m going to let you go. Go and run away, be sure to tell all your pathetic little friends my name and intentions.”
Necromancer then loosens his grip as Sarge runs away.

Necromancer - “Run, run, little maggot, because you’re the only one in this dungheap I’m leaving alive!”
Sarge runs away as the Necromancer begins to enflame more of the village. Two Horned Roaches then step out behind a building to corner the coward.

The Necromancer - “Oops, I lied.”
As Freeki runs back to his house, he encounters a Horned Roach attacking a civilian with her child. He then draws his spear and attacks the beast. It puts up a good fight, but Freeki wins by stabbing the creature in the head causing a green mucus-like substance to ooze out. Freeki finds his house ablaze and rushes in to help his guardian.

Freeki - “Pappy! Pappy! Where are you?!”
Pappy - “Get your sorry-no-good-lying-backstabbing-backside in here and help me out of this!!!
Freeki - “Are you alright??!”
Pappy - “YES I’M AS PEACHY AS ORANGE JUICE NOW GET ME OUT OF HERE FREEKI!”

Freeki runs out with Pappy on his back, and they rush into the secret outside area. At the castle the servants are barricading the doors as the Horned Roaches swarm the castle. Not caring about the situation at hand, Beatrix is shoveling food in her mouth like a pig.

Servant #1 - “Your malevolence! We can’t hold them much longer! We’re doomed!”
Queen Beatrix (between mouthfuls) - “Please! Please! You’re frightening the children! Please keep it down my spawn can’t breed in conditions like this!”

At this, the window burst open with flames as the Necromancer enters the scene. He takes off his mask to reveal his face to the queen. (But not so that the camera sees it.
Necromancer - “Do you remember me Beatrix?”
Queen Beatrix - <gasp> “Get away from me you monster!”

The Necromancer snaps his fingers and another swarm enters the room. The Necromancer then climbs down the tower with the screams of the victims above. Mothra meanwhile is seeing this disorder and is hiding in fright. She helps more victims find shelter and tries to hide because she has no weapon.

Meanwhile, Freeki and Pappy take refuge in a broken flowerpot. They hurriedly make themselves hidden as they finally rest from the chaos. The next morning, Freeki walks back with Pappy strapped onto his back surveying the damage of the Roaches. The village is mostly desolate as they venture into the burnt and broken landscape. Overcome with grief and anger, Freeki breaks down.

*For the full text, please see Appendix*
“I said I love you,” I cried “why won’t you answer me?”
My words dissolved into the sharp, chilled air. I finally realized that I loved him but he couldn’t answer.
He couldn’t complete the circle of love that had been gashed open and never shut. And now it would never close, constantly widening until our togetherness remained a distant memory in only my mind. The swaying trees were throwing their staggering leaves across the air, which frequently stabbed my face, as if trying to push me away from him, here. I couldn’t leave him forever. He showed me this wondrous side of life that exhilarated me with every step we took together. But now I was alone. The sun waved slowly and fell away behind the hills and everything grew still and dark. I pushed my bruised knees off the ground and stared down at him, letting my last tear fall. I gathered myself and walked away, trying to not look back. But I knew I couldn’t forget him, for I had left half of my heart next to his, six feet under the grass.
The Hairy Legs In My Ear
The hairy legs in my ear scratched my brain,
making my eyelids flutter.
Those tiny,
hairy legs in my ear tickled my skin,
causing those tiny bumps to appear on my neck.
That memory of the spiny needle crawling down my face,
embedded in my dreams.
Cunning vampires,
they are.
For when the sun goes away,
the moon comes to stay,
and they come to play.
One night,
the furry thorn with eyes found a new bed
in my head.
The air legs were sour but in a spicy way.
The remains of micro hairs scratched my insides
like a fizzy coke.
I would have a terrible cough when I woke
because those hairy legs had crawled down my throat.
Superstar
Yesterday I was Whitney,
today I’m Madonna.
I have the most powerful voice.
The glass walls around me shake as I sing.
?The ground rumbling from my sound.
A standing ovation today,
an encore tomorrow.
The voices of my screaming fans,
drizzling in the background.
They won’t notice me half an hour from now.
I’ll see them another day as Celine or Cher.
I won’t sound the same,
my fans won’t recognize me.
But for thirty minutes
I’ll have the attention of a million liquid fans,
Thirty minutes of stardom.
?Thirty minutes of fame.
Thirty minutes of having the most powerful voice in the world.
Thirty minutes of being a superstar.
Thirty minutes in the shower.
My owner looks at me, tears streaming down his face. I wag my tail, and squirm closer along the linoleum so lick his tears away, ignoring the painful bulge in my side. He looks at me sadly, petting me, staring at me as if it was the last time he would be able to. I don’t understand his sorrow, all the other visits to the vet hadn’t given him this reaction.

“You’re such a good boy, I love you so much, this isn’t fair to you.” His hand shakes as he strokes my face, hands trailing down my sides, carefully avoiding the lump evident even through my fur.

He flinched as we hear a voice announce, “It's time.”

My owner stands up from his seat, crouching down next to me to look me in the eyes. Sobs wrack his body as he kisses the top of my head. I wiggle happily, and stand up to get closer in order to give him a good slobbery kiss, his salty tears wiped away.

He stands slowly, as if it pains him to be away from me. I trot happily next to my owner as he wanders into the room the man in the white coat went into. Though the visits to the vet were not always enjoyable, I always felt better afterwards.

Maybe the vet would be able to fix the knot in my side this time.

When we arrive in the room, my owner lifts me onto the steel table, his arms linger around me, reluctant to let me go. I lay down after he releases me, laying on the side that doesn’t hurt and look up at him. Our eyes meet, and I remember to the moment that he saved me.

I think back to the first time I saw my owner, when he wandered into the alley after hearing my pitiful whimpers. His eyes were soft even back then, looking curiously into the cardboard box I was in. He lifted me out of the box, and took me home with him, despite my itchy fur and swollen stomach. Then he took me to the vet for the first time, and they made me feel as if nothing was wrong.

“Is it really that bad? Do I really have to….” My owner trails off.

The doctor nods, a his mouth turned in a grim frown. “He’s in pain, Charles. Would you force him to live in pain, just so you don't lose your best friend?”

My owner sighs, and swollen eyes turn on me once more. “I couldn’t do that to him. It's not fair to make him suffer so I don't have to.”

I lay my head on my paws, eyes looking up at my owner. He comes over, stroking my golden fur. “You’ve been such a good boy,” he blubbers, “You don't deserve this. You deserve to live a long happy life, but the cancer… I don't want you to go. I’ll miss you so much more than this...”
The vet comes forward, and inserts a needle into my leg. I jerk a little, eyes locked on my owner. His arms wrapped around me, his sobs shaking my body. I lick his face, lying next to mine, as I fall further onto my side. My breathing slows and I feel darkness reaching for me. I blink slowly, before closing my eyes.

I don't feel the pain in my side anymore, I don't feel my body shut down, or the shaking table as my owner grieves. I don't hear the doctor declare that my heart has stopped. I don't hear the vet leave the room, the door clicking shut behind him. I don't feel my owner crawl up onto the table to lay with me as my corpse cools.

I feel nothing.
“But dad, why won’t the NYPD investigate?” asked Mia, as she sat down in their living room in their apartment together, conversing.

“I told you Mia,” said Mia’s dad, “The NYPD was ordered by the Government, THE GOVERNMENT, to not investigate.” Mia’s dad sat down next to her on the Lazy Boy couch. He grabbed the remote, and turned on the tv. There, on the tv, was a report on the New York City bombing in Central Park.

“Look dad, innocent people died, along with police officers like you. You can’t just sit here on your bum and do nothing.”

“Mia, that’s enough. I don’t want you to talk about this anymore, ok?” Mia slouched down in the couch. “Fine, but at least tell me how many people died.” Mia’s dad slouched down in the couch. “We know of 51 people got injured, 31 people died, and we still haven’t dug through the rubble to find any more... any more dead bodies,” said Mia’s dad, hesitating at the end.

Mia felt like she wanted to cry. “But dad, why won’t you tell me why you won’t investigate?”

“Mia, do you think your mother would approve of this?” asked Mia’s dad.

“I wouldn’t know, because she died 3 days after she had me!” yelled Mia. Mia got up from the couch, and raced to her room. Once Mia reached her room, she slammed the door shut, shaking the whole apartment.

Mia’s dad sat in silence, alone. “Oh Margret, if only you were here.”

“Mia, that’s enough. I don’t want you to talk about this anymore, ok?” Mia slouched down in the couch.

“I gotta do something,” Mia said to herself. She raced over to her twin sized bed and reached under her mattress. Under her mattress, she found $37.50, a fingerprint scanner, (that she stole from her father) a magnifying glass, some binoculars, and a backpack. “Thank grandma for Christmas money,” Mia said out loud to herself. She threw her supplies into her backpack, and walked towards her window. She opened the widow, said a prayer silently, and jumped.

Mia landed gracefully on the ground, right next to a garbage can. She walked down her street, took a right, then made a left, and found the bus stop. It was mid-afternoon, so the streets were busy, and she blended in. She climbed in the bus, and payed her $6.75 dues, told the bus driver to take her to Central Park, and took her seat. The bus ride was 20 minutes total. There were four other people on the bus. Three women, and a man. The bus stopped at another stop and picked up a passenger. Mia couldn’t tell if it was a boy or girl. The stranger walked down the aisle and sat across from Mia. The bus doors closed. Mia road the rest of the way to Central Park in silence. As the bus pulled up to the park, Mia stood up and walked to the front. She got out, and walked toward the bomb site. There was police tape surrounding the area. She walked over the tape and got out her supplies.

“Look for clues. That’s what dad says.” She walked toward where the bomb went off and looked for fingerprints. She scanned the area. As she was scanning the area, she heard a twig snap. She looked up, and there, was a man who looked like he was from Tazjilla, planting another bomb! “HEY, STOP!” Mia screamed. The man looked at her and took off. Mia ran over to the other bomb. She looked at the man running and the bomb. She knelt down to the bomb. There was a timer on it. “What does it say?” asked Mia. She looked at the timer. “Oh my gosh, 10 seconds!” Mia took off running. 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1. BOOM.

“Uh, what happened?” wondered Mia. She was dressed in a white hospital gown, on a hospital bed, in a hospital room. She sat up on the bed. Just as she was about to get up, a doctor walked in.
“Hello Mia. Glad to see you are awake.”
“Another bomb went off and you were really close to it. You have been in a coma for 1 week and 3 days.”
Mia’s heart sank. “Your father says you ran to your room after an argument. He then said he went to come talk to you 2 hours later. He saw that you were gone and your window was open. Then, he knew what you did, where you were going, and what you took. He got the whole police force together to go look for you at the bomb sight. Once the pulled in, they heard a bomb and saw smoke. The officers rushed over there only to find you, still breathing. You, my friend, are one tough girl.”
Mia was trying to make sense of all this when her father walked in.
“Mia, my baby girl. Are you alright?” Mia’s dad raced over to her bed and gave her a hug.
“I am fine dad. Just glad to be alive and healthy,” said Mia with joy.
“Mia, that was a foolish thing to do. I could have lost you, but thanks to you, we caught the bomber!” said Mia’s dad, overjoyed.
“Really, was he from Tanzilla?” Mia’s dad sat up in his chair and said. “Yes, he is from Tanzilla. He admitted to everything. He said it was an act of terrorism, and that he was ordered to do it. He now won’t talk anymore. The government is now taking over the investigation.”
“Dad, good job,” said Mia with pride. “Thanks Mia. Uh, Doc. when can I have Mia back?” asked Mia’s dad.
“Give us two days and she is yours,” said the doctor with confidence.

“On behalf of the city, we would like to thank you Mia, for helping you assist in capturing the know fugitive from Tanzilla,” said the mayor proudly. The crowd erupted in town square. As Mia walked onto stage, she scanned the crowd. She guessed there must have been at least 10,000 people there to honor her. Mia arrived at the middle of the stage. “Mia, to show our gratitude, we give you the medal of honor, the key to the city, and a 5 year scholarship.” Mia bowed her head as the medal was bestowed upon her. As the medal was bestowed, the crowd erupted, louder than ever. 3 hours later the celebration ended, and Mia and her dad drove home.
“Mia,” said Mia’s dad, “Your mother would be proud of you.”
“Thanks dad,” replied Mia. They drove home in silence, thinking about how they would be changed forever.
Opportunity for Greatness
My heart pounded against my ribs in anticipation. I subtly crossed my fingers, hoping that this superstition, which I ordinarily view as pointless, could in some way alter the verdict I was prepared to receive. The knock on the door of the pediatrician’s examination room caused my entire body to flinch. “You must have just thrown up from nerves; you’re all good to go to school today!” declared Dr. Plax, with a seemingly mocking grin.

With that announcement, the bubble of hope which had built up inside me popped, leaving me with only the fear of going to a Parkway Central Middle School, after nine years at my small, private school. Tears forced their way out of my eyes as this thought became a reality.

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My father’s mantra, “Every challenge is an opportunity for greatness,” played through my head, but the sound of my chattering teeth interrupted the efforts to tame my apprehension. The empty halls taunted me as I tugged at my shirt, uncomfortable to be in school without the stiff, plaid uniform I had become accustomed to.

After starting down two wrong hallways, I once again examined the labyrinth on the school map, now dampened by the palms of my clammy hands.

Finally, I found the correct hallway. My slow pace was intended to postpone the petrifying moment of walking into an in-session class, though it only elongated my anticipation of the inevitable. After what seemed like an eternity, I turned the doorknob with an unsteady grip and paused. Failing at my attempt to gain composure, I opened the heavy door.

I stumbled into the rowdy classroom, too overwhelmed to fully take in my surroundings. Then, for an instant, all I could see was an intense red. I realised I had bumped into a lofty boy in a red shirt, but by the time I became fully aware of the situation, he had already walked past me. This encounter resulted in even stronger feelings of self doubt, worsened by the eyes peering into me.

An abrupt screech came from the end-of-period bell, and hundreds of students funneled into the hallway. Once again, disorientation enveloped me while the air filled with a stench of body odor, and dozens of conversations sounded over each other.

As the wave of pre-teens carried me down the hall, I tried to ground myself by repeating my dad’s favorite statement once more. “This is an opportunity for greatness. I have nothing to fear, because this is a chance to do my best,” I said to myself.

While logically I knew there was nothing to seriously fear, my rationality seemed insignificant in comparison to the tensing of each muscle of my body.

I scrambled through the herd of students to find a teacher, and, after uttering multiple unintelligible phrases, I asked for directions in a hushed tone. In an animated tone, she replied, “Your class is right over there. Are you the new student? Don’t hesitate to come to me if you need help with anything!”

The crowd led me farther away from the teacher, and, despite her supportive intentions, my intestines were tied in a knot after being referred to as “the new student.” My eyes fixated on the navy carpet as I found my way to the math classroom.

Inspirational posters cluttered the walls telling me to “believe in myself” and that “confidence is the
path to success,” both of which seemed impossible as I scanned the intimidating room.

Tentatively, I raised my gaze to see about 20 students lounged in their chairs, displaying the ease that I lacked. I sat in a seat next to a stranger, with whom I carefully avoided eye contact, when a sudden awareness of my appearance came over me. I realised that the majority of my peers sported workout shorts, a t-shirt, and Chacos, while I dressed up in sandals, jeans, and my nicest tank top. I breathed in through my mouth in an effort to suppress the sense of standing out, which had been foreign to me at my old school. My shoulders hunched and my legs crossed, giving me the feeling of invisibility, though not reducing my unease.

Suddenly, the teacher’s annoyingly high-pitched voice pulled me out from inside my head.

“Okay, class. We are going to get to know each other a little bit. Introduce yourself to your ‘shoulder partner’ and each of you answer the question on the board: What do you want to be when you grow up?”

I turned to the girl next to me, whose features looked oddly similar to mine. We had the same blue-green eyes and short, flaxen hair, although hers was in a relaxed ponytail while mine was flattened down and straight as a pin. An oversized t-shirt hung off her laid-back frame, and her eyelids faintly drooped over her eyes.

While I searched for my voice, my silent thoughts began to stammer in my head. This was a situation which I had hoped to avoid the whole day. I had to introduce myself for the first time in my life. I had to talk to someone new for the first time since kindergarten. I thought to myself, “This is your opportunity for greatness.”

“Hi! I’m Emily, when I grow up, I want to be an English teacher.”

Surprisingly, my voice sounded almost normal. The seconds in between my response and my shoulder partner’s were put into slow motion as I watched her face closely, trying to figure out what she was thinking. My entire body trembled slightly; my stuttering thoughts turned completely incoherent. Before I heard her voice, I saw her mouth begin to move, and the knot inside of me tightened.

“Hey, Emily! I’m Naomi, and I don’t know what I want to do when I’m older. I’ve never heard of anyone who wants to be an English teacher; that’s so cool!”

As we laughed about my peculiar occupational aspiration, I uncrossed my legs, and my mind began to function correctly again. My intestinal organs returned to their appropriate positions, although a tingling combination of slight nerves and excitement remained in my chest.

For the rest of the period, Naomi and I whispered to each other while facing the teacher as to not get in trouble.

When the obnoxious bell sounded another time, I was unexpectedly disappointed to leave the classroom.

I scampered through the mess of students during passing period and into yet another unfamiliar classroom. This time, the room’s walls were bare white, lacking the posters of the previous one. What remained constant, however, was the palpable comfort between my peers who were already familiar with each other, though this time it welcomed me.

I approached a stranger’s table, excited for another opportunity for greatness.

“Hi! Could I sit next to you? My name is Emily.”
We stood, two perfect strangers, one with a million places to be, the other with no general plan. Or maybe we both had no general plan. Nevertheless, she was beautiful.

A text popped in my inbox, sounding off my tacky ghost notification and distracting me from the beautiful girl. It’s Renee, the best friend and greatest wing chick I’ve ever had.

“What’s up?”

To tell the truth would’ve been simple. I was at a bus station. It was overcast, and I had been ready to open my umbrella and walk the twelve miles home. There was a pretty girl near me. Not that last part, though. I had a significant other then, and it wasn’t this charming lady standing not three feet from me. The second time the ghost sound went off, the girl turned towards me, her eyes on the phone. What pretty eyes. Clear as the rain that started pouring down from the angels to the tiny bus stop.

My partner reminded me of the rain as well, but not in this pure way that the woman did. They were more of a drip, drip, drip.

Another text came in from Renee, and soon another from my significant other. I decided to silence my phone and hide the distraction from view in the back pocket of my jeans.

The girl was looking at me. Red as a cherry, I checked my watch. The bus was late. Where’s the bus?

Nervous, I drummed my fingers on my leg and made a quick glance at her again. She was still looking at me. I did the only thing I knew how to do.

“Hi.”

She grinned, her dazzling white teeth perfect as a military cemetery and brighter than a dozen supernovas. And when she spoke, her voice was brittle and broken.

“Hey.”

I was frozen. The words she spoke had carried no weight, the texts from someone who used expletives as a second language, and her eyes. Her beautiful clear eyes seen through a window of tears.

“Is everything... okay?” Hesitantly, the question slipped from my mouth. Nothing stopped me from asking it, but it seemed the right thing to do.

Her answer was equally as cautious. “Not really. Thanks, stranger.” She was fed up with waiting for the bus, and started heading out of the shelter we had made in the rain.

“Wait!” I ran into the heavy drizzle after her, determined to say something, anything to let her remember me.

“Yeah?” Her tears were indistinguishable from the rain.

I had nothing to say. Anything clever had drained out of my head. Instead, I handed her my umbrella.

“Thanks, stranger.” She stated, her smile no longer plastic and her true imperfect facial features freed from the facade of infatuation.

She walked away, for the final time. And without names, numbers, or astrological signs exchanged, I let
her.
And I wasn’t allowed to think this way about her. About girls. Girls like her are supposed to like boys like
my partner. Girls like me aren’t supposed to get all flustered when another girl like her comes along.
But just for a second, I let my mind wander.
Boys and Bad Habits

Once I dated a boy who only ate pizza folded –
In half with high fives and socialize,

Boys and bad habits

Next day, hip-hooray, I found a new way to eat pizza -
In half with high fives.
Tomato sauce now runs down my fingers and I always have to use a napkin,
Not like before, but I can’t break the habit and neither could the boy.

Once I dated a boy-
Kissed me in the car.
I’m kidding, that never
Happened;
But he was driving and had Vaseline on his lips,
And I had pockets in my hips,
And we got lost and Illinois and nothing was destroyed he just laughed and we laughed and told ghost stories in the dark with a flashlight
We made it in time but also all out of it.
We were washed on the floor,
Not like before.

Boys and bad habits

Once I dated a girl, and I kissed her lips, and she hugged my hips, and we laid by the heater, never got to the theater.
But now she eats Tic-Tacs, and her head smacks when I see her.

Head round and round
Forget the sound

Boys and bad habits

Once I dated in future tense,
We owned cats, and ate pizza, and walked down the street in pretend.
And hopefully that’d be the end,
Video games and morning movies

Lillian Hayward
Grade 11

Boys and Bad Habits, Pepperoni Trees, A Poem About Sad Goodbyes, The Last Girl I Liked,
That Girl
Poetry

Marquette High School
Chesterfield, MO
Teacher: Ryan Bixby
Brushing teeth, aquariums, sharing cooties.
Little Ms. Shark Teeth finds a friend.
Hiking into the end.
Overture plays in pretend.

Pepperoni Trees

I met a boy who writes a poem everyday.
The leaves are red, yellow, brown, but not blue and the wind whips through the streets. I trudge along the road with a book in my hand and childish posture on my back. The way back from school is a thirty-minute trudge, which roughly translates to one short story,

“In the Isle of Lagoo, the leaves are blue and everyone is happy except for Tony’s dad who’d rather put on mascara than have to make pepperoni.
Tony’s father, whom other mothers claim is a bother, is the butcher on 82nd street (which doesn’t make any sense since Lagoo is only seven miles long)
but you get the point, the women are transphobic and Tony’s dad totally doesn’t want to be a dude butcher.
In fact, if he was a lady, I don’t think he’d even want to be butch, in that circumstance.
Mr. ‘Tony’s-Dad’ is kind inside.
He likes to paint his daughters’ toenails, and turn them into pretend mermaid scales, and doesn’t care for politic but loves a good themed party.
‘Funfetti, forget he’
cries Mr. Rabaj, as he picks off pepperoni from his pizza which everyone with a right eye agrees is the best part. (Except for vegans, and probably vegetarians and pescatarians too, and maybe even Mormons, whom my father, not Tony’s, claims are the nicest people...)
Resume.
We see Mr. Rabaj in his room.
It’s like looking into a dollhouse, in the middle of Lagoo, where the leaves are all blue and everyone is happy except for Tony’s daddy and possibly Mr. Rabaj too.
You see, Mr. Rabaj with the surprising red hair and Mr. ‘Tony’s-dad’ had an affair.
But you probably knew that by line 2.
Now it was over and it was mid-October.
And trouble was brewing in Lagoo.
There was a major storm coming their way that would render everyone’s chargeable toothbrushes useless.
Tony’s dad, was feeling sad when his doomful daughter ran towards the butchery on 82nd street.
Enter Linda, poor Linda, it’s a super outdated name on this fictional island too.
Linda’s hair droops in her eyes and she likes cold soup, and sings sad songs in her mind.
‘Papa!’ she screeched in her most monotone voice, ‘there’s a storm heading straight for Lagoo!’
‘Linda! Quick, help me bury all this pepperoni so it doesn’t get ruined in the storm!’
Linda and her papa’s fingers dig like dogs through the rich soil of Lagoo. The horizon can’t be seen anymore, and the sky is blue grey, and smells like aftershave and dandelions.
Linda had met a boy who writes a poem every day. Those are the best kind.
The leaves in Lagoo were red, yellow, brown, and especially blue and as the wind whips through the streets, Linda hopes he knew she still thinks about him too.
And as for Mr. ‘Tony’s-dad’ and Hurricane Rabaj, with his aftershave and dandelion scent? They’ll figure it out.
After the storm, sure, their carports will be gone, but pepperoni trees will sprout everywhere.”
A Poem About Sad Goodbyes

The saddest, bittersweet bit is that-
I’m not allowed to text you back.
According to Social Rule #222
You’ll see my gaze through a rainy haze
And -squint-
And that
will be the end of it.
My umbrella will be black
and I finally will have gotten the hang of drinking coffee.
My hands will be warmed by just the thought of "The Nearness of You"
by Billie Holiday
playing through my earbuds.
It’ll look like I’m shores away,
But like, plastic shores made for pirates at Disneyland
that are
dusty
And mechanical
And closer than you think.

The Last Girl I Liked
You came after the last girl I liked.
I told you “no” because I didn’t know
how to process my feelings or how I was supposed to react, or how my parents would react if they
figured out I kissed another girl. I can see us there; eating Indian food, catching movies, and lecturing
your brothers on things they should care.
I don’t mind the drive to your place. There and back is the perfect length for a podcast. it’s more
convenient than you think.
The last girl I liked used to call me after things were over.
She would read poetry to me that she wrote for other people
She told me I was “oblivious”
Unmindful, unconscious, unaware.
She tried to tell me who I was. And I tried to tell myself I was not.
She texted me, when she was high, she said “you hurt me, a lot”
But she didn’t know she created caverns in the places where she kissed me,
a cool breeze now covers the miners who dig in those dark subterranean grottos.
She was soft and sad but that wasn’t all
Our first kiss, my first kiss. Was by the air vent. We were lying down, the airy, sheer white curtains were
covering us and she asked, with her eyelashes fluttering, “can I kiss you?”
I explained that- I hadn’t kissed anyone before and I was sure to be awful and-
“it’s okay”- she lightly lifted my lips to hers and the simple silence blew between us.
I’d known her since freshmen year. I carpooled with her sister to a play we did at an all-boys school, very
St. Louis. The play was in November. I remember while waiting for her sister we’d kick a soccer ball
around as the leaves fell down and it felt like I was in a Charlie Brown special. Her house was right
behind a church, which made things between us holy.
That Girl

That girl does her homework
And the extra credit essays
And the tennis regional championships
And the driving her sister to gymnastics
That girl could run on a Habitrail hamster wheel for five plus hours
and not realize
she’s not going anywhere…

That girl does her homework
And the proposal for Model U.N.
And the late-night lunch making.
That girl’s boyfriend could be gay and she wouldn’t realize it.
“I’m only gay for you!”
5’2”, quaff, looking for a good time
his Grindr profile reads.

Let’s just say I’m not surprised the girl has a blue highlighter…
She’d be prepared if the world was about to end and the only way to save it was if she could
Quickly! Highlight and Annotate this copy of the Scarlet Letter!

I bet she used to watch that T.V. show, Dance Moms, and get like, emotionally invested, you know?
I’m sure by her
neon green jacket that she would wash her hair with silky conditioner after running laps and the
afternoon delight of algebra.
She’d spool her hair through a comb
Wet and icicled-at-the-end
And curl her fingers into sweatshirt sleeves.
She’d watch that show with a milky bowl of cereal and criss-cross applesauce
with her dazed eyes through thick-rim glasses that only she ever sees herself in.
No matter what I did, the dragon wouldn’t leave me alone. I looked out the back window of the car and
the dragon was still there, pure white against the snow. He had red eyes and he always floated just a little
bit behind my head. Throughout his body were red ribbons of scales that formed intricate, yet fearsome
patterns. Every time I turned my head he would spread his wings and I would be faced with the
antagonizing message scrawled along its chest. The dragon continued this process for a long time,
unfurling its wings whenever I turned towards it.

“Stop crumpling that paper, Milo, your teacher made it clear you only get one of those,” said my mom,
turning around in her seat.

With a smile she took the paper I had been crumpling and uncrumpling and for the final time flattened out
some of the creases along the dashboard before passing it back to me.

I sighed and looked down at the page entitled “Personal Narrative” with various doodles I made in red
pen littering the margins. I read through the rubric I had been seeing for all five years at Highcroft Ridge
Elementary. I hated this assignment. The narrative was a common trial where, rather than a passionate
entry of wizards and dragons, with which I was very well versed, one had to write about a time they
yelled and their sister cried, or the time they saw Santa Claus at the mall. I was an only child and I was
adamant that the Santa Clauses at the malls were just elves stacked up in disguise, because Santa was too
busy to deal with crowd control. Although I’m sure I had plenty of other adventures to talk about, they
didn’t come easy enough to mind to warrant a story on them.

The dragon came back. I began to look at him, which of course caused him to spread his wings and let out
a large shriek. My mom, seeing me crumpling the paper again, understood the frustration I was suffering
and decided she would provide a distraction.

“What was it you were telling me about the master thief... Serpentine?” she asked, with genuine
interest.

She hesitated at the name, remembering the one character of the thousands I had created in the past. Like
a good mother, my mom not only remembered all the stories I told her, but she could discern her
favorites. In her eyes I was a real J.R.R Tolkien.

I began to rattle off all sorts of information about Serpentine, the thief who hid his face and was a
master when it came to poisons, and his pet snake which stayed coiled around his arm and would strike
out when his master shouted certain words in an archaic language. As I described the details of his latest
heist in a distant land of knights and magic, I began to become more and more animated. I fought the ogre
who protected the vault of the wealthiest magician of one of the main cities, who happened to be dealing
in black magic behind closed doors. I dodged the bolts of crossbows, while my snake stealthily
dispatched the opposition through the power of its venom. These added theatrics were all very impressive
as I was both fastened beneath my seat belt and I was making this all up on the spot.

“We’re here,” muttered my dad who had until recently been silently smiling.
I looked out my window to see the face of a rather ordinary shop. The windows were half submerged in the large mountain of snow that had been pushed out of the street by snow plows. On top of the store was perched the white dragon again. Ever patient, and never violent, the dragon only ever sat there, only hissing and shrieking whenever I paid attention to it. Whenever I decided to dispatch my army of heroes, led by the skilled Serpentine and comprised of characters from all of my stories, all it had to do was scream and beat its wings until the sheer force of the action pushed my fantasy creatures into the ground. In victory, this creature, this threat to the world I knew, would once again hiss and screech and spread its wings wide. Its message was spread along its breast. *The time of fantasy is long gone.* The statement was something that dwelled at the back of my mind, a persistent doubt. I continued to stare at the assignment paper. Has fantasy become obsolete? The old stories I loved of elves and knights that I so rarely was allowed to write about and so rarely was encouraged to read in school, were they obsolete? I frowned, and with great force I threw the dragon out of my sight, once again crumpling the personal narrative paper and tossing it in my backpack I had brought with me from school as I didn’t have the chance to stop at home with such an important trip.

When I was sure the dragon flew away, I jumped out the car and felt the snow crunch beneath my feet. It was a Friday, and despite the heavy snowfall that had occurred, the day had been relatively bright and cheerful. Now, the sun had began to set and the lights in front of the shops had started to turn on. Looking up and down the street, one saw the bright lights and snowy atmosphere and felt as if they had been transported into a Christmas toy commercial or a Coke commercial. My mom grabbed my hand as my dad walked around the car to meet us in front of the store.

“Come on, let’s see what he’s got!” said my dad with a clap of his hand as he led my mom and I into the shop.

The best way I could describe the store was old, ancient even. The store was only slightly bigger than my living room and my kitchen combined. However, what it lacked in size, the store made up for in density. Wall to wall, shelf to shelf, tile to tile, there was nothing but mechanical wonders as far as the eye could see, which, mind you, wasn’t far with the sheer crowded nature of the shop. Machines of all shapes and sizes which seemed to go from practical, boxy, and sometimes even electronic machines, to more grotesque machinery that felt more at home in a Tim Burton film. The one common link I found was that all of these items had been created for the same purpose: to write. Typewriters old and new, or rather old and less old, littered the store creating an organized mess. It felt like you were in a jungle of majestic and unique beasts, each one stranger than the last.

I had become so excited in being surrounded by the wonders of this shop, I had completely neglected the clerk my parents were leading me to. He sat in the middle of the entire beautiful mess, sitting behind an average, if not slightly messy, counter. He heard the bell before he saw us and dropped what he was doing to greet us. He stood there, an interesting man in his own right. The clerk looked exactly as one might expect the owner of a typewriter store might look like. Wire rim glasses fell on a slightly rounded, reddish nose which gave way to a tired and wrinkled face. Yet his eyes and permanent smile conveyed a warmth that was strange considering the weather and the occupation he possessed. He stood slightly hunched over, his thin frame covered by the baggy sweater and pants he wore.

“Hello! How can I help you three today?” he said in such a jovial manner that it made the store three times brighter.

His smile took over every muscle in his face, pushing his eyes into a joyful squint and lifting his cheeks to complete the jolly appearance. His joyful face, combined with his salt and pepper beard, gave him the appearance of a thin Santa Claus, which was funny considering the season.
My parents began talking to him about my interests in writing and books and so forth. I had stopped listening and found myself being pulled through the aisles. My jaw hung to the floor as I walked by one gleaming machine after another. One could almost see the kind man at the counter walking around the store polishing each one until the typewriter was so shiny that, when he smiled at his work, he could see the typewriter smiling back.

The strangest thing was that these machines looked to be anywhere from ten to one hundred years old. When getting closer, you could see tags that displayed information of all kinds in relation to the machine. One was from Europe, the other from the U.S, and some from countries I couldn’t recognize, whether it was the illegible writing or the country’s name itself. I could swear some of them were written in ancient runes.

I walked to one and ran my finger across the keys and pressed down. With a surprising amount of resistance, the key went down. From within the typewriter the smallest little arm, like that of a goblin, reached out uncertainly and pressed his hand gently on the paper the man had placed in all of typewriters so that the customers could test the typewriters. The ink on his hand smeared every so lightly along the paper.

This goblin must’ve been the letter “f”, or potentially the letter “r”. I couldn’t tell which one I had pressed, but it was so light it didn’t seem to matter. I looked at the typewriter with a renewed sense of wonder. Now I wanted to play with the goblins as much as possible. Slamming my finger down on the letter “f” I saw the goblin slam his hand against the paper with such vigor that the ink had actually splattered a little outside the area of the letter. I slammed my whole hand down and all of the goblins’ arms flew out and tried to fight for their way to the page. Letting go of the key, they returned within the machine and stayed there.

“I see you found one that entertains you,” the man said, loud enough to cause me to jolt at the sudden sound of the man’s voice.

He smiled smugly at having gotten the drop on me and stepped in front of me, towards the typewriter. Like something from Batman, I saw him reach outward and press on the red diamond with the brand’s name on it, causing the “hood” of the typewriter to spring open with great vigor. I looked onward as what seemed to be a thousand more little goblins, trolls, and fairies filled the machine. Some of the creatures were round like gears, others curly like springs, and others straight and long for the purpose of connecting. The man began pointing to the different creatures, naming them as well as describing their jobs. He went on about the knight Sir Ribbon, the Lever family, and Ms. Roller as well as how they all served in the “Royal” machine, gesturing at the logo again, which bore the name “Royal”.

He managed to explain this all in a way that reminded me of my videogames and books. These comparisons to knights as well as himself referring to them as little goblins, struck a chord with me, immediately making me like this much man more than I already did. He seemed genuinely in love with the machines themselves, as a gleam could be seen in his eye as he explained all the inner workings of this one. He began to move on to the next machine, picking it up with some difficulty to show the goblins working in the mines beneath the world.

“Why do you like these old things?” I ended up blurtting. To my embarrassment, this actually caused him a large amount of surprise.

After dropping the typewriter he had began to lift, he turned to me with a nervous smile, coughing as he waved away some dust that had been blown up by the accident.

“Well, there are a lot of benefits to old things. After all, typewriters can still write papers as well as any computer,” he said readjusting the dropped typewriter. “The way I see it, if there is at least one old man
around to care for them, typewriters won’t become obsolete.”

I thought about this statement. “If there is at least one old man around to care for them, typewriters won’t become obsolete.” Somehow, this reassured me. At this time I looked between the shelves and out the window, seeing the familiar head of the red eyed dragon, peering in with a malicious look. The time of fantasy is long gone. The statement seemed dumb now, because it was not true to any extent. After all, if one old man could protect the legacy of typewriters, I’m sure I could eventually protect an entire genre.

I started as I realized that this whole time my parents had crept up and were again talking to the man. “We’ll keep in touch,” my dad said to him before motioning me out of the store.

I looked back at the store to see the man, and noticed that he was smiling as he had for the longest time. He waved us goodbye as I jumped in the car. Before driving away I stared at the dragon again, which I didn’t care nearly as much about now. The man followed my eyes, and although I could never confirm it, I could swear that he looked at the dragon, shooed it away, and turned back to me with his finger at his lips. I quickly turned to my mom to tell her my newest story. The elder wizard, forever guarding the ancient tools from oblivion. The wizard was known as “The Guardian of the Obsolete.”
a man of faith

he worships,
some weeks, it’s every night,
at the little church on pine street.

he arrives early and leaves late,
as late as he possibly can.

he crawls home with cuts on his hands,
broken from his twisted prayers.

his wife is in bed,
alone and in tears.

over dinner, the children ask
why daddy never comes home at night.
she tells them, “daddy has to work late.  
it’s because he loves us,
he wants to take care of us.”

but she knows.
she knows he’s at the altar,
worshipping his god.

our Father - repentance

our Father, who art in heaven,
i take your name in vain.
Your wrath will come
because of what i’ve done.
God help me, i'll do it again.

help me this day as i lie in bed,
committing these trespasses,
with another who trespasses beside me,
leading me into temptation.
deliver me from her evil.

for the kingdom, the power, and the glory are Yours, now and forever, amen.

anonymous - a sober moment

worry is a sin, you know.
i worry too much, i know.
i’m anxious and scared and stupid.
scared and stupid, i can’t do anything right.

“you’re beating yourself up again.
it hurts me when you say these things about yourself.”
i’m sorry, i’m sorry.
i won’t do it again.

i hurt you. i deserve to be punished.
i haven’t wanted to hurt myself in a long time. but, God grant me the serenity, i won’t do it again.
i won’t hurt you. i will get what i deserve.

i will appreciate you.
i love you. i love you.
i won’t think about the bad things anymore.
i won’t do this to you again.

courage and wisdom, i will make things right.
serenity and courage and wisdom.
serenity, i know.
serenity, i know.

rosary - the foxhole

Mother Mary, and God my Father,
i’m a curious soul and i can’t help but wonder, is it wrong for my eyes to wander?

hail Mary, full of grace...
i have never been so weak, weak knees, weak will.
i’m a sinner, and i feel so alone in this.
hail Mary, full of grace...
more than anything, i need strength, strength for myself and those around me.

hail Mary, full of grace...
we're all weak, weak and human, powerless and sinful.

amen.

a man of faith - revised
he works, most weeks, it’s every day, at the office down the street.
he arrives late and leaves early, as early as he can.

he walks home, almost reluctantly, afraid of what normal will become.

his wife is in the kitchen, making dinner like she used to, a long, long time ago.

the family is quiet, nervous. there’s a foreigner at their table. “how was your day, honey?” “oh, it was fine.” “tommy, don’t play with your food.”

it takes several days, but eventually, she lets him hold her again.
The living room is probably my favorite room in my house. There are two couches and one of them is just small enough for me to justify keeping it all to myself. Everyday I open the blinds of the two windows that overlook our backyard and every night I forget to close them again, but that just means that they'll let more sunlight in tomorrow. The ancient Wii sits next to the TV and all of our movies are tucked away in the automan. I believe that the three mildly disturbing watercolor clown paintings on the wall protect us from monsters, and you can hear someone from any room in the house when you sit there.

But there’s something wrong with it. I see it all the time no matter where I am, but it’s always biggest in the living room. We sit together and read the scriptures on Monday nights and it settles on the carpet right in front of me. I think we’ve all pretty well ignored it for a year or two, as long as I’ve had it. I think it’s easier for you guys to pretend it doesn’t exist because it isn’t yours. It’s mine. But I’m yours. Your second child, your baby sibling, your older nuisance. I am your heir, your best friend, your closest kin. I am yours, as you are mine. And the more you ignore it, the crazier I feel for seeing it.

I’ve decided to call the elephant in the room Clay. A suiting name for something buried so often. Everyone has their own elephant. Some people have multiple elephants. Some people keep their elephants all to themselves, but most of the time the elephants become obvious and the only thing we do is choose to awkwardly ignore them. We all have our elephants, this one is mine. It follows me and talks to me and sits in our living room screaming while the rest of us diligently stay silent.

We avoid it like the plague, a curse, taboo, something we should be ashamed of, or humiliated by. Something I should be ashamed of. Ever since I was little we wouldn't talk about it. It wasn't dinner table conversation. Every time it was dragged out of the dirt someone would bury it again within a minute. The only indication I had to how you felt was a mantra painted of the inside of my brain, short and sweet and poison to my thirteen-year-old lungs.

We believe that all human beings deserve love and respect, but we believe that marriage is between a man, a woman, and God.

For so long I’ve let you stay silent. I’ve stayed silent, too. But elephants aren’t quiet creatures. There’s a shovel in my hands and I can hear Clay crying from beneath the ground. Elephants are not easy animals to keep. It’s time to set him free.

***

Kalista,

It’s only fitting that I start with you considering you were the first person in our family that I came out to. You might be the worst about this whole thing. You’ve done just about everything people are told not to do when someone close to them comes out. You were the third person to find out. Fifth, if you include my online friends, but I don’t. I told my closest (only) friend and my English teacher and they both said I should tell you. So I did. That day we drove back from the movie theater I told you I liked girls and you just said okay. Okay. And it wasn’t what you said, it was how you said it. Kind of shocked and kind of weirded out and entirely negative. I asked you not to tell mom or dad. So what did you do? You drove us home and you locked yourself in your room
and later that night I overheard you tell mom. I remember because that was the exact moment you lost my trust. The moment I realized your faith and your fear was more important to you than our relationship. Later, when mom confronted me about it she told me not to be angry at you, that you were just doing what you thought was best. Mom said she thought was a part of me that was grateful I didn’t have to do it myself. Maybe a part of me was. But regardless, I wasn’t ready. I trusted you and you betrayed that trust and I got hurt, but I don’t think you ever regretted it.

Every time something like this is mentioned you still get quiet and awkward and your discomfort is palpable. It hurts to know that you hate something that is such a big part of my life. You probably still see gender-queerness as a mental illness, and you probably still think straight people have more a right to exist than gay people. I know this. I know you.

Out of everyone, I think you have the most work to do. I know your faith means a lot to you, and I know traditional marriage is a big part of that faith. I respect that. But you have things to learn and things to change and I wouldn’t tell you that if I didn’t think you could do it. I tell you this because I love you. I only tell these kinds of things to the people who I want to keep in my life.

***

Teagan,

I worry that I’ll be gone before I can teach what I know. I’ll be graduating and going to school somewhere on the other side of the country before you turn twelve. You’re nine now, right at that age where you absorb every opinion you encounter but can’t really filter out which one is yours yet. You repeat what you hear, so as the only gay person you know I have taken it upon myself to be your queer influence. God knows you won’t get it anywhere else. So I’ll be your queer influence and you probably don’t even understand what that means yet. You know that there are straight people and gay people and there’s something different about those two things. I’ve told you about some of this stuff before and I don’t think you’ve ever understood. But that’s okay, you don’t need to understand everything just yet.

I have a hope for you that I don’t have for anyone else in our family, Teagan. I want a lot for you and I know I can only do so much. You are young and naive and you have a lot of growing to do. I have a feeling you’re gonna become someone pretty freaking great, and if I have even a small part to play in that, I’ll be happy.

If there’s anything I can send into that little brain of yours, it’s this: don’t stop growing. Don’t stop changing. There’s so much in the world and I want you to see it all. Don’t ever believe that you should just be satisfied with how things are, or that you know everything there is you need to know. Learn and grow and change and don’t stop.

I don’t tell you enough, but I love you. I know I spend more time with Kalista, I know we don’t have a lot in common yet, you’re six years younger than me and our conversations are only half coherent most of the time and you have a natural gift for making me irritated without even trying, but I love you so much. I’m really excited to see who you’re gonna become.  
(Psst, don’t tell Kalista this, but, uhh, you’re my favorite.)

***

Dad,

I don’t even know what to say to you, Dad. There’s a part of me that thinks there isn’t even any point in saying anything to you. I don’t expect it to make any difference.

Don’t get me wrong, I love you, I always have and I always will, we’re family. But sometimes I think that shared DNA is the only claim to family that we have. Even then, I wonder if that’s enough sometimes.

For the most part, you’ve been a good parent. You let us do what we will, you’ve been supportive and encouraging and you’ve made sure we all have good self-esteem. But sometimes I feel like we’re from
two different times. You are traditional, conservative. Sturdy and consistent and unchanging. I am - not. We clash. I don’t share your beliefs or values or opinions. I believe in change. I live in the new age. I have new beliefs and new values and new opinions. I know you are set in your ways and I’ve long stopped expecting anything different from you.

I like girls. You have to know that. I remember the first time I told you. Mom knew so I had assumed she had told you as well. We were sat in the living room talking debating over the rights of transgender people, I made some comment about how I used the girls changing room even though I liked girls and you said No you don’t. And that was it. I had worried about what you would say so much and that was it. I went to talk to you later to ask about what you meant. I tried to explain what I was, who I was, what all of this meant. You told me you didn’t care to learn all of those terms. It hurt. I know you wish I thought the same way you do. You’ve tried to teach us what you hold true. You’ve succeeded, somewhat. Kalista is just like you. I know you love me, and you want what you think is best for me, but you can’t keep me in the past, too. Welcome to the new age. The future is now, old man.

***

Mom,

I have so much to say to you and not enough courage to say it. There were times when you would reach out to me, and I would still be too afraid to do anything except try to weasel my way out of it.

“Let’s have a talk.”

Those words still strike fear into my heart. They wash up memories of being trapped in the car in a loop through the neighborhood, again and again, being sat on your bed threading through my words so afraid of what might slip and what you would think about it. I’ve always cared so much about what you thought. When I come back to it, I realize how much of it rested on you. What you would think about it, how you would react. I think your opinion meant the most to me. It still does in many areas.

You and dad raised me well, raised all of us well. There are times when I am so thankful that I ended up being born to you guys. There are a lot of things you’ve done right. You never smothered us. You let us make our own choices, live our lives, and supported us in becoming who we are today. For that, I will always be thankful.

I lied to you once. Well, I’ve lied to you a couple times, none of them particularly harrowing, but this one sticks out to me.

It was within the first week of school. I had started going by a new name. You saw that name at the top of my math homework and asked about it. I told you that it was a funny joke, something my friends had just started to call me and it grew. That was a lie. It was never a joke, it was my reality. I chose that name with love and I asked my friends to start calling me it. My birth name had stopped fitting quite right. There wasn’t anything wrong with it. It was a beautiful name, fitting for a perfect, bubbling baby girl. I guess that’s where the problem started. So I picked a new one, gender neutral, and I wore it with pride.

Mom, it hurts to write this. I can feel the pit growing in my chest with every word. But every word needs to be said. I need to say it, otherwise, these things will always sit at the back of brain, festering and stewing until I let them out. I don’t want to hurt you or make you feel bad, or necessarily change the way you treat me. I just need you to know.

I had heard all the horror stories. Abuse, homelessness, conversion therapy. I was so afraid. I have lived with so much fear of what people will do, what they’ll say. That’s just how it is for people like me. Living every day knowing there are people who hate you just for existing, who would be happy to see the inside of your head painted on a wall. You never proved any of those stories right. You told me you loved me. You didn't kick me out or beat me or threaten to send me to therapy. Nothing bad really happened. You never became one of those horror stories.

But you never proved them wrong either. You told me you couldn't support it. At a time in my life when I needed you to support me more than ever, you told me you couldn't.

You acted like it was something I could ignore or get over if I tried hard enough. I think you hoped I
would. I think there’s a part of you that wishes I hated it. But I didn’t. It wasn’t a stain on my personality. It was the identity of a young, pubescent, quaking teenager. You never proved those stories right, but you never proved them wrong either. I kept waiting for the other shoe to drop, the bomb to go off. I didn’t know what to expect, what to do, how to handle anything. I became paranoid and bitter. I expected the worst from everyone. Everything became warped inside my head. In my head, everyone was suspicious of me, hated me, knew about me. I became so afraid of fitting into any box that I conditioned myself to hate anything that might fit a stereotype, I conditioned myself to hate so many things I could have loved. I talked bad about my friends, I talked bad about you and dad, and I excused it because I thought everyone else did the same. It took a long time to get that shard of glass out of my eye. It took months of healing and reconditioning to become who I am. I can’t blame you for everything that was going on with me. A lot of things went into the development and change of who I am. And all the things I went through, everything I learned has shaped me into who I am and who I will become, and I’m proud of that. I think that everything that happened was necessary. I just wish I hadn’t had to do it alone.

All of you,
Make no mistake, I love every single one of you so much. You are my family, the people who have stood by me and been with me my entire life. You’ve shaped me into who I am today. I hear stories about other kids parents, the relationships my friends have with their siblings and I couldn’t be more grateful to have ended up with the family I did. I wouldn’t trade you for the world. But I’m tired of my elephant. He keeps leaving dirt on the floor. You can say that you love me, but as long as you hate this part of me it won’t really be true. I am not made of bits and pieces. I am a whole person and you can’t pick and choose which parts of me to love. If you try then you won’t really be loving me, you’ll be loving who you wish I was. I’m gay, and we all know it. Now it’s time to accept it.
The words of Jawaharlal Nehru, a wise man who became the first Prime Minister of India, were the very words that held me back from things I wanted to accomplish. “The art of a people is a true mirror to their minds.” As a young girl, I developed a love for the arts. Around the same time, I had found how deep my shyness was rooted in me. When I read, “a true mirror to their minds,” I didn’t worry that someone would find something I don’t want them to see, but that they will judge what was a part of me.

Sixth grade band introduced me to music without lyrics, which was something I had never really paid any attention to or appreciated before. As I got older and matured in my playing on the trumpet, I found myself searching for pieces to listen to just for fun. Through this “research,” I came across a multitude of film scores. Previously, for me, movies had just been for the action or the love story, I didn’t even notice the background music until it wasn’t there. Just like that, I fell in love with the melodies that made the movie itself.

Once I became a teenager I was shown the world of theater through the movie that was The Phantom of the Opera. Soon after my obsession with the show had been planted in me, my mother took me to see the Broadway version live. It hit me that those were real people right in front of me, singing notes I could hardly fathom, and dancing steps I’d never seen. They were capable of doing what I couldn’t, and in front of an audience. They couldn’t mess up, not once… that was their actual job.

It took a while for me to fully grasp that a human had been able to create that. All those contrasting notes, the chords and rhythms… they did that. I wanted to do that, I wanted to create something bigger than myself. I began looking for ways to get involved and fantasizing of when I could be the one directing their every move. But I wasn’t quite ready to take my first step into that world. I knew that once I had, eyes would be on me, watching for my mistakes and inevitable failure.

See, it’s a small business… anything in the arts, that is. What were the actual chances that I would one day go on to see myself succeed? And on top of that, being in the entertainment industry, what if I couldn’t do that? What if people did not find amusement in what I did, was my confidence strong enough for that? The simple answer is no, because I know myself enough to know that being shy, has translated into me taking criticism very personally and almost always looking at it as if it were meant to be harsh.

One day, a speaker had come to school and talked of self-love and being true to who you are. Typically, I would think those were cheesy and staged, but when he mentioned his daughter going to Broadway, my ears perked a little. My hopeful nature caught up to the better half of my mind, and decided maybe it was a sign. Only a sign to listen closer to this guy, but a sign nonetheless. I went home, opened my laptop, and got to work.

“How to not be shy,” “how to become more involved,” “what degree do Broadway actors have?” Those were just a few of my many desperate Google searches I had made that afternoon. Eventually, I made it onto the homepage of the university that my parents were looking for me to attend. At first, I had been reluctant to the idea of the school, but digging deep into their different programs, I found exactly what I
was looking for. The Liberty University Department of the Theatre Arts Handbook gave me all I need to know; there was indeed a theater major… and it had my name written all over it.

I felt then, that that was all that really mattered to me. Why would I want to stay stuck in a job I despised my whole life just for the convenience of it, when I could be doing something I loved? Being shy had its moments, but was I really going to let a personality trait get in the way of my entire future? Now I have it all planned out, no matter if I fail, I’m taking a chance on the thing I want most. If people judge me, well… I guess without some conflict, the journey wouldn’t feel as complete, and learning from mistakes is a “commodity” I’m willing to use.
Wittman Regional Airport in Oshkosh, Wisconsin is surrounded by miles of land. While some of the surrounding areas are farmland, the majority remains an empty field for eleven months. Unused and silent, the acres of grass wait for the last two weeks of July. It is then that thousands of people from the coasts of Africa, the mountains of Colorado, the boot-hill of Missouri, the highlands of Scotland and beyond, migrate to this empty field. These worldwide people travel mile after mile for the same purpose: to attend the annual Experimental Aircraft Association’s Air Show, AirVenture.

The convention, stretching across the entire airport, hosts a variety of things to see and do all week long, promising that attendees are never bored. From hurricane simulations and t-shirt booths to endless rows of homebuilt airplanes, AirVenture Oshkosh is to an aviation enthusiast what a candy store is to a child. Pilots and their families swarm the grounds like ants all day long until blisters form on their feet and they’ve sweated off their smiles. My family, however, seemed perfectly content to do nothing, absolutely nothing. For many years this drove me insane.

Every year, we never failed to gather and make the trek across the Midwest. My sister and I would spend the thirteen-hour drive crammed in the back of a GMC extended cab pickup truck with our legs in each other’s armpits. The boxy television set from our kitchen counter would be precariously balanced on the console as we rewound The Brave Little Toaster for the third time. Around hour five, entertainment would be found in countless games of ‘I spy,” watching corn fields pass through dusty windows, and sticking bubble gum in the cup holders. Hours eight through thirteen would be spent intermittently napping or singing along to whatever classic rock station happened to be playing on the radio.

In agony, we’d make it to our destination sometime after lunch the next day, usually in the dead of night. As our doors opened, stuffed animals, stale French fries, and the traditional bag of road trip Twizzlers (empty) would tumble to the ground like fog in a horror movie. Crawling over one another, my sister and I were unleashed from the depths of the backseat. Stretching our legs and rubbing at our sleep-crusted eyes, we stood staring at our long-awaited destination: Camp Scholler (camping grounds at AirVenture Oshkosh.).

Sixteen times I have stood in that empty field on a summer night accompanied by the rush of the highway and the crunch of grass underfoot with the creak of the camper acting as a symphony to the starry sky. Buzzing crickets followed us while we unpacked. We’d grab toothpaste and water bottles to brush our teeth.

The next morning would find me tucked into the atrociously small bunk above my sister. I’d climb out, feet first, grasping onto the mattress as I slid slowly down, hoping I wouldn’t kick Renee in the face on my descent. Breakfast would be Dad’s famous pancakes on a paper plate and orange juice in a red solo cup. I would munch on my pancakes, syrup dribbling onto my shirt as I kicked my legs back and forth; the whole camper would shake with the movement.

Through the mesh window, I could always see the vast stretches of Camp Scholler, not so empty now with the influx of newcomers overnight. Motor homes or RVs like ours would line the makeshift grass to dirt roads. Husbands would wrangle awnings as their wives stood by watching and shaking their heads while dogs yipped in fenced off areas. RVs tended to shudder while little tents braving the cold ground would barely stand against the Wisconsin winds, and generators ran nonstop all around our
In a day's time, Camp Scholler morphed into a breathing city of campers right before my eyes. Camp Scholler was quiet in the mornings. Most campers would walk, bike, or catch a ride up to the convention grounds. Some years, we'd go early with the crowd. Many years we'd wait, pull out chairs, sit around the picnic table and "enjoy" the silence.

Dad always promised we'd go up to the show later in the afternoon, yet I was still left baffled. Why in the world would we just sit around? I had spent over half a day smooshed up next to my sister, legs cramping and the smell steadily getting worse, only to sit in a lawn chair?

"Not just sit in a lawn chair," Dad would correct me, "to sit in a lawn chair and watch airplanes fly over."

For years, I would shrug this off, banishing the words as more nonsensical "wisdom" that Dad was always proffering, and sulk back into my lawn chair. The sun crept farther across the sky, which was getting bluer as time passed; time I was certain we were wasting. By noon, Dad would be participating in the annual first nap of vacation, Mom would be hand quilting, and Renee would either be reading, texting some boy, or flicking grass or playing cards with me. Oh, how sweet is sisterhood?! "Arizona!" Renee would point out, "Oh, look there's one from Hawaii."

"Kansas, Texas, hey, another one from Missouri!" I would jump up and down.

It seemed sad that license plate bingo was a highlight of my day, when we could've been walking the convention or sitting on the front lines and watching the air show in person, rather than from a mile away under an awning. Renee and I would return from the small onsite convenience store, a plastic bag containing crayons and paper, swaying in my grubby child-sized hand. We would stroll across the grounds, passing the tin shower houses, the big red grocery store barn, and countless plastic flamingos.

The sun would be encroaching on the horizon by the time we would make it back to the camper, the smell of dinner wafting up off the grill. Dad, with a spatula in one hand, would be in the midst of a big body-shaking laugh; a few of his pilot buddies, Lou, Dan, Hansen and their wives (members of the Pilot's Association at the airport where Dad kept his Cessna), would have moseyed their way over to our campsite, bringing along tubs of potato salad and aluminum foil covered trays of brownies.

We would sit on the picnic table, hip to hip, and load our plates with traditional Missouri summer food. Sweet iced sun-tea sloshed in solo cups and the plastic table teetered with each of the big hand gestures Lou used to recount his grand tales of being a helicopter pilot in the Vietnam war. The big ear-reaching smiles would never leave our faces as dinner finished and night fell and we would eventually move back to the lawn chairs. Old stories and jokes we'd heard before were the theme songs of those summer nights.

In the distance, the rumble of jets could be heard as the night show began. Fireworks exploded where the sky blurred into the ground, and sparks trailed the performing pilots in the air. Loops of dazzling colors decorated the night sky.

The twinkle of the awning lights casting shadows onto his face, Dad looked a decade younger. The stress of his job, bills, and money (the worry of life) seemed gone from his face, his smile radiating the enjoyment of his friends and family. I came to recognize this as the meaning to his "nonsensical" words of wisdom.

Even at a tender age of seven or eight, I was busy. Right alongside the world, I was speeding through time without a second glance. Dad did not mean that these trips to Oshkosh were for us to vacate our lives, but rather to vacate time, to slow down, to appreciate what life we've been given and to focus on the moment at hand:

to sit in a lawn chair and watch airplanes fly over.
I reached for the icy, metallic handle of the door. Large and looming, the building itself seemed to stretch a thousand miles and blocked out the sun’s rays. The touch of the handle sent chills through my fingertips. Cold air from inside hit me in an instant and so did the crowd of teens, who dreaded the first bell as much as I did.

As I looked around the huge hallways, I recalled my own “little school that could”: St. Vincent. The small hundred of us were Catholics of all ages. We dressed nearly identically, perfect young children of God. Only a handful of St. Vincent’s graduates attended the public high school rather than the private Catholic one.

Here everyone looked different like the fall leaves outside, no two shared many similarities. Different hairstyles, clothes, race, and religion, the diversity pulled us down to reality with a force stronger than gravity. Despite the variety amongst a thousand students, I knew none of the faces. I found no familiarity to take comfort in.

A millennium passed before the first bell tolled. I fled my corner in a panicked haze; I, among others, swarmed the halls in a desperate search for my first class. Five minutes became seconds when I found my place at first hour. I sighed with relief, not unaware of what I would face next.

Uneventfully, the first week dragged on. I kept to myself for most of it, yet I soon found my place or rather it sought me out. A Catholic boy with shaggy blonde hair stole my lonely heart with his faith, my first high school crush: William. My cousin, Emily, readily welcomed me into her already large group of friends. Here I met my brunette “sister,” Rachelle. The two of us became inseparable. Lastly, I met Charlie, a junior who rode my bus and sat across from me in Geometry class.

Before I knew it, my first homecoming had arrived. I clung to my roots and stood out from the crowd. My black western boots and simple, pink, lacey dress couldn’t compare to the light of the shining, sequined, strapless dresses worn proudly by the other girls. Still, I danced endlessly, completely unashamed by the looks of the other students. I dissolved into my world with friends who cared about me.

In that same month, I found the courage to ask my crush out. Every part of the relationship seemed magical. I loved him, or so I thought. Although, what high school girl actually knows what love is? My heart and mind became two separate deities fighting for control of my mortal soul. My mind reminded me that William was Catholic while my heart screamed in protest. Every writer knows the heart will rise as the stronger deity; I decided it best to end our little romance. Guilt reached its cold hand into my chest and crushed my heart. My soul struggled for a month to recreate her broken deity.

My soul’s deity was reborn in a confused and fragile existence. My heart was swayed easily in this state by Charlie, the junior I swore I would never love. This time everything seemed different. A demon held our relationship in slow motion: fear of destroying the friendship we had. I learned fear is only overcome by leaping. In leaping, we soared; I trusted him with everything. I had fallen in love with my best friend.

The summer sun that year burned out faster than a newly lit match. Between the small parties, sleepovers, and vacations, time took off like a jet. The chill of the handle didn’t scare me as the leaves fell on my sophomore year. Panic faded with the sun. I had my friends and I was unstoppable.

Classes begun to grow more challenging, I stuck to it anyway, continuing to push myself more and more. My grades stayed high and I seemed to be in the center of my group of friends alongside...
Rachelle.

Choir became a bigger part of my life as our Christmas event drew closer: Madrigals. A huge three-day dinner and show performance set in the Renaissance era filled with wassail, “Huzzah’”s, old English accents, and even a boar’s head. From the costumes to the singing, I was transported back in time for a glimpse of a bright and cheery past. Each choir performance made me feel more and more part of our choir family.

Sophomore year was filled with plenty of sunshine. Nothing could kill my happiness. I had perfect grades, a boyfriend, and popularity. Though things started to shift eventually; my life shaking as the first signs of the earthquake started to appear. Rachelle seemed to ignore me when I spoke and Emily gave me glares as I sat with them and Charlie in the mornings. I couldn’t understand what I had done; I felt belittled and alone. High school drama had a bitter taste. I couldn’t be rude, and couldn’t possibly fight it. So I thought it best to take a peaceful leave.

Before the week had passed, I had traveled back to freshmen year. The earthquake had finally stopped although the life I had known lay in rubble. I struggled to pick up the pieces, most too destroyed to ever be part of my life again. I had Charlie and his friends, but I remained too shy to make my own friends. His friends welcomed me, yet I never felt included. Then in an instant, the light of sophomore year had fully faded to darkness.

Each hour of those summer days ticked by on a broken clock and the months were torn away from the calendar at the speed of light. Junior year slowly started; the temperature hadn’t dropped, and the welcoming cool of fall hadn’t hit yet. Charlie had graduated and I felt as though all my friends had vanished.

Choir became my favorite part of the day. That hour meant two things: Josh and Ethan. Those two sophomores seemed to be my only friends, but they meant more than that to me. They became my brothers and it didn’t matter what paper or the blood in our veins said. Nothing could take that from us. Not even the screams of a society that taunted us with its disbelief that a guy and a girl could simply be just friends.

A steady stream of stress trickled in from the homework of three AP courses. I quit my job to focus solely on my education. It gave me more freedom to study or hang out with friends, to live out the days to the fullest. Those classes challenged me more than classes I had previously taken.

In the same year, I entered a club called Interact, a high school version of Rotary. At the time I was still antisocial from the climax of my sophomore year. After some persuasion, my “older brother” Ethan, decided he would join too. We helped in various volunteer projects throughout the year, giving back to the community, which ultimately rebuilt my self-esteem.

My happiness swelled in time with my excitement about the return of Madrigals. That year would be special because it would be my brothers’ first performance. Every moment of the week brought a thrill much different than the previous year. The three of us acted as comedians soaking in the spotlight. My fragile soul slowly restored itself because of those two. I didn’t feel alone as I once had. Despite society’s objections, my brothers always had my back. I knew they would stand behind me, supporting me through whatever life threw at me.

Junior year ended the same as the rest. A few friends left. I wasn’t sad though, I knew I had my true friends. I finally learned the number of friends in my life wasn’t equivalent to my happiness.

Senior year’s awakening brought with it the realization of the speed of time. High school had almost passed. New adventures awaited me just over a hill about a semester high. I feared leaving my friends, afraid it would mean the end for us. I couldn’t stand to lose more.

Though, here I sit, a senior frozen in time for just a moment. One moment to look back at my life before graduation blurs the memories together. As time stands still, I let the pencil fly across the page pouring out my life story. I know I’m not that fear-stricken, little freshman anymore, and I know she’s more courageous than she thinks. That top of the class sophomore knows the true values of life’s roller coaster. She can get past all obstacles, even loneliness, if she believes in herself. The over-stressed junior understands the worth of true friends, even though they may be small in number.

I found how to accept the changes; they’ve made me who I am. I don’t dress the same, talk the
same, or act the same; but that doesn’t make me a different person. Change in our lives is inevitable, yet we have the power to decide if we will change for better or worse. So I unfreeze time and welcome in the change. If I don’t, how will I know the rest of my story and who I will become?
Hair up  
Tarp down  
Pop  
My mother uses her strength to cradle  
Our liquid gold  
Douses the pan with potential energy  
And snaps the blade to its wand  
The brush crackles and crinkles  
Screams  
She slaps more gold on the canvas  
Drowns out the cries and begs  
Until we are met with silence  
The new vibe of our humble abode  
Warms my soul  
With hope  
The new yellow walls have never witnessed  
Tear-streaked cheeks  
They are new  
Like us
Paige Hubert  
Grade 10  

The Yard  
Poetry  

Platte County High School  
Platte City, MO  
Teacher: Angela Perkins  

The Lawn Mower  
My family is a lawn mower,  
shearing the grass,  
while sculpting the lawn,  
my dad’s the blade always sharp and tough,  
He gets clogged with the grass,  
But continues to push,  
my mom’s the loud annoying sound always disturbing the neighborhood,  
But also the familiar and calming sound,  
Telling you that the edges are getting tamed,  
my sister is the freshly cut grass,  
always smelling good and beautiful,  
my dogs are the sticks always getting in our way,  
but they’re there when you need them,  
I’m the wheels always keeping us going and supporting on the way.  

The Weeping Willow  
The root family is a weeping willow, blowing in the wind,  
With silence but wiping the branches near,  
The mother is the bark of the tree keeping in the pain,  
Acting like the strong trunk keeping everything together,  
The father is sulking branches with no strength,  
Just wiping deep furrows into the bark,  
The 4 children are the board flat leaves,  
Going along with the ride,  
No way of stopping.  

The Old Fence  
We are all the fence, standing strong,  
With weathered edges,  
Few of us fall and never get repaired,  
The rest of us pick ourselves back up,  
We put nails back into the same spot,  
With no chance of staying strong,  
The nail gun not caring about the spot,  
Just doing its job,  
Never worried about the outcome,
We try our best to protect the things inside
They run around carless,
They protect us but also distance us,
To the ones close,
We shut our gates to anything that is harmful,
We put up signs warning others of what’s inside,
We connect to the structure,
But never to the house,
We get repaired all the time,
But we never lose the weathered edges.
Looking down at my desk, about to cry, it felt like the end of the world as I knew it. Almost like I was sitting at the bottom of an ocean, the pressure killing me. I failed the biggest project of my history class, which means that I would fail the class as a whole.

“For those of you who have failed the project, I am very sorry. This was a huge part of your grade and you will fail this semester. There is nothing I can do for you, so, good luck with that!” Mr. Dubray said dismally.

He was talking about me! He was talking about me because I am most likely the only one who failed, and he is definitely super disappointed in me. I had just failed the biggest project of the year. As I buried my head farther into my palms, I saw another hand slide in front of my eyes and deposit a folded up piece of loose leaf paper on the brown tabletop. I opened it up, and there was a note written on the inside:

Finn, are you okay? Is something wrong? Do you want to talk about it after class? I’m here for you.  -Camille

Is it really that obvious that I’m upset? What is everyone else thinking?

I could feel my stomach doing little loops, that feeling of impending doom and that the whole world was going to come crashing down on you. I am not going to start crying in front of all my classmates. What will my parents say? Would they hate me for failing? I could feel the anxiety bubbling up inside me, almost like a pot about to boil over. I stared at the clock and then looked down at my watch, longing to get out of there.

The eighth period bell rang. I burst out of the door so I wouldn’t start sobbing in front of everyone instead.

I ran down the long, intimidating hallway, passing many open classroom doors. Classrooms with people in them. People that would see me. The hallway looked like it kept getting longer and longer, that it would never end. I kept running. Only a little further, I told myself. I made a right and shoved open the heavy wooden door to the girls bathroom, feeling my breath becoming shaky. I slam the door shut and lock it. The lights flickered a bit.

How did this happen? How could I fail this project? After all the research I did? My backpack makes a thud as its hits the floor and so do I as I slide down the wall. My hair feels greasy as I run my hands through it. It sounds as if the loud AC unit is screaming at me.

How could I have let this happen? My teacher probably hates me, he thinks I’m annoying or irresponsible. I’m going to fail my AP History class. I am hyperventilating so much my body is shaking. Breathe. I try to inhale slowly. Breathe. It feels as if I’m not getting enough oxygen into my lungs, that they’re collapsing in on themselves.

“Finn?” I hear a muffled knock on the door. “Hey, Finn? Are you okay? I saw you run out of the classroom after 8th period. I didn’t know what had happened. Is anything wrong?” I recognized Camille’s
voice.

“What do you want from me?” I yell through the door. The slightly rational part of me was saying, *Don't yell at your friend, she's only trying to help.* I don’t really want her to come in, though. She’s not too great with her words. She tries her best and I love her for it, but she just doesn’t understand. I appreciate her sympathy, but I honestly don’t feel like talking. I want to be alone with my thoughts, even if the pandemonium of my brain was incapacitating.

She reminds me of my mother in a way. Not very good at comforting. They both try really hard, but they don’t understand.

“Finn, just calm down. Breathe. You’re going to do great. No one will know if you mess up. Everything will be fine. You’re going to sound gorgeous and everyone will love you. You know my friend, Lonnie? He said you’re the best violinist he’s ever heard” My mom tried to console me.

Everything is not going to be fine! Why can't people understand that? She put her hand around my shoulder trying to comfort me. I was almost green with envy of the person who went before me. She sounded perfect, hardly any wrong notes, amazing stage presence.

“No, Mom, you don’t understand. I don’t think I can explain this to you, but that’s not how it works in my head,” I tried to describe to her. No one understands! It’s not as simple as calming down, or taking a breath. It’s nowhere near that simple when you have the crushing weight of anxiety on your shoulders, the pressure turning you to dust instead of diamonds. Why can’t anyone understand that?

“Mom, this is the hardest piece I’ve ever played, and I’m nowhere near ready for this. I’m going to end up just shutting down in front of everyone,” I argued. “I’m going to fail and everyone will be there to see it.”

“You are going to be fine. Finn, you’ll be amazing!” my mom asserted. I certainly didn’t feel amazing. I felt like everyone was putting too much pressure on me, that everything was happening too much. I seemed as if someone was punching my stomach with a rock, trying to force out everything in it. My mom pulled me in for a hug and whispered in my ear. “Even if you don’t do great this time, I’ll still think you are amazing and so will your father. You know I love you, right?” That was probably the only comforting thing she has said to me all day.

I walked up the aisle towards the stage, violin and bow in one hand, music in the other. My palms were so sweaty that I felt like I would drop my instrument. *Do not drop your violin. You can’t afford the repairs.* I closed my eyes. You will be fine. Calm down, it will be fine, part of me said. You’re going to screw up, you’re going to fail, everyone will hate you, another part of me said.

I set my music on my stand and lifted my violin to my shoulder with trembling hands. I tried to think of everything my teacher told me, but at the speed of light. I took a breath in. I took a breath out. I took another breath in, but this time, when I exhaled, I actually started playing. ‘Wrong note. Your chords sound crunchy. Too orange. Now the tone is too pink! Slow down. Speed up. Why are you doing everything wrong? Why are you such a screw up? Why do you have to have synesthesia?’

After the performance, my mom had told me I was amazing, how I sounded so professional, but I didn’t feel amazing. She gave me an abnormally long embrace, squishing me in her soft wool sweater. “Mom, you’re saying that out of obligation, I totally screwed up,” I insisted. “No, you didn't Finn, it was gorgeous, you were amazing. Don’t say that.” I tried to believe her.

I hear the shiny brass lock turning on the huge wooden door. Camille picked the lock! I turn my head and see her standing there and then bury my face in my knees so she couldn’t see my face.

“Finn, what's wrong? Did something happen? What happened?” Camille interrogates me. I don’t feel like talking, but I give in and tell her.
“I-I failed my-my project, the one wor-worth 35 percent of my grade. I-I’m going to fail,” I hiccup, barely able to get it out.

“Well, um, can I do anything for you? Do you want me to get some water?” I shake my head.

“Oh, so, do you want me to stay here with you?” Camille offers, trying her best to be comforting. I shrug my shoulders this time and I can hear her slump down next to me, wrap her arms around me, and put her head on my shoulder, her odd way of comforting me. She drops the bobby pin she used on the lock on the ground. I have to admit, her sweater was really warm compared to the freezing bathroom. My breathing picks up again. What will my mom say? She will probably ground me for life. I’m not the type who gets F’s so this will be big. I’ve had so many people tell me to just breathe, how it will help. Well, it doesn’t. It almost makes it worse, having another thing to focus on. My chest was hurting from trying to keep oxygen in my lungs and my breath was coming in short gasps.

Why does this always keep happening? Why do I always panic at the slightest of thing and stress myself out so I screw up on the big things? Why? Why couldn’t I have paid more attention in class? Why do I keep doing this to myself?

I remember during finals last year, I didn't study by accident. I just didn't think of it. It tore me up just thinking about it. I didn't know how to handle it and neither did my friend, Andrea.

“Andrea, what am I going to do?” I had asked, expecting her to magically fix everything.

“Andrea, I'm going to fail and my mom is going to hate me and I'll be grounded forever and my life's falling apart! What am I going to do?” I had vented to her, running my hands through my hair. She just stared at me with a gaping mouth, not knowing what to do. She was so perfect. She didn't have to deal with the constant nagging of anxiety.

‘You're not good enough. Everyone hates you. You are failing. You are a burden to others. ’ She was so lucky and I wished I could be like her. I was so jealous of her. She was perfect and I was failing.

“Finn, I-I don't know what to tell you,” Andrea had said. “We've got a few minutes until 7th period, I could quiz you,” she suggested, sliding her notes towards me.

“It's not going to do any good, we don’t have that much time,” I crossed my arms and denied her offer.

“Anything could help,” Andrea pushed me, sliding her notes even closer. I finally caved, not wanting to argue.

“All right, fine, just quiz me on the main points.” I pushed the notes back to her.

I looked back over at Camille who was pitying me with her big, sad, brown puppy dog eyes and her pouty mouth; The same way Andrea did. I don’t want peoples’ pity!

I was so fed up with everything, I couldn’t bear any noise, anything touching me. I unclasped my watch and threw it away from me. I couldn’t stand the sensation of it on my wrist. I saw the gold glint of it as it slid under a stall. I shook off Camille’s arm and laid on the chilly, unforgiving floor. It was disgusting, but I didn’t care. It felt as if the harsh blue lights were trying to drill their way into my brain, stabbing at my temples. The smell of lemon cleaner burned my nose and the cold from the tile was seeping into my bones.

My breath was ragged and I was about to start crying but I didn’t want to hear my sobs. I pushed my hair away from my face. It felt as if everything was happening too much. The world was going to collapse on my shoulders.

Can everything just stop?

My eyes drift towards the ceiling and my uneven breaths cause my body to shake. All of my walls had crumbled. I sat up set my head on my knees and began to sob. Full on sobbing. Not just the
tears streaming down your face. The heavy, ragged breaths, the hiccups, the sniffing. I didn’t care that Camille was there. I didn’t care that she would probably be judging me. I just don’t care anymore.

“Finn?” Camille says. I don’t feel like responding. “Finn?” She asks again, very insistent this time. Doesn’t she get that I don’t want to talk right now? Why doesn’t she understand. Why does no one understand? “Are you okay?” I shake my head. I’m not okay. Everything is falling apart. “I-I will be. I’ll ge-get over it” I say, lying. If I do get over it, it would take a very long time.

Ding! I pull out my phone. It’s from Mr. DuBray, my history teacher. What could he want from me? I open up the email.

All Junior Students,

I am contacting you to inform those who have failed that I am allowing you to redo it. You will have all of next week to do it and I expect it to be on my desk on Friday before 8th period ends. A lot of you did not do so hot so I’m deciding to be sympathetic.

Mr. DuBray

I let out a shaky sigh of relief. Everything was going to be fine. I wasn’t going to fail AP history. I wasn’t going to get in trouble. Mr. DuBray was letting me redo it. Everything was going to be fine. It felt as if a huge weight had been lifted off my shoulders. The lights weren’t as harsh, the scent of the cleaner not as strong, and the cold floor becoming comforting.

“H-e’s letting me redo it. C-Camille, he’s letting me redo the project! I’m not going to fail my class. Camille, everything will be fine!” Even though I said it would be fine, I still felt a slight panicky feeling in the back of my head. I couldn’t believe this was happening. But it’s not going to be fine. Quit telling yourself that. Your mom will still see the grade before the teacher updates it. I hug Camille out of my excitement.

I stood up, grabbed my backpack, and walked out of the girls’ bathroom, still sniffing and hiccupping, thinking about how this could have gone differently. Your mom is still going to see the grade, my thoughts chided me. Emotions: the relenting and the relentless.

I heard the sound of Camille’s shoes follow behind me. Sometimes, you just need to show a bit of sympathy to others. It makes life a bit easier.
Abigail Jackson
Grade 10

I’ll Light a Candle
Poetry

Platte County High School
Platte City, MO
Teacher: Heidi Mick

Part 1, Home
I come home
The day’s events jumble and collide inside my brain
I light a candle
Take a flame to my fingertips
Feel the heat absorb into my skin
My skin is infected with the hardships that comes with living
The heat is the only way I feel alive anymore
The only way I can prove my existence is real
The candle burns
This flame is small, delicate
But it is fierce
And it has the potential of becoming something great
One wrong move and my whole world will be set ablaze
I can already taste the ash on my tongue

Part 2, The City
I slip into bed, my eyes close for a moment
I expect peace
But I receive chaos
Flames climbing skyscrapers
Screams of pure agony
The smell of smoke
I grow weak
Flames climb my legs
My eyes burn from the sulfur
My vision is burnt to a crisp
I’ve let this flame become who I am
My own selfish suffering has affected those around me
Those who love me
But this spark has met its match

Part 3, Purple Sands
I awake, it is dark
My room is illuminated by pale moonlight
It contrasts with the yellow flame of the candle in the corner
I lay there
The curtains dissolve
There is no more smoke
And the moonlight grows brighter
Rather than the flame of a candle
I feel the rays of the sun
My feet are now engulfed by soft sand
The screams turn into the magnificent crashing of waves
I exhale the flame
And I inhale the purple sands
I wake up
to my mother
carefully shaking me
to get me ready for school.
I take off my clothes,
putting them in the hamper.

I take a hot shower
until I decide that I’m done.
I get dressed
and go downstairs to eat.

I eat a hearty breakfast
of bacon, eggs, and fruit.
I grab my backpack
and head out the door.
Kisses from mother.
Kisses from father.
I walk to the bus stop,
Noticing my best friend.

I stop.
His name is Joe.
He always looks
happy.
He says that
he is okay.

I open my mouth to speak,
but the bus arrives.

I wake up
to my father
yelling at my mother
about a petty argument.
I get out of bed,
put on my backpack,
and walk out the door
to the bus stop.
Late.
No breakfast today.
It isn’t like it matters.
All we have is
dried up cornflakes,
half a gallon of milk,
no fruit,
2 eggs,
and a bag of beef jerky.
I see my only friend walking to the stop.
I stare.
His name is Ty.
I try to be like him-
happy.
He try to act like
I’m okay.
I open my mouth to speak,
but the bus arrives.
I have this extreme problem where I constantly lose pencils. Some others also likely have this problem. But my problem is worse, I will just be in class, and put down the pencil. Five minutes later I will look everywhere for it. I swear a ghost comes in and steals it while I am looking at the very interesting picture of the teacher’s three kids, while listening to her tell her story about how her kid chipped his tooth 17 days ago. It wasn’t like we already heard this story 16 times, but that’s besides the point. On average every day at school I lose 3 pencils, one during the first half of the school day, one during the second, and the last after I finish my homework. Even though I can always get 28 new pencils the next day, the effect of these three pencils stolen by the ghost, that follows me everywhere, is actually quite large.

It is not so uncommon for me to find these pencils in someone else’s hand, even the custodian’s. My patented and trademarked pencils with a broken clip, happening as a result of spinning the pencil when I am bored and a loose eraser at the end of the barrel, the result of my frequently removing the eraser to check the amount of lead left. I will confront them and ask if that is my pencil, but none of them have my pencils, because everyone says the same thing, “No, I found it on the ground.” To add to my frustration, there is more than one occasion where I found the pencil on the ground, but to my dismay the graphite(pencil lead) is gone.

You see I use BIC #2 mechanical pencils, Xtra strong, 0.9mm that come in assorted barrel colors. I know that because I am sometimes more interested in my pencil than the chemical composition of Hydrochloric Acid(HCl). And by sometimes I mean always. This is also important, because these are mechanical pencils and at school, these are “cooler” than the normal pencils your average Joe uses. They are colorful and slender, they write smoothly and have the comfort of an eraser on one end. Above all they never need sharpening, so I can amuse myself looking at the long line of sleep deprived students falling asleep while waiting in line for the teacher’s electric sharpener, first thing in the morning. These mechanical pencils cost 33 cents apiece, which means every day I lose about a cent less than a dollar worth of pencils.

Now that’s a lot of money. Imagine the Xbox 360 that I always wanted but never had. Well I can buy a whole 40 of them. What would I do with 40 Xbox 360s? I don’t know. But let’s see what else I can do with that money. Let’s say I wanted a car, because it is time I want one. I can’t drive one yet, but I want one. Truth be told, I just want one Lamborghini. Is it too much to ask for? It’s just a little out of my pay range, but maybe someday... Anyway with 3,640 dollars I can buy a used Pontiac. And if I really wanted to be “cool”, I can buy not one, not two, not four, but three used Toyota Corolla 1990 models. These three Toyotas that fit my budget are extra special, because they each have a disclaimer stating that the car can fall apart and become dust at any moment. Interestingly never, not once did the pencils make it to their correct and final destination, i.e., the lost and found. Or at least I didn’t see any on my frequent trips.
if they did make it to lost and found, then the school will have enough to give every student an extra pencil. Instead, if they get the classic yellow unsharpened wooden #2HB pencils, which cost 72 pencils for ten dollars at Wal-Mart, the school can buy 26,208 pencils, likely enough to fund the whole district. Every student and every teacher can get a grand total of… one pencil.

Beyond all the materialistic goods, the ghost that stole those pencils has essentially robbed me of, I have lost money that I could have spent elsewhere. It is important, because I came to realize that even the small things in life add up and can really amount to something big. It is important not to take things for granted, because every small thing and every small pencil counts. Oh by the way, with 3,640 dollars I can also buy 2,600,000 M&Ms, giving myself the sweet pleasure and elating my mood a whopping 2.6 million times, also giving me diabetes and cavities in the process. It wasn’t just materialistic goods or money, but also psychological and medical effects.

Reflecting on my pathetic situation this far, I still don’t have a solution to the problem. Except for one and only one, wait for the day when everything, meaning everything under the sun becomes electronic and the word pencil will retire and be honorably exited from the English dictionary. I wonder what the ghost will do then. Turn his hobby towards mouses? Maybe.
I nestled my hands farther into my pockets and shivered. Small flurries of snow had begun to fall, squeezing through the gaps of trees to add extra padding to the existing blanket of snow. As the warmth of my nose melted snow to form droplets, I grimaced as they refroze and stung the skin there. Should I even be out here? Is this a storm? I glanced back towards the condo, a towering column that radiated with warmth and familiarity, but then caught a shining green and purple glimmer of the northern lights above it. If I wanted to see them from the top of Flagstaff Mountain, I would have to get going. This was a rare opportunity, to see them in Utah of all places. Knowing the ski trails well, I meandered my way to a flatter path that wound around the mountain between rows of pine trees that gathered mounds of snow on their branches. Everything was tinted a sort of warm blue-purple color like the sky, and the trees looked like ones decked out for Christmas with multicolored lights shimmering off the snow from all angles. I found myself absorbing all the sights and sounds associated in a strangely serene moment, though the wind was beginning to pick up to a steady whoosh. I was hesitant to trample the untouched snow ahead of me and break the seal of fresh, fluffy powder, but the snowflakes glimmered like tiny sparks as I threw a little pile over my head and grinned.

If I hadn’t been looking around, I would have missed it: a small log cabin, with a small lantern glowing in one of the front windows. Have I seen that before? Maybe it’s for the lift ops. Or ski patrol. Or one of those forest playhouse-things for ski school that I loved as a kid. But seriously, how many times have I skied here, a thousand?! I approached it on my tiptoes, trying to peer into the window, which had been recently cleaned and the snow swept off its sill, but the purple glare from the sky impeded my view inside. I ran my hand across one of the logs composing the outside, and the aroma of sap and pine filled my nose, but the grain of the wood was irregular and rough, as though it had been there awhile, or built by someone themselves. How old was this cabin? What if someone lived here? I strained my memory, through over ten years of skiing, and came up blank. If this cabin was there, it had been hiding in plain sight. I figured if it was a ski patrol hut, it would be locked for the evening. As I put my hand on the dull brass doorknob to see if it would open, glowing a faint purple like the snow, the wind began to howl, and the accumulations of snow on the pine branches and roof of the cabin were sloughed off and crashed to the ground. The scene resembled a battle or retaliation, as purple bombs of snow plummeted and branches lashed wildly around. Yelping, I jumped away from the doorknob as if the metal was searing hot and fell backwards into the snow. Instantly, the wind stopped wailing and succumbed back to a low whistle. What the heck was that? Surely, that was just a coincidence that the instant I touched the doorknob snow fell on me?

I warily eyed the cabin for any signs of movement or life, and tried to brush the snow off of myself. No use. It had already gotten my clothes wet and chilled my skin, and I violently shivered. That only seemed to spread the iciness through my bloodstream somehow, and suddenly I felt very insignificant compared to the vastness of the mountain around me. There was so much snow, and some few feet had knocked me over- what could a whole mountain do? I glanced upwards at the lights, albeit slightly dimmer and hazier through the snowfall, and chided myself for being such a chicken. As my gaze returned to the ground, my eyes nearly popped out of their sockets and I froze. Was that another pair of footprints in the snow?!
Nonono. It can’t be. I apprehensively approached the prints and stamped my foot hard next to one of them. I recoiled with horror: mine was crisp, molded into a distinguishable shape with snow neatly packed, and deep, but the other had blurred edges and was far shallower, and the snow rippled outwards as if the person had meandered pigeon-toed through the snowdrifts. I don’t walk like that. Hadn’t I been marching? I dropped to my knees, my breathing ragged and heavy, and every inhale diffused the freezing cold through my body. I bent down so low to inspect every snowflake impressed into the snow by these boots, whether they were the same pair, that my nose grazed the ground. I squinted at them so hard, the prints blurred as though I had removed my contacts. I blinked. Hey, the prints look the same. Shakily getting to my feet, I compared the pigeon-toed pair of prints to the rest of the track. Instead of the prints being by themselves, they were just pointing in a different direction, as if I had briefly turned around then continued walking. I sighed and glanced up at the northern lights. I must have been overreacting. After all, no one else was out here (as far as I knew), and it was getting darker.

I picked myself off the ground, inhaled deeply again, and watched as my breath turned to condensation as I exhaled. Pushing the last couple minutes back into a small corner of my mind, I continued up the slope, although doubt still lingered. Was it possible for those tracks not to have been mine? Am I alone out here? As I walked, I forced myself to whistle Christmas tunes, and the emptiness of the mountain echoed it back around me, as though the sound searched the canyon for other ears to hear, then returned solemnly without luck. But the echoes sounded hollow, like they were trying too hard to be something they weren’t, and every fault or quaver in my voice was magnified. Instead, my focus turned to the smooth, predictable motion of my gait, a rocking heel-toe, heel-toe, heel-toe. Squelch, squelch, squelch, as my boot repetitively spread and smushed and pushed the snow out of its way, with the snow having no choice but to obey my command. Who has the power now? I continued in this fashion for a while, until an object impeded my path and snapped me out of my trance-like state of mind: a tree. A small patch of them, in fact, spaced widely apart, leaving inviting gaps to walk between and offering shelter from the snowfall. I had walked on the flat trail, or “catwalk”, so long that it had merged with a steeper trail and I had unknowingly walked across it. Knowing the patch of trees led to another wide path, I set my head down again, continuing my rhythmic step, modifying it to weave between trees. Squelch, squelch, squelch, snap, glide.

Wait, what? I whipped my head wildly around, looking for any other tracks, for the “snap, glide” very closely resembled a sound made by clicking a ski boot into a ski binding. Silence. I closed my eyes, though it was already dark, and strained my ears for any noise that seemed out of the ordinary, that seemed unwelcome. A rustling a short distance up the hill forced its way into my eardrums and demanded to be heard. It gained intensity as it drew nearer, and I felt as though it was rushing towards me with a purpose. My eyes flew open. I didn’t see anything beyond the first row of trees, save the swaying of the branches, and the comforting purple glow of the lights was stifled by clouds. I can’t see I can’t see I can’t see It’s a person they’re getting nearer I can’t outrun someone on skis I’m gonna die oh my god this is it I disturbed some person in the cabin and I’m paying the price nonono. A pattering seemed to surround me, as though I could be suffocated by sound alone, and I cowered against a tree, dug my nails into the thick bark, and tensed every muscle in my body. The wind howled, as if jeering at my presence and trying to boo me off of its stage. It mocked my fears, laughed at how I was crouched down and trembling at just a single sound. Tears rolled down my face, and I clawed at my cheeks as the tears froze. Something snapped and hit the ground. The suffocating pressure around me released, and the blood rushing around my brain drowned out all noise, even my whimpers.

I opened one eye, and was comforted to see that the lights were visible again and illuminated the forest in patches of a warm purple hue. It was dark, but I could make out that branch had fallen off a tree from the force of the wind. I sat down and laughed so hard tears kept pouring down my face. I sat there for a long while looking at the northern lights. My eyes glazed over, and felt nothing but the taste of salt from the tears. I didn’t move until my body succumbed to the cold and shivered. I looked up towards the top of the
mountain, even though my eyes could only discern dark, looming shapes I assumed were trees, and gathered the courage to ascend the last 100 yards forward to it. The peak was open and familiar, and I would feel safer up there. Using the trees as a guide, I stumbled my way through them, placing my hand on the trunks to provide myself with stability and comfort. I followed a lone pair of tracks close to where I had been sitting, but they were shallow, and people skied through here. What if they belonged to the person living in the cabin? No. Stop thinking about that. These aren’t fresh. Not fresh.

Still squinting down at the tracks and shutting out my relentless eternal monologue, I stuck my hand out again to grab what I thought was a tree. Heat diffused from the object, effectively defrosting the skin on my fingers. As I pushed it to feel its texture, it swayed and the ground crunched, as though something had made an impression upon it. I squeezed and dug my nails into it, and it squished and I heard a gasp of air. I withdrew my hand, and I caught a whiff of a familiar iron smell, was it… blood? Staggering backwards, my vision blurring, I let out an agonizing scream the tension from the entire evening erupting. I blindly tore back through the woods, pushing my way through the trees and stumbling over roots that I couldn’t even see. Loose branches lashed against my face, and the deep snow threatened to swallow boots my as they sunk deep into tree wells. Pine needles poked my face and tree bark scraped my hands raw every time I rushed past one. Wailing, my outstretched hand never found a tree and I collapsed face-first into the snow. I spluttered out a mouthful of powder and begin to crawl on my stomach, clawing at the snow and thrashing my legs to somehow propel me far, far away. I scratched at snow, breathing so heavily that snow filled my lungs and spread freezing cold through my body, until my fingernails hit something hard and recoiled.

Wiping my face and glancing up, expecting to see a tree root, I realized I had reached a rough wooden door with a dull brass doorknob. The wooden cabin towered over me, establishing its dominance. Shadows danced as the lantern on the windowsill flickered and went out. The trees around it swayed with the howling wind, making every shape blend together into a menacing mass surrounding me, encroaching on the cabin. I gripped the doorknob with both hands, turned, and shook the door back and forth. The cabin was locked. I screamed with anguish into the clearing, my throat catching on a sob. Icicles were flung from the roof, and the wind whipped at my face like a pellet of pebbles. “Who are you?!” I exclaimed. I punched out the window, and blood gushed from my knuckles. I cried, banging relentlessly on the door, harboring a hope that the defender of the cabin, whether a person or Mother Nature herself, would take a special pity on me. When no one offered me any response, I continued to pound, and bang, and tore at the door fiercely until it was stained red and my hands burned. My hands burned, and so did my arms! My head, my entire body! Heat pulsed through me, a triumph against the cold in my veins, and I slumped into the snow and began to sift through it. Nestling into the thick, cool layer like a blanket, I let the wind and frost form a protective layer around my skin and turn it numb, my heartbeat slowing to match the intensity of the low temperature. Looking up, the northern lights had returned, basking my cocoon in a blue tone. “I’m safe now,” I murmured, and closed my eyes one last time.
“Pardon me, ‘scuse me! Can’t you see I’m trying to get through?” I yell as I escape the crowd of 8th graders infested lunch line.

I walk over to the back wall of the cafeteria with my tray of very little food, since today’s meatloaf day, and I didn’t want to take the risk. I look around standing on my tip toes to get the best view of the lunch room. I wobble back and forth trying to see all the possible options of where I’m going to sit today. The goth table, the nerds, the skateboarders, the allergens, the... I stop and take a deep breath.

“Populars,” I whisper. I had been planning it out since 8th grade started. I never left the house with a strand hanging from my hair, my boots are shiny black that go up to my knees, and I did my research every night to make sure the 90’s trends hadn’t changed on me. It all lead up to this day. I’m going to sit with the Populars.

I start to walk confidently over to the table of glory, but in reality my heart is beating out of my chest. As my sleek black shoes squeak across the glimmering tile, I realize, Mia.

I glanced over, not completely making eye contact, to see a hand waving back and forth, at a table with a single person. “Mallory, over here!” I hear.

“Dang it!” I cringe. “Mia.” I had sat with Mia almost everyday since the first day of school since she didn’t have anyone to sit with. The truth was, she’s pretty nice and all, but she is the exact opposite of cool. She wears really long dresses and clunky black shoes. She has curly brown hair that is always raised up on the top of her head. SO 80’s hair! Keep up with the trends, ‘cause It’s the 90’s now! I think. Worst of all, she wore head gear the size of a rhino’s horn. Not today. I keep walking, trying to avoid eye contact. I feel a tad guilty, but I mean, we would be great friends if it didn’t prevent me from being popular. It just isn’t worth the risk.

I take a deep breath, for I’m almost there. Today’s the day, I think. From here on out, I will be known as popular. I smile and almost twirl but that definitely wouldn’t be cool. I look down to make sure everything is perfect, my white short sleeve shirt, a mini skirt with exactly three buttons, sleek black boots, and brown hair pulled back in a black scrunchie. Perfect.

I watch as eyes start to peer toward me as I take a seat. I try to make it look as cool as possible, if sitting could ever be cool, but instead I landed with a thump, shaking the burly football player’s jello back and forth. My eyes clench together, as if I’m about to get a shot. I slowly open my eyes, and everyone is oddly staring at me.

Great job Mallory. What a good start, I tell myself.

“Uh, hi,” I hear a voice come to the left of me, so I glance over in that direction. Veronica Jones. The queen bee of 8th grade is talking to me! She’s wearing a crop top! Mom would never let me wear one to school! I recognize her almost immediately.

“I’m sorry,” I say hesitantly. “I shouldn’t be here.” As soon as I start to turn away, I get stopped by a new voice.
“No, stay. We’ve been keeping an eye on you.” I turn my head back toward the table and see Jessica, Veronica’s second self.

Okay, what does that mean? I wonder. Veronica must have seen the confusion on my face, so she speaks up.

“Not in a bad way of course!” she reassures me. “You have potential, lot’s of it.” She turns towards me and puts her elbow on the table, leaning against it.

“Potential to do what?” I ask with a crack in my voice. I wanted to jab myself with the plastic fork in my hand. That didn’t sound cool.

“To be with us! The Populars,” Jessica states, her eyebrows raising.

“I mean, you look the part,” Veronica adds on, scanning my clothes with her eyes.

“You’re just missing somethi-” Jessica says.

“More like, something you’re going to have to lose,” Veronica interrupts.

“What?” I ask, looking around. Is it something about my lunch? One thing’s for sure, I’m not going to be a vegetarian.

“Mia,” Veronica sighs.

“Yea, she’s a buzzkill,” Jessica says, pursing her lips together.

Ugh! I knew the day I sat down with her it would ruin my life forever. “I know, right!” As soon as the words left my mouth, guilt started to build.

“Maybe you can help her!” Veronica says, eyes widening. “Start by getting her a new wardrobe.

A scatter of snickers starts to arise throughout the table, and my frustration starts to turn into guilt.

Don’t be guilty, I think. She deserves it! It’s not my fault she’s a buzzkill. The more I thought about it, the more the guilt crept into me. The mean comments at the table didn’t help.

“I heard Will pushed her down the stairs the other day!” Veronica says, gesturing towards Will.

“Yea,” Will chimed in. “Boy, can that girl tumble!”

“I saw someone throw a book at her in 2nd period homeroom today!” I heard a girl with shiny black painted nails say, sitting across the table.

“Woah, someone should give them an award,” A football player to my right says.

The whole table starts to explode with laughter, except for me. I have to do something. Mia is really getting attacked over here. Is this what always happens at this table? I wonder.

“Well, maybe if you give her a chance,” I say, hope in my voice. The table stays quiet for a good five seconds until it explodes with laughter again.

“As if!” Veronica snickers. “I don’t care if her and I are last people on earth. That girl is not hanging out with me!”

So much anger is building up in me I feel like I’m going to explode. My fists clench up, and my teeth grit together back and forth. I can feel my face heating up, and my cheeks growing red. I try to stay calm, but I can’t take it anymore. “Get over it,” I mumble. “This has gone too far.”

I grip the edge of the table, and I slide my chair out with a forceful grunt. I grab my lunch tray and quickly snap around. Before I know it, I’m heading over where I should have been all along. With Mia.

I sit down, my face still feeling like I have a fever, flaming hot.

“Woah, calm down there,” Mia reassures me. “What happened over-.”

“Why didn’t tell me?” I interrupt. “I could have helped! I didn’t know they treated you like that! Isn’t it hard to go through that every day?” I slide my hand up and down across my face in stress.

“You wouldn't have helped anyway,” Mia responds. “I could tell all this time you were doing this,”
she waves her hand back and forth between me and her, “all out of sympathy.”

“That isn’t true!” I lie. I hadn’t been the best friend I should have been. She and I stay silent for a solid minute until I speak up. “I really am sorry Mia, I don’t deserve to be with them! All I need is a good friend like you.”

“Nobody deserves to be with them, Mallory!” Mia yells. “They’re jerks! I think you’ve seen that already."

I put my head down in shame. She’s right.

“And the fact that you abandoned me all those times just so you could be labeled ‘cool’, I’m pretty darn sure that would make you one too.”

A pain in my chest hits me like I’ve been shot, but it’s what I needed. I needed the truth. And that’s what Mia gave me.

“You’re right Mia. I don’t know what I was doing.” I didn’t want to be that cheesy friend but the truth was, I really didn’t know. “I think I was maybe a tad jealous of how you could just walk in here, wearing whatever you want and not care what other people think! I don’t know how you do it!” I let out a smile, and she does too.

“That’s the beauty of not being the bad type of popular. You can still be popular. Just make sure it’s not with them,” her head nods toward the table I was so wanting to join a couple of minutes ago. “You’ll learn that soon enough,” she chuckles, playfully punching me on the shoulder.

“Thanks, Mom.” We both start laughing our heads off until I regain my breath to talk again.

“If I wasn’t mistaken,” I say, “I’m pretty darn sure you’re the best friend I’ll ever have.”
Snap, Snap, Snap, goes the camera. The sun shone brightly on the town of Leewood, Maryland. I was taking pictures of everything I could see. I had just opened a photography business and was enjoying the high it brought me every single time, the shutter clicked. This was the first time that I’d felt at home since I’d moved back to my tiny hometown. I looked at my watch; I would have to head back into town if I wanted to make dinner at Leah’s. The thought of dinner at my sister’s made her stomach churn, Leah was not the greatest cook.

Quickly walking through the town square I admired my surroundings. The giant Christmas tree was lit up and glistened in the center of the square, it spread Christmas feeling. The streets were lit up with lights, that sung of warmth and cheer. And the smells the wonderful delightful smells were like nothing you had ever smelled before. The fresh bread and baked goods were in the shop’s merry window just waiting to be taken home.

As I hurried through the streets, I thought about how things were so different a year ago. A year ago I was in my cozy New York Apartment. A year ago I was lost and broken, and now I’m home. I finally made it to Leah’s with a minute to spare without being late.

When I came inside I was bombarded with hugs, from my niece and nephew. Henry and Naomi rushed me into the kitchen, where I received a kiss on the cheek from my sister and a hug from my brother-in-law, Liam.

“Emily, it’s been too long since you’ve come over for dinner,” said Liam fondly.

I laughed, It had been a long time. Two months to be exact. Even though they saw each other around town, I had been too busy taking care of my shop at the time. Now that it was the holidays, they decided to have a dinner together.

“Em I would hug you, but I have batter all over my hands so…,” laughed my sister, as she rolled out cookie dough.

I laughed along with her it had been so long since we had laughed like that. As soon as we sat down for dinner Henry and Naomi stuffed their faces with food.

“So, Emily I heard that your birthday is coming up. When is it?” Liam addressed me.

Leah smiled and laughed, “Darling, she was born on Christmas Eve, her name is actually Eve.”

Liam looked at me confused, “You don’t go by your actual name.”

I shot Leah a glare, I try to keep my name a secret from people, it draws attention. I hate my name and I hate Christmas, I always had and I always would. That was the day that I killed her. That was the day I killed my mother.

“I prefer not to go by my actual name, and not celebrate the holidays,” I politely refused the invitation to answer why.

Liam still looked confused, but clearly saw that I was uncomfortable so he dropped it. The dinner went by in an awkward silence and an awkward goodbye. When it was just my sister and I she turned to me.

“There was no reason to be rude,” she started.

I looked at her, she thought I was being rude. Did she not know what I went through, finding out early in life that I was the one responsible for killing my own mother. I didn’t even get to meet her, and I have to live with that every day. People use to say that we look alike, that I was beautiful like her. I ended that perfect, beautiful, happy life.
“You do not get to judge me,” I say rather forcefully, “I grew up with the shame knowing that in bringing me into the world I ended her life. My own father can’t stand to look at me, so we don’t even speak anymore. Did you know that he moved away because of me?”

My eyes were bright with fury. I opened the front and slammed it behind me. As I hurried through the uninhabited streets, the frosty air clung to my body. I hurried into an open pub. I sat down on an empty bar stool.

“What can I get you?” inquired the bartender.
I smiled up at him, “Just a hot chocolate please.”

Soon my frothy drink arrived in front of me. I was sipping my drink and reading my book that I had bought when a familiar voice caught my attention.

“Emily is that you,” said a gruff but gentle voice.
I immediately knew who it belonged to and quickly turned around. My childhood best friend Carson Meyer appeared in front of me.

“Car, what are you doing here,” I asked as I ran to hug him.

He still had a hearty laugh after all this time. His voice had grown deeper, but it still had an insightful tone. Carson and I hadn’t seen each other in five years since we both left Leewood for college, but we were still as close.

“How have you been Emily,” he asked in his thoughtful voice.

I laughed, I hadn’t been this happy since I left high school.

“Good, I started my own photography business,” I replied.

We spent the next better part of an hour, reconnecting. People stared at us with curious eyes. Some of the older folk and people that knew us our entire life had always suspected that we were together, but never once has that happened.

Carson looked like he was about to say something, but hesitated. I gave him an encouraging nod.

“I know this is a difficult time for you, and I just was wondering if you were ok?” he inquired.

I took a moment to think about it. Was I okay? I thought I was, but the more I thought about it the more I couldn’t shake the feeling of wrongness.

“Yes, I’m fine,” I decided.

Carson looked like he was about to say something, but decided against it. I was fine, I really was. I took one final swig of my drink before excusing myself for the night. He could see that I needed a moment and let me go without questions. As I hurried through the streets, I checked my phone. There was one message from Leah, I played it.

“Look Emily I’m sorry I really am. I know you don’t like the name Eve, and you should have told me about how you felt about mom. I don’t know what you're going through only that you’re going through it alone. Call me please I want to know that you got home safely,” replayed the message.

I love my sister I really do, but sometimes she could be so oblivious. She really didn’t know what I was going through nobody does. Everybody says it isn’t my fault, but it is and it doesn’t help that my father won’t forgive me.

I hurried through the streets to my Victorian house on Elm Street. When I turned the corner I saw that the lights were on. That’s weird, I thought, I must have forgotten to turn them off. When I hurried inside my house, my Border Collie Ezra jumped on me. I laughed and reached down to pet him. That’s when I heard his voice.

“He’s a playful one isn’t he,” rang a familiar voice.
I whirled around. There he was in all his greatness, Jacob Williams, my father. I stared at him dumbfounded, we hadn’t spoken in years.

“How are you Eve?” he questioned.

My ears perked up. Nobody called me Eve, especially not him. My father hated that name, the only reason he named me that was because it was my mother’s dying wish.

“I go by Emily, always have, always will,” I bitterly replied, “What are you doing here dad?”
He chuckled, “So it’s so bad for a father to want to visit his daughter?”
I scoffed, he hadn’t seen me in five years why would he want to spend time with me? I told him as much.
“Because we are going on a family camping trip, before your birthday,” said Leah stepping out of the kitchen, “And, I’ve already called Carson to see if he could come.”

Of course, my sister would be behind this, who else. She sees this as family bonding time, and I see it as torture. Ezra just sat in front of me wagging his tail. All I wanted was to yell and run away and hide. “Get out of my house,” I demanded calmly, before turning around and walking to my bedroom.

I would go, and I would try, but I will not force anything.

Sun streamed through the curtains casting a shadow on my white duvet. I groaned when I realized that today I was supposed to leave for the “Family Bonding time” at 4. This camping trip was going to be the most awkward thing ever. I started to pack my things. As I was packing the necessities, I decided to pack a book for when it gets so awkward there is nothing to do but read. 4 finally came around, and I decided that backing out was not an option. I parked my gold Acadia in Leah’s driveway and took a moment to breathe. When I entered the home, I heard laughter coming from the kitchen. I followed the noise to see Leah, Carson, and my father standing around the island. The laughter stopped when they saw me.

“Well I guess we can head out now,” said Leah breaking the silence.

We all climbed into the car we were riding in. Leah in dad in Leah’s Honda, and Carson and I in my Acadia.

Carson leaned over and whispered in my ear, “If all goes wrong I managed to smuggle some wine into my bag.”

I laughed and with that, we were on our way to what was sure to be the most awkward weekend ever.

When we arrived at the campsite, I groaned we actually had to do this. I got out of the car and started taking my things out. 20 minutes later it was time for dinner, which meant people had to go get kindling. Of course, my dad and I got voted to do the job. We walked in perpetuated silence while gathering kindling. Finally, he turned to me.

“Evie, please talk to me. I’m trying here I really am,” my father pleaded.

Through gritted teeth, I said, “Nobody calls me that!”

In another awkward silence, we headed back to the campsite. Soon, Carson, had a fired started and we had eaten dinner. Now we were sitting under the stars.

“So Leah, how are Naomi and Henry and what’s his name Liam,” inquired my father with a sparkle in his eyes.

My sister laughed, she loved having him back in our life again.

“Great dad, you know it is really good to have you back,” she laughed.

My father chuckled, “How about you Evie, found anyone to share your life with?”

I couldn’t take it anymore.

“I can’t take it anymore,” I screamed.

“Evie, as much as you may believe it is not your fault. I never told you this but your mother knew that giving birth to you would be risky. There was a very high-risk factor. But she told me, ‘She will be the greatest joy in our lives and if I do die the greatest joy in yours’. I couldn’t take it when she died, but it was not your fault. You remind me so much of her it hurts. But in the end, it was her decision and she made it,” said my father in a gentle speech.

Jacob Williams had never been one to make speeches, he had always been a quiet simple man so naturally, this shocked me greatly that he would talk like that. But he wasn’t done yet.

“And if you really think this is all your fault, then you are more self-centered then I thought,” he laughed.

I couldn’t help it I felt tears build in my eyes. My father came over and opened his arms, and I fell right into them. My father was finally there for me. I had always thought it would take a miracle to have a moment like this.

When I looked up at the stars, they were twinkling bright, but it seemed brighter than before.

***

One week later

It was Christmas, and I had a new appreciation for it. I hurried into the living room, where Henry and Naomi tore open presents and laughed to myself. I was surrounded by family, and it was a wonderful
feeling.
For, I was the girl born in the last hours of the day before Christmas, I was Eve.
Emma Jones  
Grade 9

A mock letter to my School Board stating why To Kill A Mockingbird should be left in our Pre-AP English curriculum at my high school  
Critical Essay

Platte County High School  
Platte City, MO  
Teacher: Hilary Kisker

November 19, 2017  
PCRIII School Board,  
998 Platte Falls Road,  
Platte City, MO 64079

Dear Platte County School Board:

I strongly suggest that the book To Kill a Mockingbird should be a part of the Pre-AP English curriculum. Why, you may ask? This book perfectly articulates the painfully obvious racial discrimination and the stereotypical manner white people tended to resort to when encountering African-Americans. These were just some of the things African-Americans faced during the 1930s in the deep South. This book also showcases that even though winning isn’t always an option, justice inevitably deserves to be served. In this letter, I will explain to you my personal reasons and beliefs that this powerful and inspirational novel should stay in the Pre-AP English curriculum.

First off, this story teaches us that racism, segregation, and bigotry existed, but it should be abolished and ended. In the story, an African-American man is accused of raping a young, white woman. The defense lawyer, Atticus Finch, opposes racism (unlike Maycomb, Alabama the town he lives in) and will stop at nothing to make sure Tom (the African-American man) gets treated fairly and has an equally fair trial. What really is the astonishing thing here is Atticus Finch knows that no white jury will find Tom Robinson innocent. Atticus explains this to his daughter Scout in the following passage:

“Atticus, are we going to win?”
“No, honey.”
“Then why--”
“Simply because we were licked a hundred years before we started is no reason for us not to try to win,” Atticus said. (76)

This quote really reflects the true meaning of the book, which is that race, gender, social status or poverty level shouldn’t define how we treat or act towards a human being. This novel also teaches that lies and perception take a toll on a person’s image according to the public eye, leading to false rumors and testimonies told by the townspeople. Finally, the author, Harper Lee, explains that in this world nothing is promised or given, and situations in our existence don’t always go properly, but great things can come out of horrid tragedies. For example, in the book To Kill a Mockingbird. Atticus is thanking town “myth” Boo Radley for saving his children, Jem and Scout, from town drunkard, Bob Ewell, who was trying to get revenge on Atticus because he questioned Mr. Ewell’s story accuracy regarding Tom Robinson's trial. He stopped in front of Boo Radley. “Thank you for my children Arthur,” he said. (276)

Ultimately, this classic story is very relevant to society today. In the article written by Richard Lapchick
of ESPN.com, entitled “Lapchick: The year in racism and sports” it discusses the effects of racism on sports in this day and age. It gives specific instances of racial discrimination. The article discusses athletes using their constitutional right to stand up for what they believe is just. It sheds light on how all humans are all “cut from the same fabric.” In conclusion, all of the subjects mentioned and examined in To Kill a Mockingbird are still in some way, shape or form relevant to society today. Of course, topics like racial discrimination and poverty aren’t as grave as in the 1930s (which was the time period the book was based in.) My last word I want to leave with you will be this: if teenagers aren’t taught the proper way to handle racial accusations and situations, they will go off of what society says is socially acceptable, which allows their mindset to become clouded and erroneous. I ask you-- do you want students to be taught by educated and well-respected adults, or will you allow them to take their cue from what society thinks is correct?

Sincerely,

EJ Class of 2021
1501 Branch Street
Platte City, MO 64079
July 19, 2009 was a very important day for a certain group of 12 people. Today, nine of them would be deciding who of the other three would win a sum of one million dollars. This was the last day of filming for the 19th season of the game show Survivor, and every single person in the Tribal Council arena was nervous. On one side of the giant bonfire were the nine jury members, all of whom had been voted out of the game already, who had a big decision to make. On the other side were the three finalists, who had made it to the 39th and final day of Survivor, and all hoped they would be the one that the jury deemed most deserving of the million-dollar prize. These three finalists were all very different. The man on the left, Nick Bauer, had taken up the role of leader as soon as he stepped foot on the beach. He did a good job of leading his tribe in challenges, but he didn’t make very many strategic decisions of his own. That job went to his alliance member, Terry Hanson, who was sitting on the far right. He had orchestrated almost every single vote in the entire game. However, not many of the jurors liked him as a person. Finally, there was the woman sitting between Nick and Terry, Ashley Brown. She didn’t seem to be that involved in strategic decisions, either. However, she was very good at making strong social connections, which left a lasting impact on most of the jury members. There wasn’t really anybody who was angry with her, or who had lost much respect for her. But when it came time for the jurors to vote, some of them were conflicted. Should they vote for Terry, who played a better strategic game, or Ashley, who they liked better (“This Game”)?

This is a problem that contestants on every single season of Survivor run into. They might think, “Who deserves the money the most? If the person I vote for doesn’t win, are they deserving of the money?” This is a hard question to answer. It all depends on whether you view Survivor as a game or not. Is it just in its own little world? Do the actions that happen inside that little magic circle affect the outside world? Some people, especially ones that have never played Survivor, want to say that it’s just a game, and outside consequences don’t matter. Most Survivor players argue that it most definitely is not a game, because of how it affected their emotional and mental states. I believe that Survivor can’t be contained in a little magic circle. The prize involved is one million dollars, a very large amount of money. Deciding who wins the prize has consequences outside the game, so the question of whether they deserve it based on their actions inside and outside the game is a valid one. The weight of this outcome affects the decision-making process of the jurors and the view of the concept of deservingness as a whole.

Johan Huizinga, a historian and cultural theorist, believes that playing a game like Survivor is like stepping into a magic circle, set apart from ordinary life (Nguyen 19). Here, nothing outside of the circle matters, according to him. Values don’t matter, morality doesn’t matter, and the only thing that does is playing and winning the game. If you do something that you wouldn’t do in ordinary life, such as lying to someone’s face, you shouldn’t feel bad about it. It’s just a game. Huizinga’s idea of a magic circle has been criticized by many, though. Anthropology professor, Thomas Malaby, argues that it is impossible to separate a game completely from everyday life. There will always be social stakes and repercussions (19). Which of these views would apply to Survivor? There are definitely social stakes and repercussions present, as well as financial ones. Someone will leave the game a million dollars richer. Awarding this
prize to someone will dramatically change their life. That means that the decision of who to choose to win is a big one.

Along with the monetary aspect is the moral aspect of the game. In *Survivor*, many players seem to think that doing normally immoral things, such as lying or backstabbing, is perfectly fine in *Survivor*, because it’s only a game. Once everyone leaves the beach, it’s all over. No hard feelings. Unfortunately, that isn’t the way everyone sees it. The perceived morality and likeability of a person can influence perceptions of their deservingness of a certain outcome, such as winning a million dollars (Smith 409). While playing *Survivor*, most people are trying to find people they trust in order to stay safe. However, if one person carries out a plan to vote out a supposed ally, and that person finds out about it, it can affect how deserving of winning the voted-out person views the other as. Take the example of Terry and Justin in *Survivor*. Terry Hanson was one of Justin Roberts’ closest allies throughout the game. He assumed that they would both have each other’s back, no matter what. However, at the tribal council for the final five players remaining, Russell got his other allies, Ashley and Nick, to vote out Justin. Justin found out that Terry was the brains behind this decision, and this affected his perception of Terry very negatively. Because he was so angry at Terry for voting him out, he voted for Ashley to win instead. All actions have some sort of consequence in *Survivor*, whether it be positive or negative.

Just as some people view immoral actions to be okay in *Survivor*, there are other people who believe that moral actions aren’t okay. They believe that being nice and telling the truth will not be respected by the jury. Occasionally, that is the case, but other times, jurors actually do respect the finalists when they stay true to themselves. Ashley Brown didn’t pretend to be someone she wasn’t when she played *Survivor*. She made connections to people and didn’t tell them that she trusted them unless she actually did. She stayed with her core alliance, which was with Terry, Nick, and Justin (up until the final five) for all of her time in the game. Some people viewed this as her riding coattails and coasting along without getting any blood on her hands. More people viewed this as her showing her true character, on the other hand, which won her a lot of votes to win.

Feelings affect not just perceptions of deservingness, but also the decision-making process. Emotional deficit can degrade the quality of decision making (Lerner and Loewenstein 619). You have to have at least some sort of feelings in order to be swayed to either vote for someone or not vote for someone. Without having some sort of feeling or opinion on the impending decision, you will have a lot of trouble coming to a proper conclusion. There are two different ways emotions enter the decision-making process: expected and immediate emotions. Expected emotions are when you are predicting the consequences of outcome outcomes. Most people are driven to make the decision that has the most positive reactions and outcomes. For example, most of the jurors in *Survivor* seemed to think that the most positive outcome of awarding someone the win would be giving the money to the person who needed it the most. This was one of the reasons why no one wanted to vote for Nick. He had made it clear from the beginning of the game that he was a doctor, and was already pretty well-off financially. He would still be able to thrive without an extra million dollars in his life, so nobody felt like it would be fair to give him the win. On the other hand, you experience immediate emotions at the time of decision making (620). As someone walks down to the voting booth to cast their vote, they have certain feelings about each of the finalists that affect how they plan on making their decision. Something that happened right before, at the final Tribal Council, might have influenced how they think and feel at this particular moment. At *Survivor*’s Final Tribal Council, one juror, Derrick Martin, made a big speech in Ashley’s favor, praising her gameplay and calling her more deserving of the win than most people might have thought she was. This was most likely something that stuck in a lot of jury members’ minds as they went to cast their vote. Derrick’s speech influenced their immediate emotions, and affected the way they ended up voting.

Another aspect that affects emotions and decision making is group affect. You create group affect by talking to other people (Barsade and Gibson 119). This means that a group of people that are all making the same individual decision, such as a group of jury members on *Survivor*, can talk through the upcoming decision and what would be the best way to figure everything out. The jury members spend a day together as a whole group at Ponderosa, the place castaways go once they’re voted out of the game,
and while they’re there, they can talk about the game and talk about what decision they plan on making, if they have a plan at all. In Ponderosa, you are able to see both affective homogeneity and affective diversity, two different approaches to the concept of group affect. Affective homogeneity, or mean-level group affect, is when a group all comes to similar conclusions because of the information they gathered when they were with each other. This can be seen in Survivor’s jury. Everybody seemed to agree on who they weren’t going to vote for: Nick. It’s believed that they all agreed beforehand that they didn’t want him to win, not just because he was already wealthy, but they just didn’t have a lot of respect for the way he played the game. The mean-level group affect is apparent in that decision. However, there was also some affective diversity in Survivor’s jury as well. Affective diversity is how other researchers measure group affect, in which they examine the variance in individual affective tendencies, instead of the average of these tendencies, as researchers with the mean-level approach (120). There were definitely variances in emotion among the jury members. Justin, for example, felt a lot of bitterness towards Terry. No one else really felt that strongly about him, but none of the other jurors had gotten as close to him as Justin had. Despite this individual variance, though, Justin still ended up making the same decision that most of the other jurors made: he didn’t vote for Nick, and he did vote for Ashley. Emotions play a role in decisions all of the time, even if you’re deciding something as a group. There is no way to separate your emotions from the more rational part of your mind.

Some people try doing that, though. One Survivor jury member, Dan Bell, gave an extensive explanation of his decision-making process in a Reddit AMA in 2015. He explained that he tried as hard as he could to not let his feelings towards all of the finalists affect his decision in the end. He tried a more logical approach: he assessed each of the finalists based on their performance in challenges, strategic ability, and social game. Dan felt that Terry was a better strategic player. Terry called the shots for each vote. He made his case to his alliance about who he thought should go home, and they voted with him every time. He was able to get a member of the opposite starting tribe, Susan, to trust him and vote with him instead of her original tribe. Terry seemed to know what he was doing strategically, in Dan’s eyes. On the social side of things, Ashley was a lot stronger socially than Terry was. The first thing she did once she first stepped onto the beach was have conversations with everyone. She connected with them, and let them know through her actions that she trusted them, and they should trust her right back. When it came to challenges, Dan believed that neither one of them were particularly stronger than the other. That left him at a stalemate. Now who should he vote for? What’s more important, strategy or social ability (Vacalicious)?

If Dan hadn’t resisted letting his emotions come into play when he was making his decision, he would’ve come to his conclusion more easily. He just couldn’t vote objectively. He needed to fall back on his emotions. He knew his general feelings about the finalists. He really liked Ashley, and he really didn’t like Terry. If he was voting for the person he liked better, he would’ve voted for Ashley without a second thought. However, he didn’t think that was a fair way to make a decision, so he went the other way instead. He tried being logical. In the end, though, he finally decided that the social aspect of Survivor is more important in the grand scheme of things. To him, Ashley wasn’t even playing a game. She wasn’t putting on an act, or compromising her morals. She just made deep connections with everyone and stayed loyal to her alliance. Maybe she didn’t make any big decisions in the game, but she let Terry be the ringleader because that’s what he needed in order to fully trust her. The fact that she let him take the reins fully shows that she made the best decisions for her in the game, and didn’t compromise her morals or treat Survivor like a game. She proved in her own way that she was truly deserving of winning.

In conclusion, deservingness is a very difficult subject to pin down. Is it even a concept that can really exist? Deservingness is relative. It all depends on what situation you’re in and what the magnitude of your decision is. In the case of Survivor, the stakes are high. You can’t confine the actions that happen on the island as “just a game”. The time out on the island takes a heavy toll on both the body and the mind, and the desired result is winning one million dollars, which will change your life if you win it. Also, it’s very difficult to separate actions inside the game from actions outside the game. If Survivor is a game, it’s a really rigorous and twisted one. The question of deservingness is made even more
complicated when you think about how the jury members come to the conclusion of who to vote for in the first place. All decisions have to involve some sort of emotion. Trying to repress any emotions when you try to make a decision will make that decision almost impossible. It’s also almost impossible to not have any sort of emotion towards a particular person. All of the jury members make a judgement on each finalist. They assess the actions and morals of each person, and these judgements influence whether they would vote in their favor or not. You are able to predict the emotions of everyone else based on who you vote for, but you can also feel emotions right as you’re voting that affect the decision-making process. Making decisions as a group can also affect the emotions of the decision-makers. If other people in the group talk about how someone doesn’t deserve to win because of their actions or their financial status, that might carry over to your feelings for that person, which will affect the way you vote. This doesn’t always happen, though. People can also have their individual motives when it comes to voting for someone.

What does this mean for Survivor? Was Ashley Brown a deserving winner? To Justin and some other jurors, she was the lesser of three evils. To Derrick, she deserved it more than she thought she did. To Dan, her social game was admirable, and she had talked about using the money, if she want it, to give to charities and her church. Almost everyone had positive feelings about her. She hadn’t done anything that rubbed people the wrong way. Terry and Nick, on the other hand, rubbed people the wrong way. The jurors felt more uneasy about voting for one of them than voting for Ashley. According to the jurors, Ashley was the most deserving of the three of them. Every season of Survivor, there is a different story, though. There is another jury assessing another group of finalists. They will end up measuring how deserving each of the finalists on with different criteria. However, deservingness is measured based on emotions. Emotions aren’t supposed to be integral parts of games. Survivor is not a game. It’s a way to improve your emotional intelligence.

Works Cited


Ripples
Inside us all, a heart trembles
nestled within lobes of lung that inhale ideology.
We chew it up and spit it out.
Inside us all, a sapling of good reaches up,
always chasing the sun.

We all grow in her direction, fingers outstretched for warmth
light-years away, hoping to find what gives us life.

Shoots of green reach up, ramrod straight.
The day passes with light
casting slow pours of shadow over the earth.

A lesson: “I want you to look up instead of looking at the ground all the time.”
(dirt is black-brown; it crumbles in my hands.)

We grasp for greatness and burn as stars;
slow, dwindling, bolide.

Unfurling flower buds snap open, synapses stretch.
Colonies of protists wove themselves together to form the first multicellular organism
vines wrap themselves around trees
in a slow gravitation towards what makes us alive.

Symbiosis is triptych:
You weave your fingers with mine in equal measure
moving from thigmo- to thermotropism.
You wrap an arm around my shoulder, simple but saturated with meaning.
You light with joy, a face like sun,
starting a slow gravitation to your event horizon.
swallowed.

An artery receives stints when it collapses, but a black hole cannot prop itself up.
love does not circulate inherently within, a product of dopamine and serotonin
but plasma flows through us.
fragments of the universe flush from duct to duct

divinity rushes to shore in a saltwater song.
creates its own warmth in those around us

We live like supernovae, explosions of bright and wonder
when we pass, we let others do the same.

Atoms of celestial matter bind our DNA,
good plants its roots within us,
reaching up from aortic arches
grasping for the sky with branched fingers.

We connect, bridge the cleft.
We sing ourselves into existence,
resonate with vibrance like a plucked string
and learn to understand ourselves, the universe,
and love.
Right now, in this moment,
I want to tell you about my chocolate chip cookies,
And how much I love to make them
It starts with some flour, 2 ¼ cups to be exact
I spill some on the floor,
secretly excited that my mom and dad will ask me to clean it up.
But I won’t. I love making messes, and not taking care of them
People pretend to love cleanliness and organization
But what’s better than pandemonium and disarray,
And then there’s the eggs.
I mix them with sugar, vanilla, and butter
My parents tell me not to lick the spoon, but that’s the best part
I do more than that. I eat the raw batter straight out of the bowl.
Not because I want to, but because I love to see my parents mad
You can say you don’t. But nothing is better than your dad’s face,
As bright as a tomato six inches from your face yelling at you.
And all you do is smile right back at him.
Finally, I put the cookies in the oven until they are a golden brown,
The smell wafting through my entire house
My dad’s on a diet, he can’t eat my cookies
Warm, fresh, tantalizing, inviting
He can look, but not eat
That’s why I make them,
So my dad can watch, as I devour them by the dozen
The clock stroke 9 AM. I walked with haste, splitting herds of pompous students who had accomplished no less than a morbidly obese man skipping a meal. I skillfully dodged my peers and their idealistic conversations of how our talents can bring an end to all disease; their paltry minds continually failing to admit that cessation of one’s heartbeat, stoppage of one’s breath, and death of one’s brain function is the inevitable end to everyone’s story. And each day marks one step closer on our stairway to meet the grim reaper. As my stride lengthened and my pace increased, I came to the barrier through which only I held the key. It was my cave in which I could hide when needed, the makeshift home I inhabited when times demanded it, and the safe haven where my mind could wander into my wildest dreams or, as of late, my most ingenious thoughts: my beloved office within the hospital. I disarmed the barrier as I turned the key, and grinned as the door slowly creaked open to reveal the wonders inside my dimly lit room. “Mood-lighting,” I believe is what they call it nowadays. I sauntered to my desk. I gradually sunk into my throne letting out a large sigh as if I had come home from a thirty-hour shift. I looked upon the intricacies of the fur chair in the corner, empty and perfectly carved from the skin of a black bear. Then my eyes scanned to the decorative chest she gifted to me the day I first started here thirteen years ago as an associate professor of anatomy. Despite my cynicism, I couldn’t help but fall into a time warp each time I observed that maple chest back to when I actually thought about life with the similar twinkle of hope as my irrational peers. It was a time where I could still feel the touch of her skin and smell the waft of her perfume. Oh how beautiful she—DING. The irritating repetitive noise sounding from my clock interrupted my abridged version of her spirit.

I reluctantly left my chambers, and I slumped to the dissection room to teach this year’s fresh batch of childish students. Each year they seemed to become less remarkable, more robotic, and increasingly annoying. I wrote the instructions for the upper limb dissection on the board, wholly knowing they would be completely ignored, leaving every cadaver mutilated at the hands of amateurs. Because it was required of me, I walked around and observed. It was a painful sight. Incisions into the epidermis were jagged. Main arteries were nicked at their roots. Muscle attachments were indistinguishable and left encased in fascia layers that should have been removed with ease. Nerves were improperly resected. As all of my students failed to complete the day’s task, my eye caught a glimpse of what must have been sculpture crafted from marble, the perfect hand. It was draped with pure grace and tranquility. Its nails were severed to barely drape over her fingertip, but contained little grime. Its fingers were slightly wrinkled and weathered, but not aged. Its palm was petite, but muscularly strong. It was neither clenched nor extended—perfectly relaxed. It was beautiful. I looked to protect it. While I observed the infallible hand, one of the beastly males neared it with a scalpel. Out of pure reflex, I leaped to protect the splendor within the makings of this masterpiece.

“Stop, you halfwit!” I screeched as if someone stabbed my side. I lifted the graceful hand to examine any damages. There were none, to my relief. I redirected towards the student. “You fool, do you know what you could have done? Do you understand the damage you could have caused?”

He stared at my sternly clenched face with pure fear and confusion. He tried to speak, but all he could muster was, “I-I apo-apolo-sorry”.

I forcefully advised the rest of my students to clean their stations and leave. My eyes remained
fixated on the appendage of that body. As all the materials and specimens were locked in their capsules and all of my senseless students left the dissection laboratory, I galloped with excitement over to the enclosed capsule that held the untouched perfection of a hand. I pulled the cadaver from its holdings and examined the hand, studying every groove within the fingerprints.

The clock read 5 PM. I decided it was time. I pulled out my engraved scalpel and dug into the forearm. I swiftly took my bone cutters and crushed the radius and ulna in succession, making sure to protect the distal portion of the limb as it hinged at the break site. I removed the neurovascular bundles and cut the final layers of epidermis, freeing the hand from the cadaver. I set it on one of the tables as a mother lays her infant down to sleep. I walked slowly over to the locked capsule on in the left corner of the wall. It held my unfinished masterpiece. It hadn’t been open for months, but now I vowed it would never be closed. I opened the capsule and pulled the stitched masterpiece out from the wall. It was the ultimate female, my perfect woman. The legs of a 32-year-old woman who died in a sudden car crash. The clearest blue eyes of an elderly woman who died of cardiac arrest. The heart of an athlete whose life was taken by malignant melanoma. And finally, I had my final piece—the hand. I worked ruthlessly into the night to attach the final puzzle piece and perfect the attachments. My work was flawless. I worked like every stitch and cut was my last. Eighty-seven cadaver parts, stitched together to recreate her.

By midnight, she was finished. I cleaned up my station. I cleansed the excess blood from her smooth skin and washed her long brown hair. When she was purified and properly dressed, I looked upon her hand and gently grasped her palm. When I intertwined her fingers with mine and I looked upon her cheeks, I remembered every detail from the night our engagement fifteen years ago. I saw her gleaming cheeks complement her radiant smile when she saw the insignificant diamond. Oh, her hair bounced from her shoulders as she turned around, and her eyes danced with mine. Her pearly blue eyes pranced in the light and the reflection of her joy flowed into my eyes. Oh, her walk, her wonderful stride was of pure elegance; she could have sat in company of goddesses and glowed with equal illumination. Once again, my recollection was interrupted by one of my incompetent peers banging on the door. I closed her away in her capsule and walked out the door to find that Dr. Green wanted to have a chat about my class today. I simply passed his questioning face and entered into my cave just down the hall to hide.

Once again I sunk in my chair only to release the thoughts that boil in my brain. I walked over to my cabinet and poured myself a tall glass of gin with a splash of tonic and returned to my chair. I looked over my papers and documents that were delivered to my door. Entrenched in stacks of papers I glanced to the room’s corner and there upon my fur chair she sat with a look of disgust smeared upon her face. Oh, that look of disgust always brought about the worst fights; but oh how I loved that look.

“Nice glass of liquor, I see. What’s the occasion?” asking when she already knew the answer.

“I finished you,” I said with the biggest grin on my face as I held up my glass in celebration. She folded her arms and laid her feet upon the chest. A similar look of disgust took over her face. The corners of her mouth pursed as her gaze turned cold and distant.

“She is beautiful; just as you were—are.”

Her eyes snapped in the direction of my face.

“It is not living,” she said with a stern voice, “this work has caused your brain to turn into mush. Nothing can replace me.”

I moved over to her and sat on the chest and I grasped her leg, “I did it because I love you”. “Loved,” she said as if to correct my gramma.

“No, darling,” I calmly replied. “With her, I am able to always love you, Adeline.”

She immediately threw her petite, yet strong hand at my face. She got very close to my ear and whispered, “You are a sick man”. She lunged at me again. As my eyes flinched, everything went dark.

Silence. She had vanished.

I woke up with the chest on top of my stomach and my arms wrapped around its sides. The bell rang. I rushed to class. That day I taught my regular classes and waited in nervous excitement for the night to come. After my last student left, I locked the door to the dissection lab. I walked over to my wife’s capsule and opened it with care. I set her stitched body on the table and I held her hand and told her, “She doesn’t approve, my masterpiece”. I looked upon her face and touched her cheek, impeccably
preserved by my carefully placed sutures. I brushed my fingers through her silky hair. I slightly moved her still limbs to perfect orientation. Then I reached my hand into my pocket, pulled out the insignificant diamond, and lifted her hand. It fit perfectly. The sight of our rings together, the faint clinking of the metals soothed me. I asked her quietly, “Do you remember that day?” I told her the story of our wedding, the memory that replays in my mind over and over. I told her of the flowers that decorated the aisle and of her beautiful veil that fell upon her bouncing hair. I told her of every detail that I could remember from that day. I tirelessly told her of everything I loved about her faultless body. Oh, how I loved my masterpiece!

I walked back to my office and right as I walked in, she was there, sitting in my throne. Instead of fighting her, I reclined in the fur chair in the corner, and gazed at her. She sat there, and a single tear dripped down her cheek.

“All she could muster to say, “How could you give it to her, she isn’t real.” I cocked my neck up to the right and gave her a dark and foreboding stare. I told her in a low stern voice, “She is supposed to be you. Except unlike you, she won’t ever pass away. She deserved it.”

She couldn’t see the tireless work I had spent recreating her. She couldn’t see the love I devoted to her after she was gone. That enraged me. At that moment, I knew that my wife was not sitting before me. She was in the capsule.

“I’m going to bring her out into the park, I think she would like the fresh air,” I said.

“I fear you are now a madman,” she said. For the first time, I viewed the women in my throne as appalling. I stormed out of my office and I went to my home, a distant place I hadn’t ventured to in weeks.

The next day I carried myself through the monotonous routine. As class came to an end, I didn’t open her capsule right away. I first went to my office and grabbed the maple chest and brought it into the dissection room. I opened her capsule so she could remember everything, our most sacred possessions of our experiences together. I pulled a white sweater from the chest that she wore on our first dinner. I pulled the sweater close to my face and sniffed the perfume that still lingered within the cotton. I sat her up and dressed her with the sweater. I clothed her legs with the black pants she always wore to her daily workplace. I decorated her feet with her favorite set of stiletto heels. All of my calculations were correct because everything fit her perfectly. She was my masterpiece, my Adeline.

I pulled an envelope from the chest. Within the wrinkled tea-stained envelope was my greatest declaration I have ever made, still to this day.

I read to her, “Adeline, my sweet, you are the light of my life. You fill my life with happiness, and you fill it with love. You continue to surprise me in every way imaginable,” I paused for a moment and caught my breath. I grazed my hand upon her shoulder and continued, “You are always calm when I am chaotic. You always understand when I am angry. You are selfless when I am greedy. We are matched with perfection. I will never desert you and I promise to love you eternally”.

I pressed my lips upon her cheek and a tear from my eyes dropped onto her perfectly crafted face. My trembling hands lifted her body into the spare wheelchair I took from the hospital lobby.

I looked at the clock. It read 5:17 AM. I timed this ceremony perfectly, so that we will be able to finish it with a morning sunrise. I wheeled her through the doors, and I grabbed some hospital blankets. I saw the exit doors and extreme excitement overcame me. The light bouncing off the clear doors illuminated her hands. The light’s glare that tried to block the vision of the trees offered a sense of eternal hope for our bond. As I opened the door and the slight breeze brushed away her golden brown hair, the rising sun beamed upon her skin. I sat her upright on her favorite bench and I allowed her to take in the nature and the glorious sunrise. I held her hand and told her of all the beautiful birds we could hear, and all of the colorful flowers we saw. I told her how much I loved her and how much I always have. I never wanted that moment to end. I wanted to stay in the middle of that memory forever. As my students and colleagues began to arrive I greeted them with genuine salutations. But they didn’t return the gesture; they stood frozen to the ground, staring at her. They must know how beautiful she truly is. As the few people turned into a crowd of admiring onlookers, amongst them I saw her, my wife from my office. This time,
her face was removed, revealing her bony skull. Just how I left her in her grave. Turning back towards my masterpiece, I kissed my true wife’s face, perfectly stitched into her skull. I grinned.
I walk into the darkly lit restaurant, looking around for the person I am supposed to meet. They said they would be here, waiting for me. But then again, why should I trust a dream? The first of the month, for over a year, I have the same dream. It starts with a phone call, a gravelly voice speaking quietly over the phone, so quietly I have to press my other hand close to my ear, afraid I’ll miss a word they say, even though I have memorized these words from the countless times I’ve heard them.

“I am waiting for you. You know where I am.”

Immediately after that, an image flashes across my mind. I’m standing in the entrance to L’ours Noir, a dark smelly place in the lowest part of town. The walls are made of bricks so covered in years of smoke and dirt and grease so thick that you could scrape it off with your fingernail. The floorboards are covered with sawdust, and you must walk down rickety wooden steps that moan in protest when you place your weight on them just to get to the main floor of L’ours Noir. The regulars stare at me from under smoky halos and upturned collars, the glances ranging from predatory to indifference.

“Come,” the voice says, sending shivers down my spine.

“Who.. who are you?” I say, quietly at first. Then, the more times I receive the calls, the louder and more forcefully I scream them, grabbing the phone with both hands and shaking with the frustration, but the only answer I get is the click of the other end hanging up.

Today, I decided I could no longer handle the click, leaving me with too many unanswered questions. I decided to take a risk and find L’ours Noir, and to find the faceless figure who speaks to me. It wasn’t hard to find the tiny little rat’s nest, I have seen the place so many times it was almost like driving to a close friend’s house. I get in the car, and follow my instincts. I don’t think as my gut takes me downtown, into the parts of the city I have always been warned against going. The time it takes me to drive to L’ours Noir leaves the sky dark, but no stars shine, hidden by the lights of the city and the pollution from the cars that drive in it. Without realizing, I pull up to the place that haunts me in my dreams. It starts to drizzle just a bit, a greasy dirty rain that makes you want to scrub your skin off. My car is warm and safe, I am terrified to get out of the car.

I gathered my courage and stepped out of the car. The smell of the lower city almost knocked me over. I wrapped my black coat tighter around me and walked towards the slanting building, boots clicking on the cobblestone beneath me. The front door has the name of the restaurant printed on the front, I ease open the door, wiping my hands on my pants when I’m done.

The inside is just as I imagined, dim lighting halfway blocked out by the smoke. The regulars stare, and I scan the room. I know the person behind that gravelly voice is here, somewhere. There, in the corner of the room, is a man in a black raincoat with the hood up, his face hiding in the shadows of the hood. I carefully and slowly walk over to the man. The rest of the drinkers looked back to their mugs, either uninterested or biding their time.

“I have been waiting,” the man says. His face is still hidden in the shadows of his hood.

“You’re a part of a dream, this place is a part of a dream, it shouldn’t exist,” I forcefully whisper. I don’t dare sit down unless invited. This whole situation has put me on edge, making me jumpy and afraid.

“I miss you,” he looks up, pale lips and slight scuff on his chin and cheeks emerging from the shadows.

“Who are you?” I ask.
“We miss you.”
“I said, who are YOU?”
“Come back to us.”

“WHO ARE YOU!” I shout at the top of my lungs, the people surrounding the area turn towards me, annoyed at my outburst. I look around at them, making sure I haven’t called the attention of some of the dangerous people in *L’ours Noir*, and when I turn back, the man is gone. Swiftly I turn in a circle, looking frantically about for my mystery man. The front door shuts, and I bolt towards the door, hoping I can catch my disappearing nightmare. I jump a chair, my boots ringing out loud and clear on the wooden floorboards, the smoke swirling around me and the gazes of the patrons following my every action. When I reach the front door, I throw it open, but all I see is the starless sky and the flickering street lamp out front. The surrounding buildings are dead for the night, closed signs hanging out front. The man with the pale lips and the dark raincoat is nowhere to be found. My shoulders slump, no longer feeling cold in the greasy rain. Slowly, I turn and walk back inside.

“Give me the best you got,” I say to the bartender, a lady in her mid forties with a tramp stamp and knee high leather boots.

“Y’ ain’t a loon, are yah?” She eyes me skeptically, smeared eyeliner surrounding her tired eyes, trying to conceal her hard life.

“No, ma’am,” I respond politely, “it’s just been a hard day.” I place my wrinkled five down on the dirty counter and watch as the bartender cleans out a cup with her worked hands and pours me a drink.

“Was that man someone you get in here often?” I ask after the first drink loosens the knot in my stomach.

“Who? Darlin’ you walked in here and started talkin’ to an empty seat. That table for two ain’t never full in this joint.”

Her words cut deep to my core, terrifying that maybe I’m dreaming while awake. I glance at the table pushed in the corner and the now empty chair, wondering why. I finish off what my five, which is now safely tucked in between her withered breasts, bought me, and head to the bathroom.

I walk in and check to make sure I’m the only one in the bathroom, then I lock the door just to be safe. I look into the grimy mirror, ignoring the smudges and lipstick prints and sharpie names and numbers covering the bathroom. I run the water cold and splash it across my face, waking myself up and getting rid of the fading alcohol that I attempted to get into my system. I look back into the mirror, a sleepless version of myself staring back. I have work tomorrow, and nobody has fed my dog. He’s probably sleeping on the couch, that ornery pup.

“You gotta stop doing this to yourself,” I mumble. “You don’t have time to chase dreams and fairy tales.” I look back into the mirror, and there stares back, in the corner, in neat handwriting, the words ‘we miss you’. The two events cannot be connected, people write crazy stuff all over the walls all the time, yet there it is, the same three words the man with pale lips spoke to me. Anger boils in me, and I get out my tube of bright red lipstick and write underneath:

‘Tell me who you are.’

I don’t know what I was expecting, but I didn’t get it. Nothing appeared, nothing magically wrote itself on the mirror next my scrawling print, nothing happened. The fluorescent bathroom light flickers and a moth bumps its head on the bulb, and I decide I’ve had enough of this place. I unlock the bathroom and head back out, bumping my hip on the sink as I walk out. I hold what’s left of my dignity crumpled in my hands. My head is held high, but my heart is on the floor, and I leave *L’ours Noir*, deciding I need a long bath when I get home.

My car is in the same spot I left it, and nothing has changed. The rain has stopped, just the oppressing stench of the city is left, a smell I have almost gotten used to. My skin feels tainted and dirty, the chilling fall wind biting at my nose. I look up, hoping to see just a single star, but I am disappointed.

Finally, after a long drive, I come home. I shower and scrub my body, trying to get the smoke out of my hair and the traces of the greasy rain from my skin. The steaming hot water streaks down me, burning tiny little paths across me and filling the bathroom with puffs of vapor. I rinse the soapy suds off of me, and look up. The glass is covered in steam, except for one spot. The same words from the bathroom are
written in the steam:

‘We miss you.’

I stare for a moment, my jaw dropping, and I quickly swipe my hand across the words, but they don’t move. I back away, looking frantically about, as the steam covered glass fills with that phrase, over and over and over again.

‘We miss you.’ ‘WE MISS you.’ ‘We miss YOU.’ ‘WE MISS YOU.’ ‘We miss you.’ ‘WE miss you.’ ‘We miSS YOU.’ ‘WE miss you.’ ‘WE miss you.’ ‘WE MISS YOU.’ ‘We miss you.’

I let out a terrified gasp, grab my towel that was hanging over the edge, and swipe it across the entire mirror. This time, it works, and the words disappear with a single wipe. I stand shivering, the water has run cold as ice.

I shut off the water and step out of the shower, looking for a new towel that isn’t completely drenched. I dry off, wiping the last traces of the inner city from me. I rise, dress, and start heading to bed, when the phone rings. I freeze. It rings a second time. I slowly turn towards it. It rings again. I sprint towards the phone, jumping the couch in the process in my hurry to answer the phone.

“HELLO??” I ask desperately.

“Mommy.”

“Who IS THIS?” I shout at the little girl on the other end of the phone.

“Mommy please come home.”

“I don’t have kids.”

“Mommy we miss you. Daddy misses you. Ben misses you.”

“Why are you doing this to me?”

“Mommy wake up.” The little girl’s voice sounds desperate, pleading. I’m 35, old enough to have a little girl, but I’ve never been able to have them. It is that fact that makes this voice, this little girl, so much crueler to listen to than the gravelly quiet man on the other end. I’m speechless, holding the phone to my ear, listening to this little girl who sounds so familiar. My heart breaks and I just can’t handle this anymore. For the first time, I’m the one to hang up.

Slowly, I move from the counter where my phone was sitting and move to the couch. Ben, my big fluffy puppy, crawls onto the couch next to me, and starts whining. How did the caller know about Ben? Why are the calls starting to come when I’m awake? Why did the little girl beg me to wake up? All these questions swirl around in my head, and Ben just keeps whining, keeps crawling closer to me as if to protect me and comfort me. I grab a soft blanket and throw it over the both of us, and fall asleep curled in a ball on the couch, too exhausted from the events of today to care about going to my own bed.

My dreams are not terrifying like they normally are. I get no phone calls from gruff man. I hear no desperate cries for mommy. Instead, I’m at a picnic. Two children play in the park, kicking a ball back and forth. I’m in a summer dress, and I’m sitting next to a man with a scruffy face and pale lips and kind eyes, looking lovingly at us all with a slight smile upturning the corners of his mouth. We sit on a checkered blanket with mostly eaten sandwiches spread out around us. It all feels so familiar, the faces, the warm summer air blowing my hair around my face, the man sitting next to me reaching for my hand, the kids playing. It feels blissful, and I never want to leave this place, but something about it tells me that it’s not real, that I’m not actually here. Nothing is said in this dream, just the bees buzzing and the birds chirping and the children laughing. Everything is muted and slow, like I’m underwater with the sun shining through. Nothing is spoken until the very end, when the man with the kind eyes and pale lips scooches closer to me, and says one thing.

“Come home to me.” Then he reaches in, caresses my cheek, and gives me a kiss. My eyes flutter shut, and the kiss feels like melted chocolate and smells like home. I don’t have the courage to kiss back.

When my eyes open, I see the pale lipped man in a different light. He is tired looking, his eyes sunken and his hair messy, like he hasn’t had the energy to take care of himself. He’s holding my hand, my hand with a wedding ring and tubes and wires strung up in all directions. I look around, the artificial light hard on my eyes. It smells sterile and the room I am in is too white, and the bed I’m lying in is hard and the blankets scratchy. The children are no longer playing, but a little girl is sitting in a chair holding a doll.
and a little boy is sitting next to her, politely holding the doll’s new dress and comb. I move a bit, but everything is sore. A continuing beeping rings in my ear, and I look back to the man with the pale lips. He looks shocked that I’m awake, and presses a button on the side of my bed. The children look up, and huge smiles cross their faces. The little girl drops her doll and runs to the side of my bed, yelling “MOMMY!”, the same voice from the phone. I look back to the man, and tears well up in his eyes.

He takes my hand tenderly back in his, and leans down to put his forehead on mine. I look at him, and he says three words.

“We missed you.”
Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* is a *New York Times* Notable Book known for its seemingly desolate and depressing story. The novel presents many different opinions on faith, hope, redemption, and salvation as its main focal points, and many times in a contradictory fashion. Faith and hope would be two things expected to be absent in the barren, post apocalyptic setting throughout the man and his son’s journey, but the book includes these themes as cornerstones of the entire story. McCarthy’s main goal with this novel is to prove the natural place the intersection between faith and doubt holds in our society which he shows through the child’s resounding hope and his father’s questioning and reinforces his characters’ deeper meanings with the religious allusions throughout.

The boy and his father represent much more than simply the protagonists along their long winded journey. The boy constantly forces the man to appear optimistic, even in the most utter despair. The boy’s faith and hope for something good to come is the fuel for the man to carry on even as ill as he is. For example, one cold night, the narrator reveals the complex details of the characters’ relationship. “They slept huddled together in the rank quilts in the dark and the cold. He held the boy close to him. So thin. My heart, he said. My heart. But he knew that if he were a good father still it might well be as she had said. That the boy was all that stood between him and death” (29). Upon deeper examination, this realization is not just about paternal instincts but rather another underscore of the impact of the boy’s faith on his father. This has been noted by other scholars like Susan J. Tyburski in her journal article. She notices the religious undertones to the boy’s character when examining the beginning of the book, “In *The Road*, "the lingering scent of divinity" can be found in the man's son. The man's first instinct, when he wakes, is to reach out and touch the boy, to make sure he is still breathing. He is reassured when he feels "each precious breath" (3), and counts "each frail breath in the blackness" (12)” (Tyburski, 125). Tyburski sees the man’s care for his son as a kind of acknowledgement of the child’s hope and its empowering nature.

Later, the father even suggests some holiness to his son when speaking with an old man on the road. The old man is stunned to see a child in this desolate landscape and the father says, “What if I said that he’s a god?” (172). Seemingly unclear in its meaning, this line is definitely referring to his son’s resounding hope and faith in good; the father reveals some belief of a force of divinity within the boy. Tyburski also recognizes the spirituality of the boy in regards to his father when she says, “...throughout the novel, the boy serves as a moral and spiritual touchstone” (Tyburski, 125). This scholar acknowledges the deeper meaning of the boy’s character, how he is a symbol for hope and faith throughout the story. Finally, in the end the boy’s survival and new companionship seems to be a reward for all his hope along the way; hope that was absent within the father.

Along these lines, the father’s attitude and actions resemble doubt or some kind of greater uncertainty. He frequently questions the existence of God and his eventual death is highly symbolic of what the Christian faith believes happens to those who do not recognize a God. The man struggles with the complexity of faith McCarthy suggests exists. Erik J. Wielenberg has eloquently summed up the man’s internal conflict and McCarthy’s greater message when he says, “The man's predicament illustrates the following paradox. Great suffering appears to constitute evidence against the existence of a loving God, but it also has the capacity to produce or strengthen belief in such a God. It is when we suffer that we most need belief in a loving God to keep ourselves going” (Wielenberg, 3). This concisely represents
what McCarthy is suggesting throughout the novel with the man’s doubt.

An example from the story of the man’s questioning is when the father and his son run into a man on the side of the road and they begin talking about death. The old man asks him, “How would you know if you were the last man on Earth?” (169). He replies, “I don’t guess you would know it. You’d just be it” (170). The conversation continues until the old man says, “I guess God would know it. Is that it?” (170) and the father replies, “There is no God” (170) to which the old man retorts “There is no God and we are his prophets” (170). This exchange reveals the lack of belief alluded to throughout the father’s journey. His faith becomes increasingly fleeting and finally he admits he believes this to be a Godless world.

Wielenberg also notes the religiosity of the man’s doubtful mindset when he draws connections between Job from the Bible and the father in The Road, “On an earlier occasion, kneeling Job-like in ashes (Job 2:8), the man expresses doubt about God’s existence: ”Are you there? ... Will I see you at the last?” Like the man, Job goes about "in sunless gloom" (Job 30:28); unlike the man, Job possesses unwavering faith: "I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth ... then in my flesh I shall see God" (Job 19:2)" (Wielenberg, 3). This examination again alludes to hints of divinity with the man’s spiritual questions.

The religious motifs throughout also suggest there is some middle ground between complete belief and natural doubt. These symbols are usually given through either the man or the boy in junction with their greater symbolism. Near starvation, the boy and the man stumble upon a farmhouse that they stay in and eventually the man finds an apple orchard. “He’d stepped on something...it was an apple...hard and brown and shrieveled” (120). This apple alludes to the Garden of Eden from the bible, but this apple is not clean and crisp. The man stumbles upon a rotten apple because of his dwindling belief in God.

In comparison, later on on their journey, the pair runs into an abandoned bunker stocked with food. The boy was with the father when they found these necessities, not just the father alone. To reinforce this, before eating one morning the boy says grace. He says, “Dear people, thank you for all this food and stuff. We know that you saved it for yourself and if you were here we wouldnt eat it no matter how hungry we were and we’re sorry that you didnt get to eat it and we hope that you’re safe in heaven with God” (146). This completely resembles how Christians bless their food and thank God before eating, a custom the boy thinks to initiate, not the father. Tyburski also recognizes the religious allusions with the characters as she studies the symbol of light in connection to the boy. She notices, “As the man lies dying, the boy brings his father a cup of water. As the boy approaches, the man sees "light all about him." When the boy moves away, "the light move[s] with him” (233). The recurring images of breath, light and fire suggest the Holy Spirit, which has been described as "the breath of God" (Gen. 2.7, 7.22), and as the tongues of fire appearing on Pentecost (Acts 2.1-4)” (Tyburski, 126). This reinforces the idea that McCarthy uses religious allusions to suggest divinity within the boy.

This novel at first glance would appear to be absent of faith in such a seemingly Godless world, but upon further examination, faith and hope abound through the son’s character. He forces his father to try to appear positive and ingrain an optimistic outlook in his son’s brain to help shield him from the atrocious world they now live in. At the same time, doubt battles back as the father appears weak in private and denounces the Godless world they live in. The ending ultimately reinforces these symbols through the son’s salvation and his father’s demise. This story is one of both faith and doubt and the natural place they have amongst each other in this world of uncertainty.

Works Cited
Three figures made their way through the woods on a quiet night. Moonlight trickled through the canopy and threw their shadows on the ground littered with dead leaves. A boy and a girl, no older than fifteen, led a shaggy sheepdog between the trees. The silence was broken momentarily by an owl calling out into the darkness. The girl pulled back the sleeve of her sweater and examined her wristwatch, straining her eyes in the dim light.

“Oh, God,” she whispered, “It’s already two-thirty in the morning.”

“Mom and Dad are gonna kill us,” the boy moaned.

They stopped walking and leaned against a tree, surveying their surroundings. All they could see in every direction were tall, thin aspens, their white bark reflecting the pale moonlight eerily as if they were a horde of silent ghosts. As they continued on their way it seemed that they were straying much too far from home. Hope seemed lost deep within this maze of a forest and it didn’t seem to want to be found.

After what the two assumed had been hours of wandering, they stumbled abruptly upon a decrepit shack. It looked as if the building had grown straight out of the earth. The exterior was smothered in moss and the roof was pocked with holes where shingles had fallen out. The largest hole, however, was occupied by a curvy tree that grew straight out of the hut. They glanced at each other and crept toward it with trepidation rising inside of them.

Trying the door handle, they found it was locked. To solve the problem, they found a rotten log and slammed it against the door. It gave way easily and flew to the side, banging into the wall and sending what seemed like decades of caked dirt crumbling to the ground. What they saw made them paralyzed with fear. A human skeleton lay on a grimy wood floor, impaled by a red-stained spike made of a translucent black mineral.

The boy noticed something clutched in the corpse’s left hand and slowly inched closer to investigate. He edged around the tree and knelted over to inspect the skeletal hand. He struggled to wrench back the bony fingers and retrieved a piece of paper. After unfolding it, he skimmed his eyes over the letters and his heart began to beat much faster.

“What is it?” the girl asked, still standing in the doorway.

The boy turned the parchment shakily towards her to reveal the message in dark red:

If you are reading this, it’s too late

She opened her mouth to say something but she was interrupted by a noise. Faint crunches and crackles filled the surrounding forest, as if leaves were being stepped on underfoot.

“What was that?” the girl asked. “Where’s Baxter?”

The boy hastily strode over to the entrance and scoured the trees for their dog.

“I don’t see him,” he said, his tone anxious.

Then a small light flared up twenty paces from where they were standing. The light burned inside of an old lantern that was held by a stooped figure. More lights appeared in a circle around the shack, each of them inside of lanterns and held by shadowed figures. The two teenagers heard a dog’s whimper before the lights went out.
After five months and three days at sea, you’d think that the whirring of machines and the flood of artificial light would be something you’d get used to. That, along with the cramped crew quarters and bland color scheme, is enough to drive most people to the brink of insanity. However a crew member going insane was absolutely unheard of; the feds had made sure of that. Harsh training and impossible standards had weeded out the ones who could pose any possibility of failure, which was very necessary for the importance of our mission.

We were five hundred meters below the Baltic Sea, one hundred kilometers off the coast of St. Petersburg, and just barely out of the sight of the Soviet Union. Our mission was to intercept any messages that were to go between the USSR and the Iron Curtain and report any movement of troops or missiles to the powers at be. Tensions had been tight ever since the Reds invaded West Berlin, some, including the feds, thought this to be a prerequisite of a third world war. If the sleeping giant were to make a move, we would know about it.

I started my days like most, rolling over in the impossibly cramped hole that was my bunk, longingly through tired eyes at the small photograph of my wife, Jenny, which was pinned up on a small piece of cork wedged between the wall and my bunk. Although the photo was in shades of grey, you could still feel her piercing blue eyes boring into me, hear her goofy laugh, and see her hair fall down in a mess that she pretended not to care about. It was one of the only pictures that I had of her because she viewed the camera as a sworn enemy, but I had insisted before I left for training that I needed something to remember her by. I missed her.

The clang of metal against metal tore me from my reverie. The morning bell had rung, and it was time for breakfast. I jumped out of bed, still fully in uniform from the midnight watch shift, and staggered a bit to the side from the void in my stomach.

Fighting through my exhaustion, I staggered toward the bulkhead. I grasped the cold metal wheel and turned it. The creaking of rusted metal groaned on until the final clank at the end signaled that the lock had been disengaged. I pushed through the bulkhead to the scent of stale air. The cramped corridor ahead led directly to the galley, and to yet another rationed meal of “Slop Surprise.”

The marathon trek toward the galley was filled with hunger pains which made every step an accomplishment. Eventually, I staggered through the open bulkhead into the galley. My nostrils were instantly repulsed by the smell of wet dog that came with the disgusting steam, and I was overcome by nausea. My fellow submariners were crowded around several small tables with hardly enough room to move their elbows. Their eyes were hollow, and a few were starting to show signs of bone poking through their malnourished skin. This was the captain’s fault. He had insisted that we had enough food when we made our stop in London. “We don’t need help from the Brits,” he would say, “Didn’t need it before, won’t need it now.” Thanks to him, we were forced to ration out our last few sacks of rice to make some sort of porridge known affectionately by the crew as “Slop Surprise.”

Although the captain forced us into this predicament, most still respected him for the great man that he was. He was the best of us, both mentally and physically strong and able to solve almost any problem that the drillers back in our training days could come up with. The captain and I were roommates at the academy, and we soon were deployed together onto this sub, where we worked our way up the ranks.
This wasn’t our first voyage: I had already gotten used to the captain’s harsh ways, but I still knew him as the man he was in training.

I glanced toward the table where the captain usually sat, but in his place was only an empty table and a folded napkin, which was very unusual. I lined up near the serving window behind my exhausted crewmates.

“Hey Jones,” I said rather weakly to the man in front of me, the hunger was getting to me. “Ready for another round of slop?”

Jones turned and gave a tired smile, “As long as it fills the black hole that is my stomach; that’s all that matters.” We placed our trays on the serving counter in front of us, and Jones served a ladle’s worth of slop for both of us. We found a few open seats by the sloped metal wall at the side of the cramped room.

“So,” I started as we sat down across from each other, “Have you seen Ol’ Cap around lately?”

“I can’t say I have,” replied Jones, sticking a spoon into the slop on his tray and stirring it nervously. “I heard from my bunkmate that he was feeling sick. He said that the Cap excused himself from dinner last night a bit after you left for drills.” Whatever he was sick with, it must have been bad for the captain to excuse himself. In training we learned to never let our crewmates see us sick or in a poor mental state; it was bad for morale, which would be the kiss of death for our mission.

I dug into my slop, and the soothing feel of hot, flavorless porridge in my stomach soothed my nausea. We needed to make a stop soon; otherwise, we probably wouldn’t last another month. I had been telling the captain this for weeks, but he had a feeling that something was coming. Nobody here knew what that something was, whether it was a Soviet secret waiting to be revealed or a massive move on allied territory. So here we stayed, running low on food and morale.

One of the crew members marched his way to our table. It was Augustus Brown, the ship’s recordkeeper and doctor. He looked worried, with lines creasing his forehead and replacing the usual formal expression in which he was usually in a constant state. He stopped about a foot from the table and saluted. “Sir,” he stated formally, waiting for permission to deliver the remainder of his message.

“Yes, Brown?” I replied, lacking the energy to handle protocol.

He scowled at the lack of formality, but continued nonetheless, “I’d like to report that three crew members haven’t reported to their watch shifts that began at o-six hundred. The ship’s water desalinators and the lights on subdeck C are in need of maintenance, and we are already understaffed.”

I tried to cut the worried man some slack, “I’m sure they’re fine, Brown, they’re probably just tired and have slept past the bell like almost all of us want to.”

Brown glared at me through hollow eyes, “I have another theory, however.”

I raised an eyebrow in curiosity, “And what might that be?”

“Sir,” Brown started, “One of the three crew members missing, I believe his name was Duncan Wilson, was scheduled to check on the captain in his quarters, as you probably know the captain wasn’t feeling well at dinner last night and had to excuse himself from the room to his quarters.” This was apparently true, but I wondered how this could be connected to the other two crew members. Wilson was well known around the sub, though. He was a nice guy, very helpful and always fun to have around during boring maintenance and was a real joker during meals. Brown continued, “The other two crew members were close friends of this first man, and would likely go after him if he didn’t report back later that night.”

“Quite a wild theory, if you ask me,” I replied skeptically, and Jones nodded in agreement. Although I seemed calm, it was just more of my training kicking in. I was beginning to feel worry lines develop on my own forehead. No matter the case, we still needed to find the missing crew. They couldn’t have gone far because we were, in fact, enclosed in a submarine. I sighed, “You have my authorization to search and retrieve the missing crew. Once they are found, I expect them to report to me for a much-needed explanation.”

Brown gave a wicked smile and his eyes bulged in his skull, “Sir, yessir!” After that he turned on his heel and marched off toward the captain’s quarters; he must have been retracing Wilson’s steps.

“That guy’s too uptight,” Jones sighed, “Always following protocol to-a-T, it’s like he never left training.” As a first mate, I was obligated to follow all protocol as well and to expect others to do the same. However, after being at sea for so long, I had quickly lost track of any sense of formality.
As we both settled back down to our slop, a scream followed by the sound of three gunshots echoed through the galley. The sailors froze in place, some dropping their slop right onto the galley floor. I jumped up and immediately started barking orders, “I need a team up there now! Bring the first aid kit and something to apprehend the gunman with!” One by one the men came to their senses, immediately dropping their food and gathering kitchen knives, bandages, and the first aid kit mounted on the wall. We didn’t have much to work with for an active shooter situation because, being a submarine crew, none of us were armed. None of us, except for the captain.

Realization swept through my body like a riptide. How could the captain have done this? Was it even the captain, or did someone take his gun from him? A frantic group of around ten volunteers haphazardly organized themselves in a line in front of me, all of which were carrying knives on their belts. The man closest to me, who I recognized as John Miller, whom I presumed to be the self-appointed leader of the operation saluted and stated between shaky breaths, “Sir, we are ready to move on the captain’s quarters to pursue the gunman.”

I ran my eyes along the faces of each man lined up before me, knowing that I would be asking them to run into a very dangerous situation. We still had an active shooter loose in the sub, so I gave the order, “You have my authorization to find and apprehend the shooter,” my voice cracked as I added, “No matter who he may be.” If it was the captain that shot the doctor, and maybe even the other three sailors, then we needed to take the most drastic measures to ensure the safety of the sub’s crew and the mission that we were tasked with. Doubt lined my voice, “If you are unable to restrain the shooter, you are ordered to neutralize him. The rest of you,” I turned to speak to the remaining crowd in the galley, “Ensure that all crewmembers on watch shifts and in their bunks are safe and in no danger. Dismissed.”

A grim look crossed the volunteers’ faces as they realized that one of them would have to commit a murder today, but every one of these brave few held strong to their duty and turned to jog down the halls in the direction that Brown had gone just a few minutes ago.

I turned towards Jones, who was sorting through the first aid kit to find anything usable if someone needed to be treated for gunshot wounds. “Jones, I need you to come with me to provide some backup for the crew, as well as become a first responder to anyone who could get shot.” Jones nodded grimly in my direction and slung the first aid kit over his shoulder. I turned to the counter where some knives had been laid out by a few of the crew members and grabbed one for myself. We then turned toward the bulkhead and followed the line of volunteers toward the captain’s quarters.

I could feel my heart pounding in my chest as we bounded down the metal corridor. We hadn’t heard any signs of a struggle or any more gunshots, which must have been a good sign. We rounded a corner, and proceeded upward on a flight of stairs. We were halfway through the bulkhead at the top when we heard the first shot, followed by the collective battlecry of the soldiers. We rounded yet another corner and saw a gruesome scene before us. My ears stung with the battle cry of the volunteers and my nose detected the smell of death in the air: blood and death, two scents that were never welcome to pierce one’s senses. The fluorescent light flickered weakly on the ceiling, leaving the scene cast in shadow. In the darkness, I could make out two bodies that were slumped against the wall just outside of the bulkhead that led to the captain’s quarters. Another, which appeared to be that of Wilson, was sprawled out over the floor, blood pooling under the corpse, coloring the cold metal floors. Jones launched into action from behind me, almost knocking me off of my feet. He kneeled down by the fallen sailor to check his vitals. I rushed past him to the group of volunteers that were now banging on the captain’s bulkhead and followed the line of volunteers toward the captain’s quarters.

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They were shouting to each other, “He’s in there! He’s with the captain!” I was horrified, could the captain have pulled a volunteer into his quarters? Why were there no more shots being fired?

“Men,” I shouted over the uproar, “Are we able to breach the bulkhead?”

Recognizing my presence, the crew stopped the banging and turned to face me. A deafening chorus of voices all fought at once for my attention, “It’s Miller! It’s John!”

“The captain is going to kill him!”

“We can’t get through!”

The eyes of the volunteers were wide with terror.
And then a single shot rang out and echoed through the corridor. The men whipped around to face the bulkhead, which began to slowly creak open, revealing what had taken place in that room. Miller was laying on the ground, bloody and limp. A second body, probably one of the missing crew members, was slumped against the back wall and was completely mutilated beyond recognition. The walls behind the corpse were painted with blood splatters and the floor around it was occupied by a pool of blood. My eyes traveled to the bed, and I could feel myself begin to tremble in shock, fear, and anger at what I saw. The captain was lying face up in his bed, and pressed against his face was a pillow. My jaw dropped and my brain turned to mush.

If that wasn’t enough to drive me to the point of cowering in the corner in fear and confusion, the man who stood above the bodies, the man who held the smoking gun, the man who had a crazed and insane smile on his face, sent a shiver down my spine. Standing in the center of the room, his head bowed and the gun still pointing at Miller’s lifeless body, was Brown. Brown, the rule follower. Brown, the professional. Brown, a friend whether we knew it or not. Brown, a murderer.

He threw his head back in a wicked laugh, a horrifying grin stretching from ear-to-ear across his blood-caked face.

Brown nearly collapsed from the parasitic insanity that was leeching his very being. His knees were buckled and terrifying laughter was expelled from deep within his gut as a precedent to a spell of vomiting.

He looked up from his grotesque scene and screeched frantically, faster than his mouth could handle, “I did it! I did it! I did it!”

I tried to approach him, but Brown then pointed the gun at me with shaky hands. Through uncontrolled giggles he continued, “I had to kill him! He knew! You all had to know! I did it! I did it! He looked for them!” he gestured frantically with his gun and pointed it at whatever was left of the mutilated corpse at the back of the room.

BANG!

The corpse quivered and more blood erupted from the entry wound, spraying a fine mist in the air.

BANG! BANG! BANG!

Brown unloaded three more shots: one into the corpse, one into the captain, and a final one into Miller. He then shoved the tired sidearm into his own mouth and squeezed a wink from his bloodshot eyes as his finger curled around the trigger.

BANG!

Brown’s lifeless body dropped to the floor beside his victims. I turned to face the crew, which was in just as much of a stupor as I was. Their faces were pale and frozen with fear. The first one to scream was quickly joined by the rest of the crew. One man ran off, emptying his stomach further down the hall.

“Men,” I said quietly, my voice lost in the panic that had ensued from this grotesque scene.

I raised my voice to a scream. “Men!”

The crew turned to face me; their faces vacillated between anger, despair, and confusion. Once quiet had consumed the room, I took a deep breath and managed to tell them what they wanted to hear, what I wanted to hear: “We’re going home.” I didn’t know what that would entail, but it was what I think we all wanted. Our mission was over, whether the feds liked it or not.
You never know what you have
Until it's gone
Until you see the strong turn weak
Until you see pride turn to helplessness
Until you see the strictness melt like ice in the desperate summer light
In its place blooms the kindness you never knew

You never know what you have
Until it’s gone
Until you see your father cry, tears of a broken man
Until the doctors join the family, accompanied by grief cloaked in white
Until strangers who are family come to stay forever
Out of fear of the disappearing time

You never know what you have
Until it’s gone
Until you spend every day finding unmade memories
Until you try to prevail strong, to not cry
Until you struggle to salvage the relationship
That might have come if you weren’t so blind

You never know what you have
Until it’s gone
Until you think to yourself it’s just one day
Until that one day is the last day
Until your selfishness is the cause
Of the regret you now live with, a squatter in your heart

I never knew what I had
Until he was gone.
my hair bleeds purple when i sleep
dark, violet, translucent in the way that sausage fat boiling on the pan is before it touches a towel
in the way that a ghost’s imprint is before fingerprints are left on the kitchen counter
in the way that black bodies are before they find themselves in front of the barrel of a gun
before they become that ghost
before the pus leaking from the wound touches a tshirt a hood the towel they are wrapped up in before
reaching the stretcher and they are dead meat, sold by link, five bullets per pound, fifteen bullets per pound, twenty-three bullets per pound. to save money on hospital bills the medics pronounce them dead
to prevent the wasting of money on someone who would’ve died / been left anyways they are pronounced dead

maybe if i were in the absence of color my hair wouldn't bleed, it would drip, straight down, following the lines, rivulets of clear water down my locks.
clear as my conscious as i tell myself that i am not a racist that my were parents were / are clear as my reflection in
the water i see myself and i can smile will not have to change myself to fit the image of a black pariah in america

i use coconut oil in my kinky hair because it makes me feel at home.
when it freezes into the hard shell of itself that can only be soothed with the warm pulse of a human hand
i see myself
there is no harm that comes from coconut oil, but its opponent dark & lovely deep conditioner is its antithesis, it makes me bleed
store brand, average, bought when my pockets were too empty to search for the solace of the barest, the best, coconut itself

they repackage what i know, they call it original, make me smile with a cardboard cutout black face on the label
remove the sense from my head as i reach to the shelf
forgetting the black-owned businesses that exist, that they need me, that i need them
i empty my pockets out for you and you make me bleed because the money i spent on your white product takes away from what i could’ve put in communities that would help quell the bullets that would bandage the wound / that would keep us alive / but i chose the alternative
and as it makes me bleed i

remember how purple used to be my favorite color
until it wasn’t
how royalty is dressed in fine robes of that hue, the shade tantalizing
but there are no more queens in my country
my color has already been assigned to me, black, the absence of light, and because purple is just a
refraction of the sun in a prism holding a multitude of colors within itself, it is no wonder that i do not
partake in its equiption
i have not lived here long enough to know where the creaks in the floorboards lay
or the places the arches in my feet should never touch,
i stubbed my toe once-
not within the walls of my home though, so i guess i am safe from harm,
i don't sneak out
often.
i am a perfect child. straight as only the best i can offer.
i get distracted,
enthralled in mysteries in the midst of discovering why the projectile motion of a rocket is split into two components, all
storybooks, poetry.
simple simplicity is not my forte- give me something i can play with, grow, mold until into the shape of my body, influence until you hear my voice when it speaks, when it opens itself out to you and says here i am.
i write about floorboards because they are the only thing that keeps me grounded in this home.
my door is locked and parents ask, why? but i have no audacity to tell them that when a human looms suddenly, subtly in the depths of a miniature hallway, it is only a precautionary method and an irrational one at that.
plus, i just hate that my want for privacy is deflected. rejected. overly anticipated and exploited.

wood on the floor does its best to replicate my skin like no other pearl has tried- failed to do
The guiding question in my life has always been governed by the fine line between exclusion and acceptance in predominantly white spaces: Do I belong?
As a black woman, I will face criticism for certain aspects of my identity which cannot be changed. This experience is one with which I must become comfortable in order to exist in conjunction to a world that sees blackness as an attack upon normalcy. Though I could choose to simply sit back and lounge in this realization with a Solange album or two, I find it more constructive to choose an alternative, and question that question—particularly within the realm of science fiction.
In my senior project, I pose the same inquiry which Mark Dery, in his 1994 text, *Black to the Future*, dared to present: Why is the presence of black characters in science fiction so often plagued by the doubt of anything more than representation in the form of two-dimensional characters and plotlines? Can black characters in science fiction literature have relatable plotlines? Do they belong? And how does a black narrative influenced by Afrofuturist thought present itself in the predominantly white genre of science fiction?
Drawn from the movement of the 1990’s--because everything wonderful came out of the 90s era--Afrofuturism incorporates numerous complex ideas. A distinct piece is tied to the reclamation of black bodies in the future, while another elaborates upon what realities black folks can interpret for themselves in a space bounded by no concept other than human imagination. It refuses the idea of packaging and placing identities in a box, while simultaneously refusing to ignore trials of the past, expanding far into mixed media such as hip-hop, literature, science, and film. A common thread in the theory contends that as the trend now follows, it is critical to reflect on the past prior to approaching a nuanced analyzation of the future. Science fiction is a lens by which we can analyze politics of the present.
Identity politics have recently become central to my understanding of the world, given that I am black, a woman, and non-heterosexual. These identities tend to conflict with one another because the era we live in suggests that the norm is the opposite--white, male, and straight. As I am pushed into different corners of predetermined success by my parents, it is no coincidence that in order to follow the American Dream, I must place myself within the necessary boxes in order to succeed. Following each attempt, it is common for a loss of identity to occur in the process. In the frame of Afrofuturism, it is clear the rejection of blackness is not one to be sought after, rather, the embrace of change.
I am gifted enough to get the opportunity to explore this concept further as a part of my senior project, and I intend to analyze the text of Mark Dery and other black writers who have centralized the black thought and future as a part of their work. Hopefully, the production of a novel of my own will become the endpoint I achieve. Within the insulated walls of Afrofuturism, I can find out where it is I belong, and discover that which can easily morph into the present if one waits long enough.
“Thirteen killed, and dozens more injured,” announced the morning news reporter on Channel Five. If at once these words had affected me, they now simply float by, disregarded and ignored. Every morning starts with a new shooting, a new terror attack, a new suicide, and frankly, I couldn’t care less. In the current world we are living in, it’s often challenging to appreciate the good in humanity, and the blessing that is human life. It perplexed me how those who walk down the street with a smile on their face can stay positive in our ever so downscaling society. Self centered and narcissistic, I remained in my own isolated world encompassed of me, myself, and I, that is, until I saw him. I remember him. I remember his screams, his struggle, his fight. Yelling out in despair, with his voice occasionally breaking beneath the pressure of his pain. I even remember the torn blue jeans, and old grey hoodie he was wearing. I remember the hands of the officers grasping him, and forcefully pulling him down away from the infamous international orange rim. I remember the bystanders who stopped and stared, and those who simply passed by without a glance in his direction. Most of all, I remember his face. Sunken, tired, and worn out. Yet, his bright blue eyes still shone through the pain. I remember this man, and yet, I don’t even know his name.

It was the summer of twenty-fifteen. My mother and I sat on the second level of our double decker tour bus, overlooking the breathtaking views of San Francisco. I had always been fascinated by this city. It possessed a feeling like none other: isolated, even trapped. A depressing grey with a faint mist defined the mornings, followed by a glimpse of sun at noon, then eventually, it always returned back to the fog at dusk. That was San Francisco. It seemed as if the city was stuck in a time loop, nowhere to go, and nowhere to escape, simply frozen.

It was the early gloom of the morning. As the bus drove further down the road, a cool misty breeze from the bay began to linger in the air. Miniscule pellets of rain sharply flew at me, piercing my skin upon contact, keeping me alert, and fueling my anticipation for what awaits me. After what seemed like an interminable stretch of time, my eye caught a faint glimpse of color peeking through the heavy blanket of grey clouds, there stood the Golden Gate Bridge. Suddenly, the gloomy muted grey sky changed to a bright white canvas. We were no longer observing the fog from a distance, instead, it had consumed us. A small bump jolted the bus as we made it onto the bridge. I had been dreaming of this moment for years, and now, it was all too real. Pure joy rang throughout my entire body and I couldn’t contain my excitement. As we progressed, the powerful mist grew even stronger, and the breeze blew colder. I was left gasping for air, and holding my breath for as long as I could. But, I didn’t dare look away for one second. It was seemingly perfect.

In the faint distance I heard a muted scream. At first, I thought my mind was playing tricks on me, but then I turned my head to the other side of the road. It was him. His miserable unshaven face and young eyes started back at me. Defeated and broken, he vigorously thrashed his arms and body around, trying to break free from the officers hold. Robbed of his will to live, his only goal was to jump. Shock is all I could perceive. I had just seen a man almost kill himself. The crowd of people that formed around him began to dissipate, and cars continued to move. Our tour guide followed his script, “Alrighty folks, here we have San Francisco’s famous stunner, the Golden Gate Bridge,” he said, hardly even noticing that there was any disturbance.

Birds kept on soaring, happily chirping above the bay. The world was still revolving. Yet I sat there.
Frozen.
I will always remember this man. And I will forever remember the lesson that he unintentionally taught me. Jailed in the bright white clouds surrounding the bridge, I gained a new appreciation for something other than myself. Perhaps the inescapable loop that San Francisco is placed in was meant to lock me in until I learned. And now, a new person, I’ve been released back into society. Now, I walk alongside those who I feared and avoided in times before. I walk through life attempting to salvage and enjoy every moment possible, for who knows how much time we have left.
I think of this man as an older brother whom I’ve lost, and I refuse to lose any more loved ones. Every man, woman, and child, regardless of race, religion or sexuality has a right to life. And this precious life must be appreciated.
Thank you.
I will remember you.
Always.
Prank Wars

SCENE 1
Mom: IVY!! IVY!! Come say goodbye!
Ivy: Sorry mom! Bye.
Mom: Have fun at the new school. Make some friends.
Ivy: Okay. Wait what about Sunny?
(picks up the dog)
Mom: Honey we have to leave her home.
Ivy: Alone?!
Mom: You’re not homeschooled anymore. No one will be home and you can’t take her to school.
Ivy: Yes I can. She’ll be my emotional stability pet.
(puts dog down)
Mom: Nice try. Maybe she can stay in your dad’s office?
Ivy: At the power plant? No way! Remember when we went to that Thomas Rhett concert? We had to leave her with dad. She escaped the office, drank some methane and got really sick!
Mom: I remember. I guess we leave her home then.
Ivy: I guess you’re right. Well I love you.
Mom: I love you too sweetheart.
(Mom kisses her on the forehead. Ivy gets on her bike and starts to make her way to school.)

SCENE 2
Cat: Um, Bianca? Wake up.
Karen: You said to meet you at 7:15 for carpool.

SCENE 3
(Biana comes out of a huge walk-in closet. Cat and Karen stare at the pillow and stare at Bianca.)
Bianca: Well let’s go.
(They walk out of the bedroom.)
SCENE 3
(Biana is driving her pink convertible with Karen in the passenger seat and Cat in the back. Ivy is riding her bike to school.)
Bianca, Cat, Karen:
(singing out of tune)
And the Jay-Z song was on. And the Jay-Z song was on. So I put my hands up their playin’ my song th-
(Ivy crashes into Bianca’s car on the bike. She falls off her bike. No damage is caused to the car.)
Bianca: Whoa! Hey!
Ivy: Sorry. I thought you were stopping.
Karen: You should be sorry!
Bianca: Shut. Up. Karen. This car is worth more than that Lindsay Lohan’s entire net worth.
Ivy: I really didn’t mean to. Hey at least no damage right?
(She is back on the bike by now and pedals away.)
Cat: Jeez, blue collars, right?
Karen: Let’s just go we’ll be late.

SCENE 4
(The students are in science class. Chad staring hard at Ivy, almost creepily.)
Teacher: Now you’ll need to memorize the periodic table of elements by next month. So let’s go over them. Hydrogen, Helium, Oxygen, Boron, Carbon, Copper, Gold, Silver…
(Teacher keeps going on while across the room Ivy notices the staring and is weirded out.)
Ivy: Um, do I know you?
(snapped out of his daze)
Ivy: Okay well you look like you’re staring at me and It’s kinda freaking me out.
Chad: You? No. I was staring at um, uh, the, the... car…outside of window.
Ivy: Okay.
Teacher: Mercury, Magnesium, Nickel, Sulfur, Tin, Tungsten, Xenon. I actually had an opportunity to work with xenon but then my cat died and I was heart broken so I turned down the offer. Then, when I was ready to work again the position was filled and now I make minimum wage at this dump. Anyway back to science. Fluoride…
Ivy: Seriously stop staring at me!
Chad: I wasn’t!
Ivy: There is no car outside!
Chad: I just think you’re pretty!
Teacher: Ivy? Chad? Do you have something to share with the class?
Ivy: Um no he just- No.
Chad: Sorry.
Teacher: Ivy, detention.
Ivy: Great.
Chad: What’s your name?
Ivy: Ivy.
SCENE 5
(Ivy walks into the cafeteria looking for a place to sit. Chad crosses to her.)
Chad: Hey, you’re Ivy right?
Ivy: Hey, you got me detention right?
Chad: That was an accident. I was flying by the seat of my pants.
Ivy: I thought grown boys didn’t have accidents involving their pants.
Chad: Look I didn’t come over here to argue. I was just gonna ask if you wanted to sit at my table because your new and you don’t know anybody.
(Avalon enters the cafeteria.)
Avalon: Hey
Ivy: Um hi.
Avalon: You’re new right? I’m Avalon.
Ivy: I’m Ivy. Can I help you?
Avalon: I was just wondering if you were sitting with anyone.
Ivy: Well, no.
Avalon: Sit by me.
Ivy: Okay.
Avalon: You’re new and clueless. I try to take fresh meat like yourself under my wing. Unless of course, you start to annoy me. In that case I toss ‘em to the curb. But I’ve got a good feeling about you.
SCENE 6
(Chad sits down at a table with Levi, Jacob, Cat, Karen, and Bianca. Bianca is agitated)
Bianca: So who were you talking to?
Chad: Oh, nobody. It was a boring conversation.
Bianca: It didn’t look boring. It actually looked really interesting.
Chad: I was just settling something with Ivy?
Bianca: Whose Ivy?
Levi: Jealous much?
Karen: Shut up, Levi.
Chad: Ivy is a girl in honors science.
Bianca: Do you like her?
Chad: Pssh. No. If anything she was coming on to me.
Bianca: That’s all I need to know. Cat, Karen, after school we’re going swimming.

SCENE 7
(Cat, Karen, and Bianca arrive at Bianca’s house. They are in the pool. Bianca is on a big gaudy raft. Cat and Karen are in the water.)
Bianca: Girls as you know Chad and I are in the process of developing a romantic relationship.
Cat: I thought he said he never wanted to date you because you’re bossy and high maintenance. And you couldn’t carry on a conversation without talking about shoes or makeup.
Bianca: Nevertheless(beat) our relationship is being threatened by that new girl.
Karen: Ivy?
Bianca: Yes. And we have to do something to ensure she doesn't ruin our happiness.
Cat: We could write an anonymous note and put it in her locker.
Bianca: Too passive aggressive.
Karen: What if we tell her school was shut down because all the teachers went on strike!
Bianca: No! Gosh Karen why are you so stupid.
(long pause)
Bianca: I’ve got it! We’ll prank her! She’ll be so embarrassed she won’t show her face to Chad again!
Cat: Bianca you’re so creative!
Bianca: Actually, I got it from a video on instagram.

SCENE 8
(It is the next day at school. Avalon and Ivy sit at a table together in the cafe-nasium. Bianca, Cat, and Karen watch suspiciously from a nearby table giggling like freaks.)
Passerbye: Ew. Take a shower weirdo.
(Ivy breathes on her hand and sniffs it to check her breath then shrugs.)
Avalon: Ivy do you smell that?
Ivy: Yeah, I don’t think it’s me though - I put deodorant on today.
Avalon: Do you still have it.
Ivy: My deodorant?
Avalon: Yeah.
Ivy: Yeah.
Avalon: Can I see it?
(Ivy pulls out the container and hands it to her. Avalon opens it, gives it a sniff, and winces.)
Yuck. Ivy that’s cream cheese.
Ivy: What? Lemme see.
(She takes it from Avalon.)
Aw, gross. She must have taken it from my gym locker.
(Bianca walks over. Cat and Karen are right behind her.)
Bianca: Hey girls. Having a little snack? I hear cream cheese is good with ritz crackers.
(All the girls laugh and walk away.)
Avalon: Can you believe her? She has the nerve to put cream cheese in your-Ugh, it makes me so-Ugh!
Ivy: Why would she do that. I don’t even know her.
Avalon: We have to get her back.
Ivy: What?
Avalon: We don’t know why she did it to you but she’ll know why we did it to her!
Ivy: You’re crazy.
Avalon: Crazy for wanting to stick it to the man? Crazy for wanting justice? C’mon Ivy for once we’ll show the giants, the cool kids that we won’t be stomped on. We will not let them say what’s in or out, what’s geeky of ‘hip’. We will stand up and we’ll have the last word.

Ivy: What the heck, I need something to do after school anyway. I’m in!

Avalon: So here’s what we’re gonna do.

SCENE 9
(The students are all gathered in the cafe-nasium for an assembly. It is the next day. The teacher has a microphone.)

Teacher: Welcome students. It’s that time of the year again- The election! Now we will be having candidates speak for freshman and sophomore class presidents and student body president. Now remember no slandering other candidates. First up Mandy Crisc for freshman class president.

(Applause. While Mandy gives her speech Avalon and Ivy whisper.)

Ivy: I don’t feel good about this. Maybe we shouldn’t do this.

Avalon: No! I was here till seven last night rigging that bucket of water to fall on her. Do you know how many times I had to test that thing? A lot. You’re not backing down now. Besides Bianca is next. There isn’t enough time to fix it.

Ivy: Why did I agree to this?

Mandy: In conclusion I’d like to say a few words from a very wise leader of our country.

Crowd member: Build a wall?

Mandy: “Ask not what your country can do for you but what can do for your country.” Thank you.

(Light applause.)

Teacher: Next up Bianca Harris for sophomore class president.

Bianca: Hello all. It feels so good to give back to those less fortunate, doesn’t it? That’s why I’m here today. To give to those less fortunate than I and let’s face it, who isn’t, less fortunate than I. I would like to give to the school, to the community, and to you. Now I promise to fight for you and-

(Just then a bucket of water tips and splashes down on Bianca. She slips on the water and falls. She can’t get up because she will slip. All the students laugh except Karen and Cat.)

Ahh! Help! Help!

Karen: Bianca!

(Bianca rushes to Bianca’s rescue but slips and falls. All the student are still laughing and some are videoing.)

Bianca: Chad! Help!

Cat: Oh, guys!

(Cat tries to help but also falls on her butt.)

Ivy: (to Avalon) Okay that did feel pretty good.

SCENE 10
(School bell rings. Outside school Ivy and Avalon walk.)

Ivy: I guess I’ll see you tomorrow Av.

Avalon: Kay, don’t forget about the basketball game Friday night. Five o’clock!

(Ivy’s bike is completely dismantled. Bianca walks out of school.)

Ivy: Avalon wait!

Avalon: What is it?

(Avalon notices the bike.)

Is that yours?

Ivy: Yep.

(Avalon starts to run at Bianca.)

Ivy: Avalon no!

(Ivy grabs her wrist and holds her back.)

Bianca: Oh, hey girls! Wow what a mess!

Ivy: Why did you- How did you do this?

Bianca: I know a guy. Funny story, he also cuts my hair.
Avalon: Well tell him to do a better job I can still see the bugs crawling out!
(Chad walks out of the school. He watches the girls, confused.)
Bianca: I’d love to stay but I have a nail appointment at 3:40 and they give away your spot if you’re late.
Chow!
Avalon: Oh, I’ll give you something to chew on!
Ivy: Avalon, how am I going to fix this?
Avalon: Ivy, I really wish I could help but I’m late for soccer practice. (yelled) Ask somebody who’s in shop class!
Chad: Ivy, is that your bike?
Ivy: Used to be.
Chad: Call me crazy but I think I can fix this.
Ivy: Seriously?
Chad: Yeah but I need the right tools. We’ll have to go to my uncle's house.
Ivy: Okay. How do we get it there?
Chad: I’ll have to call my uncle. He can come pick us up and put the part in the bed of his truck.
Ivy: Okay. I guess it’s a good plan.
Chad: Cool, I’ll call him.
(Chad pulls a flip phone and starts dialing.)
Hi uncle Eugene. Ugh, I told you not to call me chaddy boy. Don’t call me laddy, chaddy either. No I’m not Chad at you- I mean mad at you. You can’t punish me your not my chad- I mean dad. Ugh, I’ll just text you.

SCENE 11
(The team is warming up on the court. The cheerleaders are on the sidelines, including Bianca.)
Avalon: Hmm… where should we sit?
Ivy: Looks like those two spots are out only options. And I’d rather sit by Cat and Karen than Mr. Green.
Avalon: Alright.
(They sit down.)
So did you get a new bike?
Ivy: No, actually Chad fixed it.
(Avalon chokes on her coca cola drink and spit a bit on the person in front of her.)
Avalon: Chad?
Ivy: Yeah. He saw me and my bike and offered to help. We took the parts to his uncle Eugene’s and fixed it together.
Avalon(laughing): His uncle Eugene? Haha. So what’s our next move?
Ivy: Huh?
Avalon: (whispers)What prank do we pull on Bianca next?
Ivy: None. I’m done.
Avalon: Why?
Ivy: Its mean?
Avalon: So is Bianca.
Ivy: Exactly. I’m not Bianca. I’m not mean. I don’t want revenge. Now, can we just watch the game?
Avalon: Fine.
Cat: Coach really needs to buy the team some new uniforms. It looks like Levi got midget mikey’s shorts from last season. Oh no.
Karen: Don’t pick up that ball! Don't bend over!
Crowd: Oh!
(additional shrieks and ews come from individual members of the crowd.)
Karen: The one boy who doesn’t wear compression shorts.

SCENE 12
(The girls are in the school gym for P.E. All the girls are in their gym shorts and t-shirts except for Bianca.)
Coach Liz: Alright you over privileged, over tanned teens lets run some laps. Gimme two around the court. Wait. Bianca, where are your gym clothes?
Bianca: I can’t play today coach.
Coach Liz: Why not?
Bianca: I may have fractured my wrist.
Coach Liz: Running doesn’t involve your wrist. Tell you what, I’ll go into my office and get my brace while you change.
Bianca: Okay. Wait I just lost a contact!
(He starts crawling on the ground looking for it.)
Coach Liz: Get off the ground and go change!
Bianca: But-
Coach Liz: NOW!
(He comes out with her gym clothes on and her legs are green.)
Ivy: (to Avalon) What did you do?
Avalon: I went solo and put dye in her pool.
Avalon: Avalon, that’s like, a felony. You need to stop.
Avalon: Okay this was my last prank.
SCENE 13
(Students are having a dance in the gym for homecoming. There are decorations, food, and pictures. Avalon and Ivy enter.)
Ivy: Now there won’t be any pranks at this dance will there?
Avalon: No, I know it was wrong.
Ivy: Good. I’m going to get some punch. Want anything?
Avalon: I’m good.
(Ivy walks to the punch bowl where Bianca and her friends dance nearby.)
Ivy: Bianca? Can I talk to you?
Bianca: Ugh, Hang on girls. What do you want? Are you going to steal my friends now, my name, my house?
Ivy: No, um I don’t even know what your saying. I just wanted to apologize for dumping water on you in front of the school.
Bianca: Thanks. Now are going to apologize for dying my legs green?
Ivy: Believe it or not that was Avalon who did that. But what did I steal from you?
Bianca: Chad!
Ivy: I’m so confused? He didn’t say you were dating?
Bianca: We were. Well, not exactly. But we were this close to. Then you came along.
Ivy: I didn’t like Chad.
Bianca: Then why did you talk to him so much?
Ivy: I know you won’t believe me but I never started the conversation. I was being polite.
Bianca: Oh.
Ivy: Is that why you pranked me?
Bianca: Yeah. But a lot of good that did. I thought you would get the message and back down but you didn’t. You fought back, and you’re pranks were way more funny than mine.
Ivy: Well the cream cheese was pretty genius. I’m willing to forgive if you are. Maybe we could be friends too.
Bianca: No, I’m good. But thanks for apologizing. The prank war is officially ended.
(They shake hands and smile.)with green legs and her gym clothes. Everyone is laughing.)
Ivy: (to Avalon) What did you do?
Avalon: Wake up.
Karen: You said to meet you at 7:15 for carpool.
Bianca: Relax- I’m ready.

THE END
i dream/i am
Poetry

David H Hickman High School
Columbia, MO
Teacher: Nancy White

i dream of being a painter, a fawn-haired man with hands stained blue.
i would paint foamy oceans,
misty forests,
green fields,
afternoons at the florist.
 my paintings would be bright but my eyes brighter,
 how i dream i were a painter.
i dream of being a singer, a dark-haired bloke with lips sweet pink.
i would sing of deep despair,
piling lies,
beautiful girls,
green eyes.
 my songs would be low but my voice lower,
 how i dream i were a singer.
i dream of being a runner, a golden-haired fellow with skin sun freckled.
i would run for cool breezes,
dry lips,
long legs,
lean hips.
 my pace would be quick but my laugh quicker,
 how i dream i were a runner.
i am a writer, a messy-haired boy with cuticles torn red.
i write my poems spaced,
my stories lined,
my essays rambling,
scrape up what i can find.
 my under-eyes dark but the ink stained darker,
 i am a writer.
cole could see no color at all.
many times in his life after telling people this, they’d find themselves in a conversation at a later point
in time in which they’d let the name of a color slip from their lips, as in:
    my brother bought this awesome yellow car.
or,
    my dear aunt charlotte just dyed her hair the prettiest shade of red.
and often,
    isn’t the sky such an interesting orange this evening?
    if they knew cole well enough to know that those words held no value to him at all, they may widen
their eyes a bit in fear of seeming insensitive to the young man who saw no color.
    but cole would just smile and nod, encouraging them to carry on with their story, or he would chuckle
in gentle amusement and change the subject merrily.
    cole knew shades of black, white, and grey, and since that’s all he’d ever known, he never felt
particularly sad about not being able to see the world in hues and tints that everyone lived in but him.
    he was content living in newspaper print.

cole thought that if his violin could play a color, it’d play green.
    he didn’t know what green looked like, not at all; he knew the word, knew it was a color, but it was
physically impossible for cole to imagine what green could possibly look like on the grass, on the leaves,
surrounding him in nature like everyone told him it did.
    no, he only knew green from the sounds that his violin cried out underneath his flighty fingertips.
    he heard green like a baby cooing, like unstoppable giggles bouncing past the babies lips and filling the
air with joy, simple and innocent.
    he heard it like a cold shower early in the morning, full of shivers and fingers gripping flesh to keep
body heat in while tiredness flows out, soap and slick tile and the sun barely casting white rays through
the small window in his apartment bathroom.
    he heard it like he heard the boy’s voice, lower than his own and airier, like he had just run a flight of
stairs or seen something so amazing that he had just spent a long time tripping over his words to try and
express how truly fantastic the sight was.
    cole knew before he saw the boy that he would be green.

he stepped into a practice room, one with a piano crammed into one corner and the boy in another.
    he was talking to someone, and when he saw cole standing in the doorway with large eyes and his hand
gripping the neck of his violin tightly he lulled in his conversation.
    the person he was talking to turned to look at cole too, but he didn’t notice.
    all he could focus on was the boy’s eyes.
impossibly bright and painfully new, cole saw something that sent a shock through his spine and caused
his breath to hitch in his throat.
    what color are your eyes?
cole asked.
the boy cocked his head to the side a bit, squinting slightly in confusion.
cole wanted to reach over and pull his eyelids back from the squint so he could see his irises in full view again; he never wanted to stop looking.
  green,
the boy answered finally.
  my eyes are green.
cole let out a breath he didn't realize he was holding.
  yeah,
  he agreed.
  green.
and he smiled at the boy so widely that he couldn't help but smile back.
Eden Kurr
Grade 12

feeling all blue
Poetry

Blue Valley Northwest High School
Overland Park, KS
Teacher: Chris LaValley

The ceiling fan is spinning and I try to follow it but it makes me dizzy so I close my eyes and lay on my bed and listen to the throbbing pulse that knocks on my eyelids and thumps inside my skull and I can’t sleep it’s dark but I can’t sleep.

My mother says I have a bad habit of chewing my lips and when I was younger I chewed them when I was nervous and now I just chew them all the time and they aren’t even lips anymore they’re scabbed and raw and it hurts to eat so I don’t.

I don’t go to school anymore they think it’s not safe for someone like me to be among all those people and I don’t know what that means because even though I’ve thought about hurting them I wouldn’t actually do it but my mother told me to stay home and besides I have nothing to shoot them with.

I’ve lost a lot of weight and it’s only been three months since I’ve been home and I’m already down thirty pounds I’m only 113 now I used to be 143 and for some reason I like that I lost exactly thirty pounds in three months that’s ten pounds a month and it satisfies the longing for order in my mind.

My favorite color is red not regular red but deep dark red the color that creeps down my nostrils when I have my nosebleeds with the cold tingling sensation that starts in the back of my throat and runs down my philtrum and pools on my outstretched tongue

I looked in the mirror today and I saw a ghost something standing where I should have been something thin and frail eating itself something bony and sharp and strangely beautiful in a fragile way because of my jutting collarbones and defined ribs and long thin legs that quiver when I stand.

Today was a long day since my mother wants me to go back to school and so she was doing paperwork to sign me up for the next school year and she made me sign my name on everything but I haven’t written in so long that I can’t really write so I just scribbled a line instead.

I keep dreaming the dreams where I go back to school and I hurt people and I don’t actually mind them at all they make me feel better I’m just scared that someone will look into my brain while I’m sleeping and they’ll see all of the blood and they’ll send me back to the hospital and I don’t wanna go back.

Tomorrow is my first day back at school and my mother is making me eat too much and making me wear stiff new clothes that I don’t want to wear and is packing my bag for me as if I’m going far away and I don’t want to go I don’t want to go.

I am sitting in the lunch room and no one has even noticed that I’m here and I feel like a ghost maybe I am a ghost maybe I died a long time ago and that’s why not even the teachers have acknowledged me even the office lady stared only at my mother who was weeping.
It is my third day back at school and for the first time someone sat down next to me at lunch he stuck out his hand and asked me my name and I mumbled it and he asked me again and I wouldn’t tell him because I don’t like my name so he just decided to call me “kid.”

The boy’s name is Antonio and he is taller than me and fatter than me and smarter than me but it’s okay because he has a soft smile that makes me feel calm for some reason and when he talks his voice seems to crawl into my ears and burrow into my brain and I like it.

Antonio never eats lunch and neither do I we just sit in the very middle of the lunch room where no one else wants to sit because it’s so far from the cafeteria but I don’t mind and neither does Antonio because after all we don’t eat to begin with.

Today I woke up and I wasn’t sure what was going on everything was spinning and it was scary and I couldn’t tell which way was up or down or left or right so I tried to go back to my bed but I fell because everything was spinning and it was scary.

Antonio asked me if he could meet my family and I started to cry and I haven’t cried in a long time and he put his hand on my shoulder and I kept crying and I didn’t want him touching me I didn’t want him touching me but I couldn’t speak because I was crying too much.

My mother wants me to try driving again so I am going to get into the car and sit in the driver’s seat and buckle my seatbelt and focus on the road not on anything else and I will start to cry and not be able to see and will crash the car and I will die and I will finally be happy.

I feel like nothing is left just a shell of me and something my mother used to say is looping in my mind she used to say she felt blue and that’s what I feel I feel blue I feel blue and it’s never going to stop so I am going to take a drive.

“Wait, we have a briefing today? Who could have guessed? This is totally out of the blue,” Cass sarcastically remarked as the shuttle’s A.I., Andromeda, scanned me.

“You’ve made that joke everyday for the past three weeks and-”

“It’s still funny, I know,” he interrupted as Andromeda began his scan. No matter what, Cass was always joking. It wasn’t out of character for him to crack a joke during our rigorous conditioning in the Terra simulator or make an awful pun in the middle of our Earth History class, the exam for which I still can’t believe he passed. He even had a smile on his face as we left Mars behind us approximately 154 Terra days ago.

“Commanders Apollo and Cassini on Deck,” the A.I. announced as the deck’s metallic doors retracted into the wall and we entered. Stepping onto the Flight Deck, which was full of pilots and technicians, always left me feeling a little less intelligent. They talked back and forth, relaying diagnostics, transmissions, and coordinates, filling the room with an educated buzz. The sound of the instruments and the shuttle itself added to the noise. At the far end of the room, in front of the main console, was a huge pane of silica spreading across the entire wall, through which the sun glared harshly against the darkness of space. A small point, growing bigger on the horizon, was our final destination, Earth.

“Andromeda, is Cassini’s joke still funny?” I asked with a smirk to Cass.

“I do not feel as though I should get involved, Commander Apollo,” she stated diplomatically.

“Come on, An, it won’t hurt his feelings too much to learn he has no sense of humor,” Cass flinched as my hand clapped the back of his head.

“Attention!” Our banter was cut off by a sharp command that snapped us into a stiff and ready position.

“Captain Soyuz on Deck.” I’m convinced Andromeda’s announcement came late on purpose. The echoing voice belonged to a tall, dark skinned woman, her coarse black hair pulled tightly into a perfect bun. The seamless charcoal uniform made her look as though she had come straight from a piece of military propaganda, not from the military itself, let alone a captain's position. But she was, in fact, a captain, and she was good at it too. She was the person who could silence a room by simply entering it. I should have been warned of her approach by the quiet that had fallen upon deck. Only the equipment dared speak against her.

“Deck, as you were.” With a simple command, the buzz recommenced as if nothing had happened.

“You two are Commanders and will one day be Captains of a Terrestrial Colony. You will be among the first Terrestrials in over 20,000 Terra years. Act like it,” Her voice was steady and firm, with just enough anger to lodge her words into your throat and stomach. “Follow me.” We did as we were told and accompanied her into the polycarbonate elevator that would take us to her office, which sat above the Flight Deck. Andromeda began scanning the captain the second she stepped into the lift.

“Commanders Apollo and Cassini do not have authorization to-” Andromeda began as we entered the elevator.

“Authorization override, Soyuz, Theta,” the commander interrupted.
“Authorization override confirmed.” With that, the elevator doors closed and we rose above the deck and through the floor of the Captain’s office, which had seemed to be composed of the same metal that made up the rest of the ship, but now melted into a clear view of the deck below. The far wall was just a continuation of the window from the Flight Deck. A large jet black desk sat facing the elevator and away from the window, with a mass of holographic files neatly stacked near its edge. With a wave of the captain’s hand, they disappeared.

“Have a seat,” she directed as she walked around the desk and sat in her command chair. We sat in a pair of uncomfortable metal chairs that faced her desk as she stared at us with a mixture of what seemed like hope and worry, masked by her steely gaze. It was as if she were reading us, scrutinizing every tiny DNA molecule for some hidden meaning, a clue among the base pairs. She broke her inspection after what seemed like hours, but in hindsight was only a lapse of a few seconds. “Four days until we land. Are you nervous?”

Such a personal question startled me. I looked toward Cass, whose carefree features were on guard. “Are we nervous, Captain?” He ventured after a few minutes of expectant and awkward silence. “Oh, good, you can talk. Your lack of sarcastic comments had me concerned for a moment, Commander. That was indeed my question. So, are you?” We continued to sit in silence, not knowing quite how to respond. “Boys, it’s alright to be nervous. You lead the recolonization of a wild planet in a little under 96 hours, it’s only natural to be afraid.” We still sat in fearful quiet, neither of us brave enough to attempt an answer, yet anxious to leave her question unanswered for too long. Was it a trick question? Were we supposed to be good soldiers and say we weren’t afraid? Her voice frightened me, “Apollo, how old are you?”

“8 years old, Captain,” That I knew how to answer. “What have you been taught about Martian time, Apollo?” Apparently I didn’t know the answer after all. “Martian time is irrelevant, Captain. Sorry, Captain. I am around 17 Terra years old, Captain.” “Cassini, what about you?” She asked. “18 Terra years old, Captain,” He replied matter-of-factly. Her face seemed to age before us. She stood from her command chair and walked to the clear wall behind her, looking out onto the ever expanding emptiness of space.

“If you lived on Earth 10,000 Terra years ago, you would be worrying about going away to college, not to another planet. This is a big transition, a step into the unknown, and I want to know how you’re holding up. Both of you.” For the first time, I looked beyond her and into the darkness broken by small stars, a large sun, and speck that would soon be my home. The rays of the sun looked strange and nearly god-like. They reminded me of how small I really was, how far away from home I was. I felt like the void of space began to reflect itself in me, pulling air from my chest into its vacuum making it harder to breath. I looked away.

“If I may speak freely, Captain,” I was surprised by the waver I heard in Cass’ voice. Soyuz nodded, “I’m terrified, Captain.” “You don’t show it, Commander.” “I can’t. My men rely on me. My planet relies on me. I have to be calm in the presence of danger. I have to laugh in the face of death, Captain,” Cass explained. I couldn’t help but look at him, shocked. It seemed I was looking at a different person, like my best friend had just taken off a mask showing that he wasn’t actually Cass at all. He felt the change too, looking down to his nervous, bouncing knee and avoiding my eyes. I looked to the Captain who was looking at Cass with a small smile. This was the hope that she had hid in her eyes earlier. Those eyes then turned to me, her smile lingering only a second, yet her expression and voice didn’t harden when it left.

“What about you, Apollo?”

“I guess I haven’t dwelled on it, Captain. I feel it in the back of my mind, you know, the fear of it all, the enormity of the mission. But I can’t reside in it. I am as prepared as I can be for what comes next, so all that’s left to do is face whatever it is when it comes.” I lied. I wasn’t prepared at all. In that moment I felt as if I were a child again on Mars, pretending to be the Commander of a Colony. Maybe that’s all I
really was, a child pretending to be a Commander. The smile returned on my captain’s face, less disguised than before. She stood looking at the both of us again, but this time her eyes didn’t search. She thought she could see all that was hidden. She thought all of the secrets had been unearthed from our code, from every fiber of our beings, and she was happy with what she’d found.

“I’m proud of you. The things you have to worry about, the things you’re about to face, they shouldn’t be yours to bear. 4 days. That’s all the time you have to get your men to the mindsets you’re in. They know what to do for nearly every situation. There’s nothing left to train them for physically, and while there will be a few procedural practices you’ll have to run, there isn’t anything else I can help you with. From now until we land, you’ll have to train them to be mentally prepared for whatever happens. I trust that, as their peers and their Captains, you will be successful.”

“Captains?” Cass and I spoke together, looking at our Captain in hesitant excitement and shrouded anxiety.

“You heard right. Captain Apollo, Captain Cassini, good luck.” She stood and saluted us. We stood, returning the respect. “Your authorization will be expanded and I will have to brief you more on protocol later, but for now, go to your crew and start prep for our arrival on Earth.”

“Yes, Captain. Thank you, Captain,” We thanked her several times as we left for the elevator, and once safely inside and traveling toward the deck, I looked over at Cass.

“Captain,” he nodded dramatically, his smirk reappearing as if to comfort me.

“Captain,” I nodded back. As we exited the elevator, Andromeda announced us.

“Captains Apollo and Cassini on Deck.” The room went quiet and all stood at attention. I looked around them and suddenly felt the weight of the title, and of my mission, fall onto my shoulders. I felt the rush of oxygen back into the void of space that had settled into my body and instinctively looked to my partner.

“As you were,” Cass directed. He looked like he had felt the weight, too. It hardened him a little as he addressed the room, which went back to its business at his command. However, he quickly recovered, looking over at me and winking before turning on his heel to exit, his head held high. I followed.

“Captain Cassini, it’s got a nice ring to it, doesn’t it?”

He was right, it did. It fit him. He was a captain I would follow. I felt like the title hung loosely around me. Like when a son tries on his father’s shoes, it didn’t seem to fit. After all, what more was I than a child pretending.
Abby Land
Grade 12

The Fear and Love of Being Stuck
Short Story

West Plains High School
West Plains, MO
Teacher: Nancy Spoor

“If I knew then what I know now, then I wouldn’t have been so worried about high school or what I wanted to be when I grew up or anything pointless like that. After all, what’s the point of dreaming when reality could never be so kind? If I would have known that my life would stop at thirteen then I certainly wouldn’t have worried as much. I don’t know what was worse, my father and brother’s deaths or knowing that I wouldn’t be allowed to grieve for them. Worst of all was that I would have to watch my mother die every day year after year for them. It’s not that bad, I guess. I mean she came around after a year or two, but I never trusted that she wouldn’t go back to being an empty shell. So I took up the cross so to speak and ‘laid down my life’. The world left me behind and took my hopes with it. Is that what you want me to say?”

“I want you to say what you need to say.” The counselor glanced at me over her glasses as she jotted down my dismal narrative. She sat with an air of pity and judgement that she tried to conceal.

“There’s really nothing to say. It is what it is. Am I a little bummed that I’m stuck in Smalltown, USA? Yeah. But at least I have my mom back. And my friends. So while it does suck that I’m stuck here, it could be worse, I guess,” I shrugged, reclining in a soft rolling chair in the Ellensburg High counselor’s office.

“Lynn, do you know why you’re here today?”

“Because I got out of bed and walked here?” I couldn’t help the smart reply.

“One of your teachers contacted me and told me that you seem to have stopped trying in her class and on her assignments and she’s worried for you,” she responded with the concerned tone that she seemed to paint on every sentence.

“Well, you try juggling two jobs and school and see if you don’t start to fall behind.”

“I don’t think that’s the case here. You’ve taken the minimum amount of hours and the lowest level of classes required to graduate, yet your test results are perfect and you could easily qualify for any class or college you wanted. The only thing is, I don’t see you putting forth the effort. So what’s stopping you?”

“Let’s be real for a second. I’m not going to college, I’m not leaving this town, and when mom, when she passes, I’ll get the family business and work there until I die too. Why stress about a future that won’t happen? Answer me that,” my tone rose and my arms crossed. The counselor noted it.

“Your mother would want you to do what you love. She wants the best for you.”

“She also wanted that for Zander and Dad. She wanted them to be here. We don’t get what we want. We get the hand we’re dealt and this is mine. I’ve come to terms with it. It’s not my fault that other people haven’t,” I stated. I kept my voice level that time and continued to thank the poor woman for her time. Picking up my bag, I left the office and headed home. I couldn’t believe I had to ask off work for that.

As I walked the sidewalks of the downtown shopping district I noticed all of the old buildings. They had been here for a century, at least, yet I felt as if I could have been there to see them being built. Soon my father’s, now my mother’s, and one day my bakery came into view, its little windows glowing against the purple light of evening. I stopped as I felt a stone hit the bottom of my stomach. It had been falling for some time now, and usually avoided landing. But I couldn’t postpone its arrival any longer. I was going to be stuck here forever. Perhaps it was the emotional probing of the counselor that weakened me to the idea, because it seemed suddenly more than I could bear. As I edged closer to the brick building I felt a
pull the other way. It was like I was walking toward my fate and my only chance to escape it was now. I paused again at the crosswalk, though no cars stopped me from passing. I straightened my shoulders. No. This is my fate and I need to accept it. It is what it is. I strode defiantly toward the bakery, toward the rest of my life. I opened the door, ringing the small brass bell fixed to the frame. The sound was louder and more final than usual. My mother’s smile, small and weak poked above the counter reminding me of the purpose of my destiny. My bag soon rested on the stairs in the back that lead up to our loft. And there it sat, unnoticed and unimportant, as I donned my apron and a smile.

We talked as we cleaned, Mom asking about school and friends and I about crowds and customers. “How’s Jensen doing in Olympia?” she asked while bagging unsold loaves of bread. “Fine, I guess,” I replied shortly. “I bet college is keeping him busy,” she added. “Yeah, he hardly gets time to come down.” The remark came out more bitterly than I had hoped, yet was still not as harsh as it had sounded in my head. “You can’t blame him for leaving, hun. Maybe next year you should go up with him.” She didn’t say it with any weight, but when her eyes darted to me I knew that she didn’t mean it. She had to offer, I guess. “No, no, I like it here. I don’t think college life would suit me anyway.” I dismissed the comment casually, shoving the voice in my head that begged me to go even further into the shadows. Her posture relaxed while mine stiffened.

“You know, your dad went to college. He wanted to be an accountant, of all things,” she laughed, her voice wavering. I looked up to see her looking back at me, her eyes soft and glazed. “You can go. He would have wanted you to.” A tear rolled down her pale cheek. “I want to stay here, okay? I’m not going to leave you alone,” I started. “Don’t worry about me, don’t let me get in the way of-” “I’m not leaving, Mom.” My stern voice cut her off. She put her head back down in her work. I focused again on sweeping and turning chairs onto tables. She walked silently passed me like a cold ghost, making me shudder. She placed the bread outside on the welcome mat for a volunteer to pick up and take to the homeless shelter down the street. That had been Dad’s idea. She locked the door, almost sadly. Perhaps I had imagined the reluctance. Perhaps she felt as if she were locking herself in with the memories. I almost wished she had left it unlocked and had forgotten to turn the open sign to closed. At least she wasn’t alone.

The steps creaked under the weight of our worlds as we trudged up to our apartment. We said our goodnights before turning into our rooms. I dropped into my bed, kicking off my shoes and switching off the lights. The darkness charged forward with a muffled, sorrowful battle cry. “Today we have gathered here to celebrate two beautiful lights, extinguished from this world too soon.”

*Buzz Buzz* A text alert stopped the somber tone in my head. Do you have the math lesson from today? I may have left all of my stuff in my locker XD I typed my reply to her quickly and stared at the screen in desperate anticipation. “Jonathan Michael Smith and Zander Julius Smith were take from us in a terrible accident, but do not worry. These souls now sit at the hand of our Father, far from the pain of-”

*Buzz Buzz* She was the real angel. The small talk interrupted the eulogy until sleep decided it would be kind enough to welcome me. Even then my dreams were peppered with their faces and stained with tears that leaked into reality and onto my pillow.
I was woken up by the harsh morning sun cutting a line through my blinds and across my face. I still had a few minutes until my alarm went off, but I got up anyway. After changing, pulling up my hair which seemed to always be hanging in my face, fiery red and begging for attention, and brushing my teeth, I made my way down to the bakery for a quick bite of breakfast. One of the perks of living above your family’s bakery, besides the constant smell of freshly baked bread which, unlike other smells, never gets old, was the fact that you always had a warm scone waiting for you. I kissed my mother on the head as she kneaded bread dough, her forehead already coated in flour. As I took a bite of my breakfast I politely pushed past the line of customers and out the door. My day would start at the library today where the most ambitious of Ellensburg would be going to take their ACT. I was there to work the counter while the librarians kept an eye on the testers. I would sharpen pencils, supply calculators, and check out books until about noon when I would return to the bakery to help with the lunch rush. A restful Saturday, I know. As twelve o’clock rolled around and I headed out of the cold, musty library, I saw a face I hadn’t intended to see.

“Jensen?”

“Surprise!” I ran up to hug the tall, lanky figure that I’d missed so much and began to regret the trash I had talked the night before.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were coming?”

“The point of a surprise is that you don’t know it’s gonna happen,” he smirked. He regained his balance, set down the coffee in his hands, and wrapped me in a warm embrace. “I’ve got the whole weekend to do whatever you want, but we can’t do anything if you won’t let me go,” he laughed. I let him go, apologizing as he handed me my favorite french roast. We talked under the clear blue sky as the leaves fell around us. The cool breeze seemed to laugh through the trees instead of its usual hiss. The busy bakery came into sight too soon.

“Hey, so I told Mom that I’d help her out today. You don’t mind do you?” I asked, clutching my cup of coffee and glancing up at him.

“Why would I? This just means I get to spend more time with Joanne. She’s the real reason I drove down here. Your mom and I are super tight, you know.” His smile was so comforting. I had kept myself pretty busy with work and hadn’t seen much of Robin either. It was nice to just walk with someone. Even the silence felt full. We reached the bakery and waded through the lunch rush. My mom looked up, a smile spreading across her face.

“Just in time! Grab an apron, both of you. We’ve got a big order.”

“Nice to see you too, Jo,” he grinned, grabbing an apron off of the wall and rolling up his sleeves. It was strange how his presence changed the bakery from dismal to fun. The kitchen soon filled with laughter and smiles spread across all of the faces in the store. He was a people person. He fed off of the energy in the room, spreading joy with a flash of his white smile. It wasn’t a fake joy either, you could see the happiness in his eyes and the way they seemed to shine. The day went by quickly and soon only a lone customer sat in the corner surfing the WiFi and eating a muffin.

“You kids can go on out if you want, I think I’ve got things under control here,” my mom leaned against the counter, flour covering almost every inch of her face making her look like some Victorian Era queen.

“Are you sure, Jo? We don’t mind,” Jensen asked, making the mistake of wiping his forehead leaving a streak of white across his face.

“You don’t think I can handle it?” Mom joked. Jensen threw up his hands and walked to the sink. I followed suit and soon we were flour free and heading out the door with a bag of doughnut holes. We walked along the streets, passing shoppers and people wasting the day like we were. We came to a bench where we stopped to watch the passersby and eat. He talked about classes and how crazy his professors were, about the lake where he and his friends had been the weekend before, and how the college was in driving distance of all the best parks. We made plans to visit those. Then he asked the question I had been hoping to avoid.

“Where are you gonna go next year?” He looked on at the people and then down at me expectantly, like he thought I’d have a big scheme drawn up will all of my options on it.
“I think I’ll probably just stay around here and help Mom out with the shop,” I nodded, taking a drink as if this wasn’t a touchy subject.

“Like a break year? That’s cool. You know, you should come up to Olympia some day, check out the campus, meet some of my friends. I think you’d really like it. It beats this small town.”

“What’s wrong with Ellensburg?” I defended. Don’t get me wrong, I agreed wholeheartedly that any town was better than this one, but I didn’t like it coming from him.

“Nothing, nothing. It’s just, don’t you have the feeling that you want to see more than these streets everyday?” He looked at me in a softly questioning way that I didn’t appreciate.

“No, why would I?” I snapped.

“Is everything alright, Lynn?”

“Well, it would be if everyone would mind their own business and quit trying to get me out of here,” I huffed.

“No one’s trying to get you out of here, I just don’t want you to regret closing a door like this. Think of all of the opportunities you’ll be snubbing.”

“Maybe there aren’t any opportunities for me, okay? I’m not like you, I can’t pick up and leave just because I want to go to college. I have my mom to worry about, I have me to worry about.”

“Wait, what do you mean you have you to worry about?” Jensen caught my slip, “Is everything okay?”

“No, alright, no. I can’t even turn out the lights at night without freaking out. How am I supposed to go to college when I can’t allow myself any free time because I’m afraid to let myself sit and think? I’d be going alone, I wouldn’t have Mom to take care of to make me feel like I’m doing anything,” A tear punctuated my rant. We sat in silence for a while.

“The whole point of college is to better yourself, so you’d be doing something. But all this stuff about being alone, why haven’t you talked to anyone about it?” He asked. The people in passing became background noise as he looked worriedly into my eyes. He looked like he felt he had failed.

“Because if I tell someone then it means that it’s real,” I sniffed.

“Well, now that it’s real, we can deal with it. Your mom and I, we can help you. You say that you don’t want to be alone, but living with this and not telling anyone seems pretty lonely to me.” He was right, as usual. I leaned onto his shoulder and cried. I let myself cry into him as he held me. The town seemed to melt away. The cards I had been dealt were changing, my hand had been shuffled, and for the first time, I didn’t feel so stuck.
“Man it is really windy outside!” Mom yelled over the wind, while my ice cream cone flew out of my hand. In an instant there was a flash of light and the whole town of New Orleans was covered in smoke and ash.

I wake up to the sound of beeping noises and fading voices in the background. Everything was blurry at first but when my vision came back I am laying on what feels like a stiff hospital bed. I feel like, “Am I dead?” My voice is raspy and doesn’t sound like my own. Everything stayed silent until I heard footsteps coming closer.

“She is awake Kiley.” I hear more footsteps and before I knew it somebody sat me up and wrapped their arms around.

“I have missed you so much!” someone I assume is named Kiley said. “Will she remember me?” Kiley asked.

“Most likely not,” said a soothing voice. All I can remember is I was sitting with my mom and putting some new shoes on and then everything was blurry. Everything was gone.

My vision came back within a minute or two. The girl I assumed is Kiley was wearing a baggy PINK sweatshirt and a pair of jeans with bags under her eyes and no makeup. I guess she has not slept in a few days. The doctors standing to my left wear faded, clean doctor coats the walls were plain tan and the light in the room was dim. I felt different but I couldn’t pick out exactly what was different. I kept having a tingling sensation and rush of what felt like electricity.

About an hour later, I learned I was in a hospital. They told me after I blacked out they found me in a pile of ash and rubble and they pulled me out. I was out for about a month and people came by to see if I was okay.

“Where is my mom?” I asked shocked because I still haven’t seen her. Kiley stood up and whispered to the doctor with the soothing voice and he stepped outside.

“Your mom was found lying next to you in the pile of ash and rubble but I checked her pulse and she was, she was…” Kiley stuttered.

“Don’t say it! It can’t be true.” My voice was still as raspy as it was when I woke up.

“We did everything we could.” My face turned pale and my throat and mouth turned to sandpaper. The doctors pulled Kiley in another room and talked for about a minute or two. They came back out and Kiley sat on the foot of my bed.

Soon, “You missed the end of freshman year,” she said calmly. “But don’t worry you really only missed the last two weeks.” I really didn’t care for school after I had just woke up from a month long slumber party. Eventually she said, “The doctors are preparing for you to have a surgery tomorrow and they said you are free to roam around the city with me until tomorrow. The surgery will allow for your mind to open so you can remember what happened before the accident.”

I perked up and I guess Kiley noticed because she crossed the room and grabbed a bag of clothes and sat them in the spot she had just gotten up from. “I went this morning to get you some clothes but if you don’t like them just let me know.” Kiley opened the door and stepped out for me to get dressed. I opened the bag and inside was a beautiful dress that was blue and had yellow flowers on it. I took off the firm hospital gown and slipped on the beautiful dress. Something hard was sticking out and when I looked I found the price tag that read: On sale NOW only $39.99. I must have been close to this girl, I wouldn’t
buy somebody a dress that expensive unless I knew them very well. Kiley helped me to a parking lot with only one car in it. It was a old run down Chevy Trail Blazer painted pink with flowers on the bumper and a sticker in the back window that said, Life is better in sparkles. The smell of stale air and perfume filled the air inside her car.

I sat in the front seat and Kiley started the car as soon as she turned the key music started blasting out of the speakers. “And I was like baby, baby, baby oohh!” The tune sounded familiar but I couldn’t remember the words. She turned it down, “Sorry Anastasia you probably have a headache and you never really did like Justin Bieber.

“So, you don’t remember anything about me?” Kiley said to me.

“I really don’t remember anything before the accident but I do remember texting someone named Kiley before the explosion happened.” Her face lightened a bit and the corners of her lips curved a little, into what looked like a half grin.

“We can go look at the park first then head to your favorite ice-cream place.” She turned her turning signal on and started tapping her hand to the rhythm. TAP TAP TAP. We turned onto a small road and at the end of the street was a beautiful little park with few benches and a water fountain. Happy people were walking the trail around the small park.

Kiley hopped out of the car and ran to my side to help me out. Her hands wrapped around my waist for support. We made our way to a bench near the water fountain.

“Here,” Kiley handed me another bag. “These were yours and we found them on you in the big pile of rubble.” I opened the bag slowly and inside were a pair of red sneakers.

“My mom bought these for me.” My voice was plain and my eyes started to tear up. They looked worn and a little dusty. Inside them were a pair of socks.

“Those were your lucky socks,” They were black with pink hearts on them. “You wore them to big events like basketball games or the day you might have had a test in Mrs. Nina’s class.” I instantly fell in love. I put the socks and shoes on. They felt like they belonged. I felt another surge of energy and then bam lightning strikes in front of us.

“What the heck?” I was so surprised I jumped off the bench. “I was going to tell you about that.” Kiley said.

“About what?” I said confused.

“It happened when the town was covered in ash. Some people had side effects and became sort of, what’s the word?”

“A FREAK?!” I shouted.

“Not really a freak. there are a lot of people like you who show off their powers around town here there is one over by Pandora Street. I will show you.” She grabbed my arm and helped to me the car. She sped back over where the hospital was and instead of taking a right she took a left and on the corner was a boy who could be around twelve.

We stood there astounded just like everyone else. He snapped and like that fire shot out of his hands. Everyone had their jaw touching the pavement as he moved the fire through his fingers and from his left and to his right hand. People threw change into his cup and walked away.

“Thank you.” he said. “Hey can I talk to you for a minute?” he asked Kiley as she went up to shake his hand. “Sure, what can I help you with?” Kiley pulled him aside and stood next to me. “Well, my friend Anastasia here thinks she might be a … a …”

“A medi-human or as some people like to call us ‘Freaks’.” He didn’t sound happy or sad. His expressions were unreadable.

“Yeah, a medi-human.” Kiley glanced my way. I was a little confused if I was a medi-human then what was my power and why did only a few people have powers?

“Could you tell me exactly what happened to you on that day?” I asked wanting to know every detail. Kiley eventually realized we wanted to be left alone and she said she was going to go get something to drink from a gas station.

“I was walking down the street to go meet up with some friends, and I stopped when a saw a flash of light.” His expression turned and I could see a hint of sadness in his eyes. “I grabbed on to the fence I was
walking beside and the fence started to blow sparks and I before I got knocked out I saw fire coming from it.” Now it wasn’t just a hint of sadness the only thing I could see in his chocolate brown eyes was anger. “I don’t think I saw anything like lightning or whatever power I have before I blacked out.” I said.

“What if your powers aren’t just electricity?” His look wasn’t anger or sadness anymore it was a hint of what looked like surprise and curiosity.

“Like what?” I asked.

“Like if you had more than one ability!” His face lightened up a bit.

“So, you’re saying I could have more than one ability? Is it possible I could have more than one power?”

“I am pretty sure it’s possible I have met a few medi-humans who have more than one power,” he replied.

“Does that mean I am rare or something?” I asked.

“Well they are pretty rare to find, so I guess so,” he replied.

Afterward, we set up a time to meet again.

“Tomorrow at five?” he asked.

I stepped into the room I woke up in yesterday. It seemed warmer than yesterday so I slipped off my sweater jacket.

They put some cold liquid on my temples and then put some sort of machine on my arm.

I wake up but I feel like I am not myself. I am standing with my mom waiting in line for ice cream. A gust of wind blows over me and it flies out of my hand. My mom says something I can’t hear. I fall but as I fall I grab onto some sort of telephone line.

“I got it,” I say as I get back to reality. “We need to go talk to that boy we met on the corner because I remember I grabbed a telephone line before blacking out.”

We headed there as fast as we could. “There he is,” Kiley said. “Be careful.”

I jumped out of the car. “Hey!” I shouted.

He turned around and gave me a worried look. “Did you remember anything?” he asked.

“Yes, I remember I grabbed a telephone line before blacking out,” I replied.

“Cool! I know an electron!” he said.

“An electron what?” I asked.

“An electron is someone who controls electricity. There are only, like, two of those in the whole town counting you, they are super rare,” he explained.

“Do you think you could help me like control them?” I ask.

“Really I would love to!” he exclaims.

“Hey!” I heard someone yell from behind me as I was walking to Kiley’s house after going for a walk.

“Stop, somebody help he stole my purse!” I turn around and I see an older woman pointing a finger at a man about a block away running with a small little purse strapped to his shoulder. Wow, this could be the moment I have been waiting for! My first opportunity to save someone. I run after the man. My legs moving as fast as they will take me. I catch up to the man and run beside beside him long enough to stick my leg out and trip the man. Stumbling, he tries to get off the ground and run more. I stick my hand in the air and concentrate.

I remember what the doctor’s said to me in my training: “Focus on your target and stick your hand out you don’t give off energy, you manipulate the energy so make sure you are somewhere with ample amount of electricity around. Then close your eyes but still focus on what you want to hit…”

I close my eyes and BAM! Without even having to focus it hits the man just enough to knock him off balance, but not to seriously hurt him. I run up to him and grab the purse out of his hand and run it back to the older lady.

“Oh, thank you … Uh, what is your name? I mean like are you one of those super-medi-human people I hear about on the TV?”

“You can call me Electro-Girl, and as of now I am a super-medi-human you can tell people about.
Alright, well have good evening!” I say with the biggest smile on my face. Later, when I reach Kiley’s house we order a pizza and sit down at the dinner table.

“So, how are you doing? Anything I should know about?” Kiley asks me so suddenly it makes me jump.

“Nothing that you know of except I just saved an old lady on the street!” I say smiling.

“Really! You actually did it! You controlled your powers enough to save someone?” She asks.

“Yep! I really did it!” I said, blushing.

In a total of a whole year Anastasia and Kiley worked together to come up with a lab which was connected to the private hospital that Anastasia woke up in. Anastasia grew to not be known as “Electro-girl” but known as, “Girl of Thunder” She didn’t only save New Orleans, but also Gonzalez a city about an hour from New Orleans. This story might not be the best but it will inspire people out there to be a hero in their own way!
i heard her parents are getting a divorce.
i heard she is depressed.
i heard she was raped.
i heard she is homeless.
i heard things.
i heard things I shouldn’t have heard.

i heard she hurts herself.
i heard that she has no space to heal.
Not from home, Not from school.
i heard of her as a voodoo doll.
Again and Again people tear through her fabric, leaving gashes and bruises.
their words like scissors across silk.
and so she joins in on the fun.
i heard she hurts herself.

she heard her parents are getting a divorce.
she heard she is depressed.
she heard she was raped.
she heard she was homeless.
she heard things.
she never heard again.
The strange man gripped Anna’s hand firmly. His fingers were so large they completely covered her wrist. He had full control of her arm.

Anna looked up at the strange man. She did not recognize him, but he seemed friendly enough to her. He had even bought her ice cream, and waited patiently while she carefully inspected every color and flavor in the parlor. Anna loved ice cream.

Now, he walked her across a large courtyard surrounded by squat brick buildings. Anna enjoyed the warm sunshine on her skin and the cool breeze in her hair. She watched as puffy clouds lazily floated overhead, and searched them for any familiar shapes. A dragon, a puppy, and even a car.

The sky was replaced with plaster ceiling as the man guided Anna into one of the buildings.

“Where are we, mister?” she asked the stranger as politely as she could. She knew that she should always be nice to adults, even if she did not know them.

“Right where we are supposed to be, Anna. Remember?”

Anna rubbed her nose with the back of her sleeve. She did not remember. The strange man did not seem to be much help, so she redirected her attention to her surroundings for clues. Kind strangers walked past, and some even said hello to her. She recognized her name when they called to her, but she did not recognize the people.

Thickly-doored rooms lined the hallway the stranger lead her down. A few yawned to reveal dark interiors, but the majority were shut. Anna strained to listen for voices emanating from within, but all she could hear was the harsh whine of the fluorescent lights overhead. She looked up at the strange man again, then down at the floor.

Suddenly, Anna was pulled into one of the rooms. The door was wide open, but this time light poured through the opening. Inside, two plush chairs faced a wooden desk. A tablet of some sort sat on top of it, next to a vase of colorful flowers. Bright posters covered the walls, displaying the smiling faces of happy people. Anna wondered how the photographer could make those people smile. Anna never liked having her picture taken. The flash was much too bright.

“Let’s have a seat, sweetie.” the man said, gesturing toward one of the plush chairs. “Dr. Mentis should be here any minute.”

Anna sat down in the chair. It was very nice and soft. She ran her hands around the soft upholstery. She thought about the name that the stranger had said. Dr. Mentis. It sounded familiar, but she could not quite figure out who this person was.

A woman walked into the room. Anna immediately recognized her as the woman who makes her think. Anna liked the woman who makes her think, because she treated her like an adult.

The woman who makes her think turned to the stranger. “How’s she been doing?” she asked in a fake-cheery tone.

When the stranger answered, he seemed sad. “She doesn’t recognize me. She just keeps getting worse and worse.” Anna wondered if he was talking about her.

She turned to the stranger. “Don’t be sad, mister.” she said. “It’s too good a day to be sad!” she smiled as big as she could, because smiling always made her happy. The stranger smiled back, but Anna could see how sad his eyes were.
“You’re so sweet, Anna.” interjected the woman who made her think. “Let’s go ahead and get started.” She sat down behind the desk and rummaged through one of the cabinets within.

“I decided that we need to start taking an advanced approach to this, Scott.” she said to the stranger. She pulled out a thick paperback book and handed it to the stranger.

“This should get you started on understanding how Anna’s brain might work.” she said. Anna wondered why anyone would want to know how her brain works. It was just like everyone else’s, right?

The stranger took the book and inspected it. He held it tightly in both hands, then carefully set it down on the ground next to his chair. Anna noticed his hands shaking as they came away. She peered over the armrest of her chair, curious. A happy woman’s smiling face took up most of the front cover. Large friendly letters were emblazoned across it. They read: Living with Early-Onset Dementia: For Parents.
Nhami Le  
Grade 7

The New World  
Short Story

East Middle School  
Joplin, MO  
Teacher: Nina English

Everything was blurry. Ghost silent. My body felt like it was burning and bright lights shining on my face. What was going on? Why am I here? I tried looking around but it was too blurry to clearly see. I could barely breathe and move. As my eyes got clearer, I could finally see more and more. First thing I saw was the light shining straight on my face. Then I look down towards my feet. I was tied up. I also look at the arms and it was also tied up. Why am I tied up? What is happening to me? Minutes later, the door slowly open. I immediately closed my eyes like I was sleeping or don’t know what was happening.

“She is not awake yet,” someone said.

“Ok, let us start the procedure,” another person said.

What procedure? What are they doing to me? Goosebumps forming on the surface of my skin. Finally, the people left and close the door. I opened my eyes. The light in front of my face was turned off. I could finally see everything. There were many technologies and tools around me. Nothing dangerous but strange. I started to feel hungry. My stomach began to groan and ache.

Hours later, still laying down and my stomach still groaning, I hear a footstep. The noise was getting louder and louder and seem to get closer and closer. The door knob slowly turned and the door slowly creaked open. I immediately closed my eyes once again, but this squinting to see who the person was and what they were going to do to me.

“She is still asleep,” the stranger said.

“Ok, tell them to that we are starting the procedure right now before she wakes up,” the leader commanded.

What procedure? Who are these people? They don’t look suspicious and creepy. When they had left, I opened my eye and look around the room to find something to untie myself. There were many objects that might be able to work but there were too far to reach. Everything was too far to reach. I was bored and at the same time scared and worried. I tried to make myself happy and get my mind out of what is happening but it was not working. I’m hungry, confuse, and scared. Am I even going to live? I don’t even know who I am.

Later that day I think, I was sleeping. Everything was normal until I felt a shock. It felt like a shot or it felt like an electric shock. I felt fine but started to get dizzy. Suddenly I saw something bright. It might have been the lights shining so I walked towards the light. It was dark around me. It was silent. It almost looked a dark scary forest but without trees and animals.

When I finally reached to the light, I stared at it for a minute. I was big and bright. It looked almost like a door. The “door” was transparent. I saw a house. A beautiful house. It was like my dream house. I slowly walked through the door.

Poof, I felt like I was in a new world. The sky seemed bright and nice, the houses were neat and beautiful, there were many bright color plants. I took a minute to look around me. Everything was so nice. I looked straight and found the house that I saw through the mysterious door. I walked towards it and knocked on the door. Instantly, someone opened the door.

“Hi darling, we were looking all over to find you,” a strange nice woman said.

“Umm hi,” I said confused,” where am I?”

“What do you mean, this is your home,” the woman replied.
“Seriously,” I said once again confused.
“Come in come in,” the woman said.
She seemed like a nice woman, so I went inside the house. It was big and had lots of space. I could run all over the house without bumping into something.
I followed her upstairs to a room.
“Where am I going to sleep,” I asked.
She escorted me to a room.
“Here,” she answered.
My eye grew wide with surprise. It was beautiful and enormous. I looked around with surprise.
“Do you like it,” the woman asks, “or do you want another room?”
“No, this room is great,” I said, “Thank you.”
I didn’t know what to call her.
“You can call me mom,” the woman said.
She left the room and closed the door. She was so nice and caring. I continue looking around my room.
There was a TV, desk, and even a shelf of my favorite books. I even have a big closet full of nice clothes.
I felt super happy but at the same time spoiled. I felt horrible.
The sky turned darker and darker, I stayed in my room the whole time thinking why I am still in this super big home and why this strange woman wants me to call her mom. While I was laying down on the bed, the door opened.
“Dinner is ready,” my “mom” announced.
I stood up and went downstairs. The food smelled amazing. When I arrived to the dinner table all I could see was many plates of food on the table. Every dish had all of my favorite food to eat like mash potatoes, steak, mac n cheese, and so much more.
“It smells amazing and looks amazing,” I complimented.
I immediately started eating every single dish on the table. The table all organized and perfect. The utensils were perfectly placed. After I ate all of my food on my plate I felt really full. Almost to full.
“I’m going back to my room,” I said.
“Wait, we haven’t eaten any desserts yet,” my “mom” said back.
“I’m fine,” I replied back.
I walked upstairs and went to my room. I sat down looking at the window talking to myself. What is happening to me? Where am I? Why are is the woman so nice to me? Why is everything seem so normal and perfect?
I peeked out my door to see if the my “mom” was outside. Everything was dark. She might be in her room sleeping. I slowly closed the door without making any sound. I looked in the closet and try to find something to wear to go to sleep. I found some comfortable Nike shorts and a basic t-shirt. After I changed, I went to the restroom to brush my teeth and brush my hair. I got out of the bathroom and lay in bed and slowly fell asleep. While I was sleeping, I had a dream.
I was in the mysterious room again tied up. The two men were talking while looking at something but I don’t know what it was. After they were done looking, they opened a drawer and took out a pointy object. They walked towards me holding the pointy end straight for me.
I woke up immediately screaming as loud as I could. My “mom” rushed to my room looking confused and worried.
“What’s wrong,” my “mom” asked, “are you ok?”
“Yes, I’m fine,” I answered, “I just had a bad dream.
Early in the morning, my “mom” woke me up.
“Wake up, today is your first day of school,” she said excitedly.
I woke up feeling tired. I slowly got out of bed and went to the restroom to get ready. When I finished getting ready, I went to my closet to find something wear. There were many outfits to choose from. It was organized by color and style. I looked section by section until I found the perfect outfit for the first day of school. It was cute and sophisticated. I walked downstairs and saw a big plate of waffles. Not any kind of waffles. They were chocolate chip waffles which are my favorite. On the side were strawberries and
raspberries. After I finished eating breakfast, I walked outside and my “mom” drove me to school. When I arrived at school I felt nervous and scared.

“Have a great day at school,” my “mom” said.

“Thank you and have a nice day,” I said back.

When I arrived to I felt nervous and scared.

“Have a great day at school,” my “mom” said.

“Thank you and have a nice day,” I said back.

So I start to walk towards the school. I could feel goosebumps forming all over my have. My hand got more sweaty the close I walk to the school. I could see many people staring at me. When I went I went I to my first class, everyone stared at me. The teacher stared at me too.

“Everyone this is our new student,” the teacher announced

“Hi,” the class greeted.

They were so nice and respectful. Even the teacher was nice.

The school day was just getting better and better. The school lunch was so delicious, the students were so nice, and we didn’t have homework. In fact, the classes were easy and not stressful.

At the end of the school day, everyone seemed happy instead of tired and sad. I waited until my “mom” picks me up.

Minutes later, everyone was gone and my “mom” has arrived to pick me up.

“How was school,” she asked.

“Amazing,” I said.

We listened to music and talked on the way home.

As the days go on, I started to forget about how I was here.

Every day, the days get better and better. Nothing bad ever happened to me. The world was always happy and cheerful.

However, the dream I always have were the opposite of the world. The dreams were terrifying and scary. However, I just ignore all the dreams I had.

Saturday, the last day of the week. I felt more comfortable around the city and the woman. Everything seemed normal now.

Later that night, the sky turning darker and darker. Everyone was asleep except for me. I sat down on a chair looking at the dark sky, bright moon, and the sparkling stars. Why is everything perfect? What is this world? Does this world even exist? I keep on questioning myself.

An hour later, I felt tired and sleepy. I lay on my bed slowly falling asleep. While I sleeping, I felt weird. I didn’t have a nightmare but instead, I felt something. A shock. It felt like a shot or if I got electrocuted.

After that, nothing felt the same.
Xylophone

Xylophone pieces
Poke from the walls of my tummy
Sharp touch...soft sound...

Bing…
    Bang…
    Bonk…

A little monster jumps from one bar to another
Sticking his feet out toward memories
He lands
My stomach illuminates with a hymn

Bing…
    Bang…
    Bonk…

It hovers in the wavelengths
Between the nose of the blonde-headed love
Then licking heartbreak like a salty snack
The song of the time my parents cracked in half

Bing…
    Bang…
    Bonk…

The monster swings, like a set
My friends shoes, dirtying up the hallway
Spaghetti squishing between my fingers
Ending up on Maggie’s glasses

BING
    BANG
    BONK

The teacher’s glares...
the snotty tears...
the octave of fears...
The doctor…
   Bones…
       Being alone…

They are the monster’s favorite song
The xylophone slows…

Bing…
   Bang…
       Bonk…

The monster is still,
A tear falls down his nose.
He turns - and goes.
The xylophone will grow dusty
I’ll forget the song
Perhaps I’ll hear different one
Or - no songs at all
“Goodbye!” I say
Into the silence that fills my stomach
Acoustics bring my voice back to me
There’s the mallet
The xylophone pieces
Poke from the walls of my tummy
My touch… my sound…
I jump from one sound to another
All day…I play…

Bing…
   Bang…
       Bonk…
The Boy Who Lives in The Wind

Intended to be performed as a stage reading.

Characters
Lily: A sixteen year old girl; soft features.
Max: An eighteen year old boy; mischievous features.
Lily’s mom (Catherine): A woman in her fifties; motherly features.
The Man in White: A man in his seventies; boring features; wearing white.
Five People in Black: Varied ages/appearances; wearing black.

At Rise: A girl sits cross-legged in the center of the stage, twirling her hair, thinking deeply. There is a sound of flute and she looks around.
Lily: Hey!
(The music continues.)
Lily: Hello?
(The music continues to continue.)
Lily: Alright, well…you-you suck at the flute, ya know!
Max: (Still hidden on the side of the stage) Not true!
Lily: (whispering) it sounds like Max…
Max: It is me! (he erupts on to the stage).
Lily: (She blinks at Max, in pure disbelief) Max? (she rushes toward him, touching his shoulders, his face, and hugging him tightly) Maxy!
(Max’s arms stay at his sides as she holds him, her face buried in his shoulder.)
Max: You couldn’t even play the recorder, remember that?
Lily: Yes, but (she lets go of him) wait…how…how… are you here?
Max: (Looking at the ground he snorts) You tell me.
Lily: But you were…I saw you...
(Max shrugs, watching his hands as he spreads out his fingers and curls them back in.)
Lily: …I….Do you know how much….I - I missed you so much.
Max: (He’s still looking at his hands) Stop it.
Lily: What?
Max: You’re being sappy.
Lily: Didn’t you miss us?
Max: Nope (he crosses his arms).
Lily: (Bitterly) Liar.
Max: Yeah, okay, I missed you a little.
Lily: We…we need to go tell Maddie and George. Right now.
Max: Tell them what?
Lily: You’re okay!
Max: *(He looks at the sky)* No can do, Lil
Lily: What? Why?
Max: I...don’t want to see them.
Lily: *(Angrily)* Shut up *(she pulls his arm, he doesn’t move).*
Max: I’m serious.
Lily: No you’re not.
Max: I don’t want to...I don’t.
Lily: It’s been three days!
Max: No.
Lily: We’ve eaten your stupid mac and cheese recipe every night, we’ve sat in your ugly orange room...you know...we’ve even gone through your *drawers. All of them.*
Max: *(He attempts to look unconcerned)* I don’t care anymore.
Lily: You don’t care that I read your *journal?*
Max: Nope.
Lily: You’re lying!
Max: *(Muttering)* I should have just let you walk by… *(Lily glares at Max, while he stares at his feet, avoiding her gaze.)*
Lily: George cried.
Max: Everyone cries when some-
Lily: He cried even more than your mom. Know that?
Max: And? What do you want *me* to do about it?
Lily: GO HOME!
Max: *(Darkly)* No. Maybe I like it better this way, anyway. You don’t know what it’s like. I feel weightless, seriously. I don’t miss *anything.* *(Silence falls)*
Lily: *(Quietly)* You...you don’t miss everyone laughing at your voices you’d do? Cornelius? I do. People try to do it like you did and they suck. It’s embarrassing. And you don’t miss the time you won that choir competition? The solo? Maybe you didn’t see how happy you were that night, but I saw it in the audience. I was there.
Max: It’s -
Lily: You don’t miss New Year’s eve that one night? You and me?
Max: *(In a low voice, with his eyes still on his feet)* I didn’t think about it. You don’t have to think about all that stuff out here…
Lily: Can you look at me?
*(Max shakes his head.)*
Lily: Where have you even been these three days?
Max: Around.
Lily: What’s it...what’s it-like?
Max: *(He shrugs)* I dunno, Lil... I can’t see color. You look like an old lady with grey hair. *(He pauses)* but I learned to play a really cool song, wanna hear?
Lily: *(Exasperatedly)* Sure. I have missed your music...
*He plays a melancholy song on the flute, staring at Lily’s feet the whole time. His feet begin to move off the ground slightly. He floats more until he is six feet from the ground. Lily stares at him.*
Lily: You can fly?
Max: Obviously.
*(Max floats higher up, now two -)*
Lily: Wait - where are you going? *(four, six feet up.)*
Lily: Come back!
*(Max ignores her, playing the flute mindlessly.)*
Lily: So I’m going to have to tell Maddie and George that you left without saying goodbye?

(Max looks at her, finally.)

Lily: When you could walk right up the road right now and see them? You may not be...here... but you’re here, you’re okay...
Max: Maybe I’m not.
Lily: You’re something.
Max: I... I want to see them, ok? I don’t think I have ever wanted something more... but I just don’t think I can. Even seeing boring things like trees and - and - and the way the grass is brushing your ankles. I can’t feel that anymore. I’m not Max... I’m as much of a person as a gust of wind. Invisible.
Lily: You’re always going to be...
Max: And to see you? This is why I should have left right away.
Lily: Then why didn’t you?
Max: Because...

(A long, silent pause ensues.)

Max: Because I still had hope. Right when I left my body for the first time, before they found me, before I knew anything, I tried to climb back in. But... I couldn’t.

(He looks to Lily for a response, but she stays silent.)

Max: I saw the guitar I’d been playing just the night before... right before I fell asleep... and when I tried to strum it with this (grabs his wrist to hold up his hand) - strange hand - it was like I was air. And I could see my own face, it was ugly, at that point, all pale and cold, but it was my face, my body. The one thing in life that counted on never leaving me and... here I am. It’s lonely as hell out here. And I’m flying as far as it takes for me to forget what that face - your face - anyone’s face, anything, life, I don’t know - any of it - feels like. And you’re making it worse, Lil.

Lily: How can I be making it worse when...
Max: That’s the very reason! You think you know...
Lily: I do.
Max: NO! I’ll never buy that boat.
Lily: You-
Max: I’ll never - I’ll never take over my Dad’s business... take care of my mom...
Lily: But-
Max: I’ll never have a family.
Lily: Then stay!
Max: I DON’T EXIST.
Lily: YOU’RE RIGHT HERE.

(Max shakes his head.)

Max: No I’m not.

(Max starts flying upwards again.)

Lily: Wait!
Max: WHAT!
Lily: ...What if... I came with you?
Max: (Frightenedly) What do you mean by that?
Lily: Wherever you’re flying to... maybe I can just...
Max: ...You’d have to be dead.
Lily: (Shaking her head) I don’t know... I just...
Max: (Disgustedly) You have no idea what this is like! You would never, never wish this upon yourself!
Go home.
Lily: You are my home!
Max: (He glares at Lily for a long time) I was.

(Max moves off stage, looking at Lily once before exiting.)

Lily: (Looking up, in a small voice) You can’t be gone...

(There is no response.)
Lily: NO!
(She stares at the ceiling.)
Lily: I’m not done...I didn’t say to you...what I needed to say to you! Come back! I know you’re up there! Just listen! I wanted to tell you that you are my best friend! I meant to say it...I...you’re the best I’ll ever have! If someone comes along that’s better than you...and god knows someone will, because you suck - I hate you - I don’t care, no one, no one will get the place in my heart you did. I love you, Maxy. I know you can hear me. I know you can...please... don’t go away....
(She listens, but there is only still silence. It continues for a slightly uncomfortable amount of time. Five people dressed in black lineup and Lily joins next to her mother, who grabs her hand, giving it a squeeze. A man dressed in white appears.)
Man In White: All of Max’s eighteen years were full of love. He was a compassionate, sweet...
Lily: (In her mother’s ear) He has no idea what he’s talking about...
(Lily’s mom smiles microscopically.)
(Lily rolls her eyes, smiling at her mom. Her smile fades as she looks to the sky.
A gust of cold wind brushes by, people wrap themselves in their arms and shiver. As it continues to blow, a faint note from a flute is trails through the air. As the wind begins to dance more, a melody begins to play.)
Lily: Mom, did you hear that?
Lily’s mom: Hear what, sweetie?
Lily: (Smiling, she stretches her hand in the wind) Nevermind.
(She closes her eyes, putting her hands all the way up.)
Man in White: Max will always live on in our hearts.
Lily: (Whispering) No. He lives in the wind.
After the war, he had scars he can hide. 
Things that will haunt him that left him mortified. 
You cannot escape it, trust me he’s tried. 
But his honor—his strength—is his only pride, 
For he yells at his loved ones and brings his family to tears. 
He screams in the open, and cries when it’s clear, 
but (please) do not blame him, for his mind is long gone 
in the midst of a war where he acted strong.

A regret—a longing—for justice to be served, 
when a soldier’s life is stolen and yours is returned. 
He thinks I don’t know these things, but this much is true: 
I do not blame him for the things he had to do. 
For a soldier’s death is noble to some, 
he had to witness it armed with a gun. 
How would you feel if you had the power to save someone? 
And all you could do was stand there too frightened to run. 
Was it his fault that the consequences were so cruel? 
Or was he aware of what war could do? 
He went in a boy and came out a man, 
but did he really do it for you, Uncle Sam?

He had shards of memories that didn’t upturn his lips. 
Too many emptied rifle clips. 
Flashbacks of crimson pools of blood, 
dripping into the underbrush. 
Unblinking eyes and piercing screams that you couldn’t silence with just a “hush”. 
The tranquility of still nights that are too quiet to keep the images away, 
dreamless darkness that won’t let the comfort stay. 

But how can he not realize that he is the reason a frown is etched into my face? 
How does he not notice that my heart is breaking when his voice is raised? 
Can he not see that we fight this fight too? 

His P.T.S.D. is our war as well. 
It doesn’t just affect you... 

He’ll start to get better (in lighter moods). 
He won’t yell as much and won’t be so crude, 
but it starts to take hold again (it’s his captor),
and the spark of hope is stomped out by combat boots. 
You make my chest ache, 
and my voice shake. 
He struggles under the weight of the world. 
He’s all alone, 
but I’m just an insignificant girl. 
Then you'll suddenly snap out of it and say, 
“I'm so sorry it’ll only happen today..” . 
But I fight the urge, suppressing my words… 
because it’s not even close to okay.

...But I can't utter any of this, heaven forbid. 
What do I know? 
I'm just a damn kid.
Lillian Smith once said that, “No journey carries one far unless, as it extends into the world around us, it goes an equal distance into the world within.” As I sit here and reflect on my life, I couldn’t agree more. My journey includes adversities that have molded me into the young adult I’ve become. I have been asked if I have any regrets or if I would have taken a different path to the peak of where I am today, but I wouldn’t. It is because of the rockiest patches in my life that have challenged and changed for the better. A journey that is prominent in my childhood memories is the hike up James Peak with my father. The hike up the mountain carries many metaphors about my own life. Every hike starts with a four-wheeler ride to the base of the mountain and essentially concludes with standing at the peak of the mountain, feeling empowered by the result of hours of hard work.

My journey began as I clung to my father as he drove us up the base of the mountain. The path is smooth with wide sweeping curves and the slightest of incline. I am secure, relaxed, exhibiting little effort. My father in complete control. He has control of the path we take, the speed that we go, the turns we make. I had complete trust that my father would take good care of me. In my adolescence, I had people in my life that I trusted to make every decision for me. I didn’t have to worry about when to get up, what clothes to wear, or where I went throughout the day. Life was simple and effortless.

We reach the point where we leave the ATV behind and begin our trek via foot up the mountain. My father reaches down and holds my hand, guiding me up the path. I am in control of each step I make, but I know that he is right there beside me, helping me every step of the way. His grip gradually loosens with each passing step - preparing me to become independent. As I came of age, I reached the point in my life that I could begin to make choices of my own. My parents gradually introduced me to new responsibilities when my little sister was born. With a baby in the house, I had to learn to take care of the minor details for myself. Having my sister in my life was one of the best opportunities I have has. I had a someone to look after and a push to be a strong, independent girl.

With everything in life, there will be drawbacks and obstacles that would be easier to avoid than overcome. On our hike, I had experienced altitude sickness. I felt weak, powerless and helpless. My father was there to help me stand, and gave me an oxygen can to help me replenish my body so we could push on. After almost 10 years of intense gymnastic training, I decided to retire and hang up the grips. I went through an identity crisis, all I had ever known myself to be was the sport that I excelled in. Fortunately, I had my family, friends, and faith that picked me up and pushed me onto the road for self discovery.

After an hour of easy hiking on smooth trails, we crossed the point where trees can no longer survive. There isn’t a limit to how far I could see, how far I could go, how far I could dream. We were susceptible to storm, low oxygen, falling without a safety net to catch us, but it can’t compare to how I felt when I got a glimpse of the top of the mountain. My faith is the tree line of my life. Being above the tree line gives you a glimpse at what it feels like to surrender your life to Christ. I dedicated my life to my faith when I was 9 years old. I had made the decision that no matter the storm, I was going to have Jesus be my safety net. When life gets hard, I look to him and know that in the end, I will reach the top of the mountain and feel complete.

As we made one of our final stretches up the mountain, we had to cross a glacier. Without the proper tools, guidance, and confidence, I couldn’t have made it across. Looking down or keeping my eyes
focused on the path ahead was the choice that pushed to keep going, rather than retreating in fear. It was essential that I maintained my confidence, because when I crossed the midpoint, there is no going back. Having a mentor like my father there giving me good foot holes, coaching me across the wall of ice was a necessary figure in my success. If I would have slipped, he would not have been there to catch me - and that was important for my growth as a hiker. I needed to be pushed beyond where I thought my limits were so that I would be able to cross anything in my path. High school is the same way; without the proper tools, mentors, and confidence, you can be swallowed up and spit back out. It was crucial that I found my youth group when I did. At church, I had a place where I could go to be heard, to get advice, and relax from the strife of this world. I had an identity. I can go there for an ample supply of mentors that are willing to help me through anything and give me the tools I need for success. With this being said, however, I need to be able to stand on my own two feet and know that if I fall, I need to take everything that I have been given and pick myself back up.

As we made our way to the peak, there were many times where the rocks in the path weren’t sturdy, and some were deceiving. We had to test each rock to place our foot on to make sure that it could hold us up and give us the right position to keep going. We made some wrong footholds, slipped sometimes, but always found a new place to support our ascent. In life, there will be rocky patches that you lean on something that may seem sturdy, stable, and supportive, but will slip away from you. It is important that I always have my faith to fall back on when all else fails.

When we finally reach the top of the mountain, I could take the time to appreciate the view. I looked down and saw the path that we took, remember all of the struggles, mistakes, and flaws, but I also got to see how I have grown and the laughter and memories made along the way. When I stood at the top, I had a perspective that I didn’t coming up. I could see how everything is there for a purpose and got a greater appreciation for God’s creation. I have moments in my life that I reached the top of the mountain. As I sit here in the solitude of my local library, I have been able to look back through my life and reflect on how much I have grown as a person. I have made many mistakes in my life, but I don’t regret a single one. If I had made any different decision, I may not be sitting here, writing an essay, waiting for the next big step in my life.
I wake up to the smell of sizzling bacon and scrambled eggs. I always wake up at 7 o’clock in the morning. I dress with my eyes closed. I always wonder why I have this fixed schedule every day.

As I ran rushing down the stairs to grab my lunch, I passed my mom who said, “Slow down! It’s amazing that you’re actually rushing to school.”

I grabbed the brown sack and shoved it into my ragged backpack. I turned the old knob and the door, and couldn’t help slamming the door as I left. The heavy sigh from my mother hung in the air. I passed by Mr. Porter reading his newspaper on the porch, who waved and said good morning. I’ve lost track, but that must’ve been the 3,000th consecutive day he’s greeted me. The towering building was on the horizon, and I looked at my watch to see the time: 7:48 A.M. I had just 12 minutes before the first bell rang. I knew I was going to be late even before I left the house.

My sneakers lightly squeaked on the freshly waxed floor. I looked around nervously for any teachers or the hall monitor. A strange feeling came upon me when I looked at the trophy case. Every time I admired the trophy case, I saw my reflection. This time as I glanced at the Dullest School in the World award, my reflection had changed. I slowly paced towards the glass up to the point where my nose would have been against the glass, but it didn’t. The glass seemed to move and reveal another image. It disappeared in a blink.

“Mr. Jones, late again! I don’t know what we’ll have to do with you.”

I walked to my seat with my head down, trying to avoid any glances from my classmates. Light giggles surrounded my presence. Ms. Rollins always gave us enormous projects as homework, which was supposed to allow us to “think outside the box.” I never really thought that school was important, so I always thought outside the school. However, today was different. My eyes suddenly were able to see more. I began to drift off into a dream, or was it a dream? I finally realized I was just beginning to wake up.

I found myself looking into the trophy case, but this time I didn’t walk to class. I observed the glass again and noticed it seemed to move with me. I stepped towards it and then I was grabbed from behind. I smelled a whiff of sweat along mixed with a sweet drifting aroma before I lost conscious.

Thump. Thump. Thump. A strange sound. It’s coming from my chest. Wait, I can see… I feel… I feel liquid. I open my eyes and see flashing lights through the glass.

“He has awoken,” a distant voice calls.

I look at my arms and legs as I start to become conscious. Where am I? I start to move around, but the woman appears and tells me to calm down. I don’t know what’s happening. I need to get out! I push myself upwards and smash the glass above me. My sight is blurry, but I can see many people in white suits. The sweet, sweaty scent… it’s back.

Slowly my vision returns. I am sitting in a chair. In front of me sits a man, who seems to be speaking to someone in a small device. He suddenly looks up.

“Oh! You’re awake. Let us explain a few things to you before you make any rash decisions. First,” he stated, “we know that you must be confused. You are a human being that we have put into a virtual world. You would’ve always been the same age and all, but you experienced some interruptions in the Life Pod.”

I don’t understand what this all means. The rest of his words morph into one huge blur of a sound. The sweet, sweaty scent roams in the air. I wonder what it is. Before I can remember what it was, I was
knocked out.

I woke up in a bed and had breakfast on the table next to me. I saw the toast and butter, but couldn’t help but think that something wasn’t right. Where were the red strips and yellow lumps? Was this a dream? Or was my memory a dream?

The outside world wasn’t as beautiful as it was in my virtual life. The wasteland consisted of brown dust floating everywhere and not one plant in sight. I am not even allowed outside. I must though. I must. I don’t know why I think. I don’t have a grasp on my past. It slowly diminishes by day.

By now, I understand more than before. I’ve learned about the past and what the future holds for me. For now, I go to the cabinet where the hole exists. The hole takes me outside of the enclosed area that they keep me in. It’s a way of… of… Freedom. For hours I pretend I’m working in my room, but secretly, I am unraveling the outside world. I have found many places that have the capacity to inhabit life. It’s about 10,000 of my steps away before I encounter Water. When I first came upon Water, I had a strange feeling that this was not something new to me. I slowly dipped my hands into the stream. It felt nice and cool. Without knowing it, I had started to drink the mysterious liquid. It made my body feel so, well, full.

Many years later, I had started a community of my own. There were others like me. They helped me understand how they had lived, and how others had lived. They said that the place I was from was the place of Evil. Many years ago, a group of people decided to take people to a lab and put them to sleep for life. The goal was to make it so we didn’t have to rely on the world, and so the Evil people could have control over the Sacred Resource. Water. I decided to leave my cell when I was to work on a project they had provided for me, but the project was too difficult. The community we built was meant for anyone in need of a new style of life. I read many books about life beforehand, and I wanted to center life around here just as it was back then.

Many months later, many communities similar to ours had been established. The variety of the communities amazed me. I frequently went to other communities in search for information. But what information?

My community and I decided that we wanted to confront the cell area I had come from for answers. Many months later, communities gathered at nightfall at our village. We left on foot to the Evil place that was about 50,000 steps North. When we arrived, the place seemed very eerie and threatening. I quietly guided my peers through the hole that I had found. When we arrived, we scuttled to the room that I had been taken to when I had woken up. However, we were too late.

“Well, well, well…” hissed a familiar voice.

It was the typical thing that most villains said, but we played along.

“You thought you could outwit us, huh? We knew all along that you were too intelligent. You know, we saw you escape every day. We even watched as your community and other communities were built. You think what we’re doing is evil? Well, what you’re doing is evil. We are trying to save humanity from extinction. That material you drink, Water, is more than you think. At first, Water was used as an essential for life. Now? Water is like a drug. You don’t need Water to survive. We found that out many years ago. In fact, do you really want to know what water does to you? It makes you grow old extremely fast. The way that…”

Without realizing it, we had fallen into their trap. The sweet, sweaty scent… It was back. I was slowly tumbling back into the world they had created. The virtual world.

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“Mr. Jones, late again! I don’t know what we’ll have to do with you.”

I calmly turned around and exited the classroom. Ms. Rollins and my classmates stared in disbelief, not knowing what to do. I had decided that this time, I would choose what I was going to do.

From that day forth, I never ate bacon and eggs again. I never was always late to school because I decided if I wanted to go to school. I don’t know why I suddenly have this urge to control my life. Before, I always ran through the schedule that I was so used to. But that schedule wasn’t mine. That schedule took away my liberty and the life that I deserved.

All I know is that there is much more for me to learn.
At first, they thought the black liquid was zendre oil, that they had struck it rich and that they’d be able to retire and live in leisure. They had actually started writing down all the ways they’d spend the money. Their first choice, unanimously, was to purchase *The Freseda*, their beloved ship that had been with them through many wicked nights. Each member of the crew then wrote down debts they owed and dreams they wanted to see play out. Drinks were passed around by jolly men, celebrating their supposed accomplishment. They made their lists and sent letters to their wives and drank their ale until dawn crept over the horizon. They had traveled over thousands of miles and through storms that had each seemed like their last just to see if zendre oil was hidden across the ocean, to prove to the world that their theory held truth.

How easy it had been to spot the empty pixie nest near the spring, to dig up the fresh dirt until a spout of black oil had streamed from their hole, begging to be free from the earth holding it down. They didn’t notice that the wind didn’t blow or that the birds didn’t sing or the bugs didn’t bite. Silence had seeped in like a fog, and the men laughed at their good fortune.

Back overseas, panic had spread as word that the liquid that fueled the wards, had kept them running for millennia, was weakening. Fleets across the continent were sent out but no one had bothered coming to Grynn, the land uninhabited for so long, too long.

They drained the alcove dry as their barrels continued to fill. Dozens upon dozens over the course of four days. They all knew that their problems were solved the moment they saw the clear stream and the golden nests. They couldn’t help but take it all, snatch it from the place no man had set foot since before written words, before when tales told as children, folklore, kept the curious at bay.

They loaded the barrels into their ship, packed it tight and enjoyed their time together as some of the richest men on the continent, their future already sealed. They planned to move along the coast the next day, explore the forests until they had zendre oil filling their cargo. Then, they would come back with bigger ships and bigger wallets.

As night fell and men slept with misplaced smiles, the oil that was not quite oil seeped through the barrels, moving along the wooden floors. It slid as if it was sentient, a living being climbing up the stairs and into the barracks of the sailors that had mistakenly let it free. The oil slithered into each bed, encasing each man like a cocoon, like a vice. It slipped through their lips and down their throat. It was silent as they all choked on the very oil that was to make them prosper.

And when the men were all lying limp in the shining, black liquid, it crept up another set of stairs onto the deck, choking the life out of every member of the crew manning the ship.

The moon was gone, as if it looked away at the greed that had stolen the heart of every man on board. It had let the oil go unseen in the starless night until only one heartbeat was left — a 10 year-old boy, an
apprentice, huddled in his bed, writing a letter with shaky fingers. Others would later read that letter, a recounting of what he witnessed and a cry for help. The cry would go unheard but what was seen under the flickering candlelight that night would be retold until every soul knew to be frightened when they heard the land’s name.

Grynn.
"Torn Trunk"

There’s a tree five houses down.
A rip
a foot wide
runs diagonal along its surface,
the bark curled away from the indentation.

During a thunderstorm
that rattled houses and composures,
lightning shot through the obsidian clouds,
striking the tree.
Where the lightning touched,
the tree shed,
a disease eating through skin.
It was open,
bark peeled away;
the storm,
a surgeon with a scalpel,
and the tree,
a patient on an operating table,
proof the storm had been more than a sound.

It stood.
Five years passing.
The bark still parted around the scar,
its skin dull from smaller storms,
but its leaves still green.
There’s a boy in a town in France whose hollow bones whistle with the passage of wind and whose heart pulsates blood that runs black and thick.

They call him Icarus, after the winged boy in the Greek myth. Purple storm clouds swirl irises beneath translucent eyelids, but it’s the speckled grey wings beneath his shoulder blades that give him his name. The day of his birth, the air was choked with rumors of demons and disgraced angels fallen from heaven.

“Bird-boned boy,” they whispered. “Born atop the eastern hill.”
“Bloodlust breath.”
“Razor sharp feathers.”
“Destined to kill.”

Yet for some unknown reason, the mayor of a town in France refused to let anyone harm the boy with the lonely stare.

His mother died promptly after his birth and the identity of his father remained unknown. Still, there was suspicion of the town drunkard. Who else but lowly scum could have given life to such a monster?

Icarus stayed with nuns until he was five years old. Then, despite the protests of the townspeople, he was admitted to the local school. Nobody was sure who pulled what strings to make it happen, but that fall, Icarus found himself surrounded by wide-eyed kids who had grown up being taught to fear him. It’s a shame the other kids had predisposed notions, because if only one had been willing to ask him to play, things might have turned out differently.

On his first day of school, Icarus’s wings knocked down bookcases, desks, and fourteen shrieking students in a domino-like effect. Parents stormed the mayor’s mansion, but he remained staunch, despite the suspicion seeping into the eyes of his wife and daughters. And so Icarus stayed in school where the muscle of his body was ripped to shreds by the howls of kids and parents alike.

And it never occurred to anyone that when Icarus turned away, it wasn’t in defiance but in concurrence—it never occurred to anyone that no child should ever wish for death.

The days have collapsed into years, and Icarus is still in the back of the schoolroom, keeping his wings folded as best as he can. To keep from complete desolation, he promises himself that somewhere far away there are people less afraid of the unknown, the different and the fantastical.

Icarus strives for normalcy. He likes Annika, a spindly, freckled girl. He eats his food in scarfing bites, like every growing boy. He loves to run, but he isn’t allowed to race. Perhaps they fear he will take off. Having wings is bad enough—the thought of him flying is unbearable. They tell him flight is impossible, and so he never bothers to try.
His classmates are beginning to see life in a new way. Icarus has always known things like cowardice and bitterness, but as his classmates began to discover love, he does as well.

He approaches Annika in the schoolyard. He, like many others, mistakes her quietness for complacency, her pink skirts for frailty. Like everyone else, Icarus doesn’t realize that Annika was dressed that way by her parents. Unlike everyone else, however, if Icarus were to find that Annika liked wrestling and collecting bugs in jars, he wouldn’t scorn her. It might make him like her more.

After lunch, Annika is standing with a group of girls, but she’s staring at the boy’s kickball game. Icarus says the only words he can think to say to her.

“You’re really pretty.”

And the rosary ring on her finger splits his lip open. Her scream echoes and pierces the heart of anyone with a little girl to protect. It’s ironic, that this little girl could protect herself.

The people in a town in France flock to the schoolyard in gross fascination to see just how Icarus’s blood runs black and thick. Carnally spurred by the sight of blood, they chase him through the cobblestone streets with pitchforks and torches. Where their medieval ancestors once hunted witches, they now hunt a trembling child. Cries of demon, devil, and death erupt anew. The mayor is too scared to help the boy with fiery lungs.

Icarus races for the first time. For a moment he really feels like he could fly. But then he reaches the safety of the nuns, and he sees that they can’t quite meet his eyes. His heart sinks so quickly he feels foolish for thinking of flight. That night, Icarus stands alone. The snarling wind slashes at his throat. His ears buzz with the sound of waves crashing in vehemence against cragged rocks below.

The people of a town in France see him from inside their warm homes but cannot be bothered to leave their dinner plates.

Annika presses her face against her window. She traces the outline of his wings with dragging reluctance. He looks so small, but she notes that he doesn’t look weak. For the first time, she considers that the two aren’t inherently correspondent.

Annika nods doubtfully when her mother tells her she did the right thing. She screams for the second time that day as his silhouette falls from the cliff like silk into the night. Her ring is still stained with his black blood. But when the light comes on, the blood only looks red.

They claim they saw him die, even though the sky that night was blacker than their souls and no eyes, no matter how hard they strained, could have seen a thing. Young children are told stories of a monstrous bird boy to scare them into obedience, and Icarus becomes a myth. The children dare each other to look for his ghost underground in molding, fetid basements, wherever smells like bitter death. They are looking in all the wrong places. If they would just look up once in awhile—if only they would look up.

In a town in France there are only two, a political man and a freckled girl, who stand atop the hill of Icarus’s birth to look at the sky. And there he is, flying through everything unsolid, hair electrified and eyes ablaze with the rippling wind beneath his wings.
Some years after Icarus’s departure, the mayor’s wife will give birth to his first legitimate son. The mayor will look to the clouds and promise to do it right this time. His son’s wings will be speckled grey.
The house is more than one hundred years old. The paint is peeling off the walls on the inside and out. Cracks can be found in every room easily spreading. You’d think every step taken is a bit of your luck going to waste. I think all of these things, but never do I put my faith in every one of them. People say you can’t trust everyone, but do they ever think ideas or thoughts count? The house is hidden from most people, their minds are too clouded to find its importance. I’m not like others. I’m not mean “I can fly” or, “I can see the future,” I just happen to take things more seriously than others. I put more consideration to things without trying. This house is my life, the source of my creativity. Don’t get the idea that I’m a crazy, lonely kid with no friends. That is not the case. I go to school, learn, ask questions and answer. I just prefer not to interact as much. I have no problem doing so, if needed. I like to observe.

Let me tell you the story of this house. One day after a emotional end of school, I took the long way to get to my house. I hadn’t walked this path in many years. I passed this house. My house. No, it’s technically not my house, but the house I’ve been rambling about. It drew me to her. The white paint peeling off the house. The way the yard was a mess, and jungle like. Even the way the wind shifted. Everything was perfect.

I walked straight up the cracked concrete stairs. It was almost like I was in a trance. My legs moved without me telling them too. Everything felt so natural, like this was a part of me. I stood in front of the entrance staring at the house. I hesitated a moment before making contact with the wood. I let my hand fall to the door, ever so softly and gently. The feeling it gave me, I can’t begin to describe. I looked down only to notice a golden and rusted door knob. Naturally I reached for the door knob. Without hesitation this time, I opened the door. I was greeted by the most beautiful scene I’ve ever seen. A beautiful, old grand staircase, some of the stairs were broken but that didn't matter. The paint was peeling here as well, but it filled me with delight. The scene was overwhelming. I stood and looked to my left. There was a hallway running to a more ancient space. I sat there for hours sketching every little detail. From the position of the peeling paint to the splintered steps. Everything mattered to me, it was all important. Nothing in my life has ever mattered more.

I stayed at the house until sunset. I didn’t have a phone, so I couldn’t text my parents who were rarely phased by my hourly disappearances. I closed the door to the house gently. I walked down the cracked steps. I left the house, the perfect house, and returned home. My home was nothing big. It was a nice neighborhood. It was just fine I suppose. It was nothing like my magnificent house. The steps weren’t cracked and the paint wasn’t peeled. Nothing like the masterpiece. I entered the house; it was rarely locked. I went up to my room. It was filled with my sketches. I sketched pretty much everything, from walnuts to trains. Since I never knew when one of my adventures would hit, I kept a secret stash of oranges and granola bars sitting in a basket in the corner of my room. I took one of each and settled down with a sketchpad and a number two pencil. I had settled down on a small padded bench in front of the only window in my room. I decided to sketch the one tree that stood in my front yard. I sketched this tree many times before. I can sketch the littlest detail to too much detail. Tonight, I just let my hand flow. The stroke of the pencil
and the way it hit my pad always comforted me.
I finished my sketch in twenty minutes. I removed my paper from the book and started a new pile of papers right next to me. My parents, by this time of course, had checked to see if I was home. I’m not an only child, I have an older brother in college. I let the cold wind hit my face. I turned my head from the window and decided to get ready for bed. I took a cold shower, not because we didn’t have any hot water, just simply because I prefer cold showers. I brushed my teeth, washed my face, changed, combed and put up my hair. I crawled into bed and pulled the covers over my body. I stared at my wall, waiting for sleep to take over my body. Once it did, I let it take me without a second thought.
Epilogue
I returned to the house. It was just as I left it. Perfect. That day I sketched the outside of the house. Just the front of it. I left when I was completed and returned the following day. I did this for several months. I sketched, I left and I returned. After a year I had completely sketched the whole house. The big picture, the little, everything.
I visit the house often. It was never purchased, never destroyed, never touched. This event, though so sudden, meant so much. How is this possible? Now that’s for you to figure out.
I remember a time before I knew what it meant to be a girl
what gender was
what wage gap was
I knew there were people who smiled at me on the street
when their teeth were just teeth and not meat eating teeth
meat tearing teeth
ivory shards of poisoned vocabulary
toxic tonsils too invisible to remove
but loud enough to rickashay rollercoasters of insults
mountains of man moans
at a fourteen year old who looked twelve
following me down steep corners on the street where i walked in the middle of the afternoon
the forty year old too cold too bold to be speaking to a too tiny me
to be yelling at a too tiny me
a too weaponless me
watching his torso lean too far out the window then the sunroof
as he reached out his paw
his claw
for christmas that I watched my mom purchase pepper spray
but I bought cat claws that collect DNA as if to say
when it happens
it being the so-called inevitable that happens to one in six

I remember a time before I knew what it meant to be a woman
before growing up meant growing weak
growing silent
they say statistically girls become less and less likely to raise their hands in class
they are afraid to ask questions
afraid to seem dumb
afraid to seem smart
but smart is subjective
and when you’re walking down the street they won't ask for your IQ
when women in england were attacked in the early 1900’s they learned Jiu Jitsu to fight back
hid clubs in big bustles
wore extra long extra sharp hat pins
kept barbed wire in bouquets
but maybe when it happens to you you won't be quite as prepared
maybe you’ll fight back with retaliation rhetoric
or watch your own hand extend into claws
or maybe you'll just keep walking
many times i've kept walking
so you can keep walking
but as your footsteps leave imprints on the concrete
your taught silence
taught safety
leaving imprints on wet insults
know that there are 3.5 billion bodies inside of yours
and we are walking with you

The Hunt

you are walking down the street stubborn silence on repeat and the man on the corner approaches you
he’d like to have you for a meal
you’re the next fleeing thing to eat so you walk a little faster
footsteps sticking to concrete
your shoes never felt so heavy and you’re praying that your feet will stop defying you
until he’s too close and his breath is in your hair
recent meals include meatloaf and mayonnaise
yellowing things you cannot hear as you float above your body trying to be somewhere else
somewhere nowhere near
but this has happened before
you’ve felt the same story slither through your veins like blood
like sand
silver
you’re clearly asking for it
first step: walk alone in the middle of the night, or the middle of the day, or mid-morning
step two: don’t tie your shoes make your footsteps hard to lose yourself in headphones or panicked
breaths
finally: dress too nice wear a ballgown wear sweatpants wear nothing
it won’t matter
because you see none of it matters it won’t change his attack mindset
because you see he views you like an animal
because you see to him you are
mild
meek
meaty
he’s not called predator for no reason
too many stories
too many girls to name
so we become one story
one person
and still nobody listens
and still nobody changes
and still nobody wants to

but next time he comes up to you on the street saying
“how are you doin’ i’d like to tap that ass what do i call you baby”
You look at him where his eyes should be and say
Just call me darkness because i’m the last thing you’ll see.
Don't call me baby.
call me independent
call me president
call me strength
because you are so damn strong to put up with people like him
people who don’t view people as people view people as meat
another mutilated carcass to hang on your wall
another catch
another claim
another kill
to show your “hunting buddies”
Because that’s what this is right?
nothing but a game
and i, your unwilling victim meant to endure your cackling
heckling
whilst weaponless in this wilderness i encountered when trying to walk to my car
April Ma  
Grade 10

_Shall I Disturb the Universe?_  
Critical Essay

Blue Valley West High School  
Overland Park, KS  
Teacher: Paige Waldorf

Since the existence of man, crises have existed in which the scenario presents a near impossible decision that “[leads one] to an overwhelming question”- does one dare disturb the universe (Eliot 10)? And though the possible ranks higher than that of the actual, it almost seems as if man is still unable to fully think. He is given his bit of the universe, the bitterly inescapable shortness of living in which he cannot possibly fathom if it is truly worth it all. Does he simply fill his life “[preparing] a face to meet the faces that [he] meet[s]”, yet does not make to go and meet said faces, keeping within the bounds of routine and normality (Eliot 27)? Or does he crucify himself to the criticisms of others, plainly “pinned and wriggling on the wall” on full display, decimating what value to life he has left (Eliot 58)?

Too often has humankind continually engaged in the mundane activities of the inactive, constrained to “wasting the poignant moments of [...] life” (Fitzgerald 57). To be limited to things in one’s reach, constantly preoccupied with material possessions constructed by the human consciousness such as wealth, vanity, and luxury, is to be wasting and not truly living life. Yet who but us gives worth to such objects? And what then, when one has lived their sheltered existence, “[measuring] out [one’s] life with coffee spoons”, only consuming each increment as though there is no end to the monotony (Eliot 51)? To live in such a boring life where one already “[knows] the evenings, morning, afternoons”, and the small bit of the universe one has been given only becomes copies within themselves (Eliot 49-50). There is no alternative to the status quo in which one can discover “[the] wild promise of all the mystery and the beauty in the world” and remain routinely banal (Fitzgerald 68). In order to truly exercise the meaning put into one’s existence it seems as though the thought of disturbing the universe is inevitable. To be given such a minimal span of universe and merely existing is ostensibly impossible.

However, who can be so sure that the destiny of the one who disturbed universe remains that of competence? Perhaps it is simply satisfactory to be “deferential, glad to be of use”, that the meaning we give existence only extends so far (Eliot 115). And to ask whether to “disturb” the universe, an implication that whatever one does to change circumstance, is always negative, as if the universe, personified, is only satisfied, untouched, preserved in the amber of inaction. Does man aim to displease the universe, to please himself, to give meaning to the self at the expense of the universe? After all, whose fault is it but our for creating such meaning in the absurdity and unfairness of a minute life? Even if man makes the decision to disturb his own part of the universe, what is there to say he will not be disillusioned by his efforts, that all the endeavor in what was thought to be the sans pareil was simply an impasse?

What is worse than to be “invariably [saddened] to look through new eyes at things upon which [one] has expended [their] own powers of adjustment” (Fitzgerald 105)? To risk the disenchantment of one’s fantasies is incomparably worse, as one cannot disengage from the disturbance of the universe, especially since the entire universe now becomes the margin for failure. How much pity is one willing to commit to watch their “dead dream [fight] on” (Fitzgerald 135)?

The overwhelming question of whether to disturb the universe or not may seem difficult to evaluate but the answer is simple, yet “there is no confusion like the confusion of a simple mind” (Fitzgerald 125). Even with its unpredictable consequences, the unavoidable disturbance of the universe always assumes its position in that of unmoving doubt. And yet in the expanse of the whole universe, man seems to strive to violate consequential determinism- to find an unalterable outcome, and to alter it. Perhaps there is no
negative connotation to the disturbance, but that that every change one effects is not an aberration, but a conformity. Perhaps the arrogance of the universe so chooses to view an emotional confrontation with the self as something so profound as to “disturb the universe”. The discourse of life with meaning has taken root in man’s small universe, and only he himself may change the direction of its growth.
By: Grace  
Grade: 3  

My Family Circus!  
My whole house is a circus!  
Wooden chairs do handstands,  
Tables do flips, Plates do tricks  
And paintings do jumps.  
The glassware break  
Dance on the kitchen floor.  
And the walls even applause, vibrating the whole house behind my closed door.  

The whole house  
wrestles itself  
For support, as it walks on the tightrope,  
Always on the edge of  
Falling.  

Holding its breath.  
My dad’s the ringmaster.  
Always yelling  
Out orders. Directing the circus.  
Telling the tables to do flips  
And the plates to do tricks.  
Making the glassware  
Break  
Dance on the kitchen floor.  

The show always starts with my  
dad’s act.  
He juggles three empty glass bottles that he  
got back  
In the part of the refrigerator I can’t reach.  
Then the show begins.  

My mommy has been to the show a lot.
Ever since I was born 8 years ago.
She sometimes comes back with face paint.
Purple spots under her eyes of a festive balloon.
And even though she has gone to the show a lot,
I still sometimes hear her
Cries
Of laughter
Spreading tears
Of joy.
I can only hear the show, though
Behind my closed door.

But one day the circus picked up and went.
Guided by blue and red lights.
Leaving my house for good.
And now without the ringmaster,
The chairs and tables now stay put.
The walls don’t applaud anymore,
The paintings don’t jump, and
The house ultimately let out its breath,
Finally off its thin rope.
Gabriel Machado
Grade 12

No Dictatura
Poetry

Central High School
Saint Joseph, MO
Teacher: Kyla Ward

The freedom here
Now a rising smoke thread
Flying away from
The blown out dead

I see with broken glee
The new power lead, the we
We lost, they tell us
With overcooked lies

Hope has no place here to sing its song
Yet he hold on to it with bloody open palms
We lost, they tell us
I’m starting to believe them

Yet we would rather live
in the light of a pit
With our eyes aimed high
And our tongues coiled like arrow tips
Than live in the shadow
Of a bright open lie
Told by those who “protect” us
By putting chains on our lives

We are peaceful marches of roaming deer
With masks on tight to fight the tears.
We’re shot with rubber bullets.
Then left to live
as the comfy homeless
A funny bid.

We’re left to eat the food scraps
Of those who shoot us back
Don’t bite the hand that feeds you,
they remind,
but when the time, arrives
We we rise.
When the last food scrap is fed,
and the last rubber bullet turns lead
We will all bite at once,
Snapping away the oppressive chains
And leaving behind our conquered pain
And remembering those, who had to go
To free our hope, all bloody soaked
To sing its song once again
And remind them, this time, that we lost
Remember,
And those who have nothing to lose
Have everything to gain.
Stay strong Venezuela.
The sweet scent of grass seeps past the layers of dirt that block my kingdom from the sun. Giggles. I can hear giggles whispering in from above. I run a lone finger over the dirt crust, knowing with only a little will it would tear itself apart for me. My breaths beat hard against my chest; even with permission, my plan makes me nervous. A jolt of surprise hits me as I process what I admitted. A small smile slips over my lips. It's been too long since I have felt something.

I breathe in again, taking the emotion as a sign, and move apart the earth. It rumbles as a crack emerges. It widens, small fractures splintering from it. A beam of shimmering, yellow light bleeds through. I step back from it as the crack pulls back farther. The giggles have stopped. I peer up through the opening and into the world above.

Nymphs run over the shaking ground, their colors highlighted against a brilliant, sapphire sky. The color blinds me; it shines brighter than any jewel I have ever viewed. One figure still stands in my blurred vision. I blink away the brightness and let my eyes fall to the figure. The girl stands frozen like a deer in shock. A long carpet of hair, the color of the harvest moon, glitters beneath the sunlight, as though it has been created of the light itself. A simple *chiton* dress the color of fresh blueberries tickles the girl's ankles. Her mouth is open in a soundless gasp. She tries to take a staggering step back as I climb farther into the crack, but fails to move. Her lips tremble, on the verge of crying out, and I pull myself onto the ground. The warmth of the grass is a shock to my bare feet as I step in front of her. She slips as she struggled to step back. My eyes widen and I reach out. She lands in the cradle of my arms, and her hand falls open, dropping something. A shout flutters through the nearby grove of trees and I curse beneath my breath.

I dart for the crack still splitting the earth open. The girl is heavy in my arms, suddenly still. I peer down to find her eyes closed as slow, weak breaths slip past her lips. Unconscious. More shouts, cries for someone to come help. I feel as the grass shifts to dry dirt. I will the earth to break open farther, to allow me through with the girl. It does as I command, sliding from beneath me. Just as I begin to drop, I let my gaze slip back to where I'd found her. Beautiful, pure white petals lay against the flattened grass. The narcissus flower is the only witness as we fall.

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The chill of my chambers burns into my skin as I rise from my dreams. My covers slide back to let me out. My feet taste the marble, the earth's unnatural heat seeping in from beneath the stone. The memory of the day she came to my palace still haunts my unconscious mind. I sigh, letting my gaze slide to the window and the ruby sky behind it. Bodies shimmer in the distance, ethereal forms bearing the weight of their punishments. Loud dongs ring through the palace's halls, counting the hour. I roll my head, stretching out my neck before lifting my body to my feet. Linen's soft touch slides down my skin as I slip into my clothes. Today, the cloth is like ink, a silk smooth black that matches my mess of hair. I wiggle my fingers through it, the restless strands weaving around my fingers. It falls back when I move them out.

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Giving up, I push open one of the heavy stone doors that leads into the hallway.

The breakfast hall is empty when I reach it. My table is out and dressed in its linens, ready to feed. I glance out into the corridor. The walls are silent with only my shadow as company. Sighing, I swing back into the room. Flickering candlelight illuminates the exceedingly large room. Dark tapestries are piled on the stone walls. Their fabric depicts different areas of the Underworld, and its monsters. Cerberus, threaded in a charcoal grey, growls forever, as a fury spreads its wings against a dark sky. Various images of spirits decorate the room and once more, I find myself studying them. Too many times have I sat alone in the hall.

A rumble enters the room as the door moves open once more. Unlike for me, it takes the person an extended moment to move the stone door until a small crack lets the body inside. Still wearing the berry blue dress, Persephone slips into the breakfast hall. Her hair is pinned up now, curls falling onto her shoulders. She moves to shut the door, but I lift a hand.

"Let me get it." I move across the room. The sweet scent of fresh blooming flowers floats to my nose as I step beside her and push the stone shut. I turn, expecting to receive the glare I'd become too familiar with in the past few days. Instead, she didn't look at me. I cleared my throat, breaking the silence entrapping the room. I move to grab the back of her chair and pull it out. A soft whisper startles me.

"Thank you," she says, dipping to sit in her seat. Her arms come to rest on the tabletop. My hands don't drop from the back of her chair and she blinks at me, waiting.

"Did you just thank me?" I ask, confusion staining my voice. She huffs at me, leaning her face on her hand.

"Yes. I can still take it back if you want."

"No," I blurt. She raised her eyebrows as I moved around to my seat. "It just surprised me. You're welcome."
She nods, seeming satisfied. Silence begins to creep back into space between us. I try my best not to stare as she lets her eyes trail over the tapestries. I snap my fingers, calling forth a servant to set out breakfast.

The food simmers with steam as it sits on the table. Persephone gazes at the assortment, almost longingly, and I gesture to it. "Would you like to eat?" Every day the question has been asked, and every day the answer has been the same.

"No." Her eyes turn cold for a moment, causing me to curse beneath my breath. Today, she had been opening up and I ruined it. I bring my thumb to my lip, thinking. I catch her gaze slide over to me in the corner of my eye. She stares for a moment before ripping her eyes away. The girl has me so befuddled.

In a moment between our hidden glances, my eyes catch on the ripe skin of a fruit. I smile at my thoughts. Standing back up, I drag my fingers over the table to reach for the thick fruit and move around to Persephone's seat. I hold it in my palm, its heavyweight centered in my hand stretched before her.

"Would you like to eat this?" I rub my thumb over the smooth, hard skin.

"A pomegranate?" she asks. I nod. "No." No more words slip from her mouth. I frown, placing the fruit before her arms.

"Why?"
She frowns, turning to look up at me. "Because it's been grown here." She pushes the pomegranate away with a finger. She acts like it's cursed.

"My pomegranates are said to be the best. That is an offensive statement."

She sighs as she looks at the fruit rolling back to her. "I've heard many things about your pomegranates. It's because it's the Underworld fruit that I cannot eat it."

My eyes widen with realization. She's not from the Underworld. She can't eat it if she wants to ever leave. My heart burns as I realize what she's not saying. Her eyes look up at me, and a slow sorrow leaks into them. I take a breath, letting my eyes close, before standing to return to my seat. Persephone's hand reaches out to hold my arm, her lips trying to say something, but nothing comes out. She lets her hand fall. Silences encompass us, but this time, I don't break it.

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After breakfast, I leave before Persephone, lying that I have business to attend to. I disappear into the gardens laid alongside one of the palace walls. I find a spot in the shade, and lose myself in my thoughts. I'd brought her here, the idea that she'd want to marry me, to love me the leading reason. Now, everything seems different in my eyes. She is headstrong like her mother but always notices. The scent of ever blooming blossoms follows her wherever, lingering in the halls where she walks. My touch is so dreadful, so full of death. I'm afraid that I'll drain her sunshine and spring glow if I'm near her for too long. And she aggravates me like no other! At first, she wouldn't let me do anything for her as a gentleman should. Every day I'd try to talk to her and she'd cut off the conversation with blunt answers. She didn't want the servants to follow her about, waiting for commands and had demanded I ask them to stop. It is too hard to ever say no to her.

My gaze locks onto the pomegranate trees with their long branches. Even those look different, like cruel chains. The fruit glow in the russet sunlight. I sigh, dropping my eyes. Beside the bottom of a few trees is a dirt plain. A garden, yet to be planted. Again, that painful twinge burns my heart. I had been for her, for Persephone to grow her own flowers. I stand, marching over to the cleared plot. I stomp on the ruddy dirt.

"Why, Zeus? Is this your idea of a joke? Punishment for being your brother? Why give me permission to love this girl if you knew she'd never love me? Why give me such false hope?" I scream into the sky. My whole body shakes with anger and I tear across the empty garden, the ground trembling with me. "I just wanted one person to be with me down here! One person!" Dark sparks crinkle around me and I slam my palm into the earth. It rumbled like thunder, my hand the lightning to feed it. I let loose a roar like a beast, the beast I am in her eyes. A gasp echoes behind me as the sound ends. I whip around to find Persephone's gaze. I slump to my knees, feeling defeat fill my body. She is gone, completely out of my reach now.

I bow my head to touch the ground. The hot touch of the dirt is my only friend now. My eyes ache with tears long forgotten. I push my forehead deeper into the dirt. Fingers wrap around my shoulder. I peer up, a growl ready in my throat. Soft finger pads touch my skin, pushing away my hair before knees sink to the earth beside me. Rust curls bounce around the edges of her face, a face drawn with thought. The growl dies as I meet her eyes.

"I think," she starts, her voice shaky, "I'd like to get to know you. All of you."

My hand moves up to touch hers, the meeting hot like fire. She sits there, fear still in her eyes, but no hard shell. No boundary like what has been there for the past days. "I'm a monster," I whisper.
She pushes aside some more of my hair, the mess tangling with her thumb. Her tongue is squeezed between her lips in concentration. "That's for me to discover," she says, her eyes studying mine.

The connection between us makes my heart twinge, but this time it's different. I lean forward, waiting for her to back up with fear. She sits still, her chest lifting with short, nervous breaths, but she stays. She doesn't run as everyone does when they meet the god of the Underworld, when they hear the name Hades. I slide closer, twisting my head till my breath paints her lips. I can feel her chest against mine, our heartbeats rushing together as though they are in a race. She lets me in closer, lets my mouth find hers. I tell her to run, to leave, but something in her headstrong nature keeps her there feeling me, testing to see if we could really discover each other. Such an intimate touch for a god of the Underworld. I can feel the sunshine of the grove I stole her from. The scent of that lonely narcissus flower fills my nose. She needs to know what I ache for, what I want, why I stole her. Intimacy. Companionship. A wife. Her touch against my skin. I can't let her leave without knowing what that touch feels like. I want to know how she tastes. She is my pomegranate, my forbidden fruit. My tongue pushes her lips open. She lets me, doesn't beg to stop. I take a bite of the Underworld's fruit.

A flavor touches my taste buds. It's sharp, tart and all too familiar. My heart throbs painfully. My fingers twist in the fabric of her chiton. The blue material curls over my nails. I don't know what to do, what to think. The flavor twists its way into my memory, demanding to be noticed. The too sweet flavor of the pomegranate fills my mouth from hers. She ate the fruit.
All That's Left

Kristen Mason

Grade 12

All That’s Left

Poetry

John Burroughs School
Saint Louis, MO
Teacher: Megan Zmudczynski

All That's Left

Whatever happened to the girl who loved balloons
so much that they filled her whole world,
who lived among the stars and filled her head with galaxies.
What happened to the smiles, the blue eyes, the red hair,
or the sheer happiness that seemed to radiate out of her?
That must be how it leaves you with age.
I still try to smile wide, sincere enough that they always reach my eyes
they’ll never look the same as they did back then, it’s a fact of life
Genuine smiles are hard to find, nowadays
little kids are cuter, anyways.
Balloons serve their purpose--
laughs with helium addled vocal chords
or intense games of not letting them hit the ground.
For the most part the stars have gone.
The rugs folded up, slipped beneath guest beds
The comforters outgrown, shelves sold in garage sales
(priceless childhood memories, to a good home. $4)
The bright yellow walls I received when I was five
(Disney paint in the color, “Main Street Lights”)
they’re gone too, replaced by cool blue tones more suited for
an “adult’s” bedroom.
Even the bunk bed is gone, given to girls more suited to it.
All that’s left are the glow in the dark stars,
left behind by my aunt on the ceiling.
I remember sitting on the top bunk, watching her
hold onto the shelves for balance.
Their comforting glow is all that I have left.
I’ll look at them at night and wonder to myself,
have I let down the girl I once was?
I hope not.
I know that’s it’s selfish, but I sincerely hope
that even though I’ve left her so far behind
that the girl I once was is proud of me.
I can only hope to do right by her.
I am at war with nature.

As I am only one human in the vast throes of the universe, I realize that it is a futile war most likely going unnoticed by my opponent, but nonetheless, I battle. Most people call it stubbornness, resistance to change, insanity, but I like to think of it as tenacity.

After it rains, make sure that you save as many worms as you can. They’ll be soggy, stranded on the sidewalk, surrounded by puddles and some of them won’t make it, but save as many as you can. Scoop them up into your palm and carry them to a nice circle of grass. They’ll squirm and they’ll be slimy, but they’re saved. Like Sisyphus and his boulder, it’s a never-ending game- I save ten worms, nature takes a hundred more. I know there’s no way that I can save all the worms, but it doesn’t keep me from trying.

The score- Nature: 100, Me: 10

Spring came too early to Saint Louis. Mid-February saw rising temperatures and confused flowers rubbing their sleepy eyes and poking their heads out of the ground far before their alarm clocks were set to sound. Two weeks of weather in the 70s was enough to confuse some students into wearing shorts without checking the weather in advance, so one can only imagine what it did to the carefully calibrated temperature sensitive system that is springtime in the Midwest.

To put it simply- it wreaked havoc.

The pink magnolia trees around campus sprang into full bloom, robins hopped around, pecking at the ground in hopes of finding one of my saved worms for breakfast. Every single daffodil on my street burst into beautiful, yellow blossoms. For a brief moment, I forgot my feud with nature. We’d been blessed with the warmth of spring without the allergies and suffering it typically brought me. I was ecstatic. Then February promptly came back to its senses. Sub freezing temperatures swept through town, bringing what seemed to be swift and sudden death to every poor flower that came out to say hello.

I awoke to a veritable crime scene, a murder most foul. Every little daffodil toppled over, weighted down and wilted by the dew frozen to their petals and their stems stiff and fragile. The sight of this massacre reignited the passion in my veins. Nature wasn’t about to get away with it this time, not on my watch.

After a series of sprints outside into the freezing cold with a pair of trusty scissors at my side, I soon had every last daffodil from my yard arranged on a paper towel on the kitchen counter. Under a light trickle of water, each flower received a warm shower to perk up their petals and thaw out their stems before trimming them down and arranging them into a vase to preserve what little I could of our early spring.

Nature: 279, Me: 28
Do I realize my crusade is doomed? Of course. Sisyphus never reached the top of his hill, and I never expect to single handedly combat nature. But my intervention gave those worms and flowers extra time, time nature was hell bent on seeing they never got. So I keep it up. I fight the good fight for my flowers and my worms. And it doesn’t matter all that much, in the grand scheme of the universe, but it matters to them.
A Synopsis of the End of the World

It was almost tangible, the inadequate feeling registering in my chest. The sky was dark enough that constellations should’ve been visible, but where Orion and Tartarus once resided, all that was seen was a smoldering grey canvas.

The grass was no longer green, absent of the marigolds and chrysanthemums that once filled the field. Mountains, once so tremendous and strong grinded down to a whisper of what they once were.

I stood in reverence, hoping for some sort of epiphany to illuminate the atrocious events before my eyes. But no pompous proposal of redemption would suffice, nor a melancholy observation convoluting my perceptions. Discombobulated thoughts ran rampant, ideas and seculations cascaded in fragments unfathomable.

The odorous vapor pulled me from my trance, reminding me of my fugacious surroundings. Fleeting, yet unceasing, eloquent yet disastrous. An oxymoron to be pondered, the earth was.

Until the persnickety pendulum of time paused its seemingly incessant motion. The last glimmer of hope passing as the sun sets, completing the earth’s odyssey with an opal sky.
My morning could be boringly monotonous. I would sit on the same old yellow bus, staring out the same smudged window, and watch the same high schoolers enter the same high school, day after day after day. That was until one morning I realized something that scared me in a way very few things could. Next year I would be one of those kids. Maybe the girl with her backpack overflowing with papers. Or I could be like the girl to the left of papers girl, a girl with her phone in her face, somehow dodging around without running into one person. Hopefully, though, I would be the girl ahead of papers girl and phone girl. The girl with her hand intertwined with a boy who couldn’t stop glancing at her as she talked to the people around her. That girl looked like she had her life going right, everything she could want in order. She had a boy, friends, and an airy quality like she could care less. I so badly wanted to be that girl, she made high school not look so hard. When the bus began to move towards the middle school, the girl was cut off from my vision. Shaking my head at myself, I inwardly scolded my foolish behavior. I couldn’t wish to be some other girl because it looked like her life was easy, I had to be my own person. If I wanted my life to look like that when I had to take the initiative. As I walked off the bus I smiled to myself. Here I was acting as if my life was all planned out because I looked out the bus window and had a small epiphany. Who was I kidding? I was still just as scared as before. First, I decided, I had to get through the first hour. Then I could start on my way to making my high school career incredibly successful.
His arms windmilled as he almost fell again, 
The ice calling for him to lose balance, 
But he caught himself in time, 
And pushed his skates against the ice once more.

He looked over and smiled, 
The smile that melted her insides, 
And made her feel butterflies, 
The smile that made her want to make him smile again.

She felt a smile on her face mirror his, 
The smile that she reserved just for him, 
One that she hoped made him feel butterflies, 
And want to make her smile again.

Back and forth they went, 
One smiled and the other would smile, 
A seesaw of feelings, 
Neither one wanting to get off.

Moments would come where a hand would come close, 
Almost touching the others, 
But they both knew they couldn’t do it, 
That it would mess up something simple.

So they were each satisfied with the smiles, 
Their eyes saying what they felt, 
Each hoping the other could understand, 
And interpret the promise behind the smiles.

Her arms windmilled as she lost her balance, 
And there he was next to her, 
To catch her if she fell, 
And laugh alongside her.

She caught her balance, 
But he still stayed close, 
And she felt herself fall for the boy, 
As he looked over with a smile.
The warm sun shone in through the big windows against the wall, as I walk around my small New York loft. I walk over to the tall modern looking mirror hanging on my wall. I study my big green eyes, and notice all the freckles covering my face. My arms feel light as I reach them up to put my long brown hair in a bun. Grabbing a small black throw blanket, I walk over to my computer and sit down on the cushy office chair. I begin to search through the internet trying to find jobs or ways to make money. My roommate Alyx and I are both college students and money is pretty tight. She shouts to alert me that she is leaving for a student government trip. “Okay Jess, I'll see you in 3 days. Don’t do anything stupid while I’m gone, okay? And don’t forget to feed the fish.” She wraps her long arms around me, her way of always saying goodbye. I nodded and told her to have fun. Alyx always feels like she has to watch over me. I’m a responsible adult, I don’t get it. I look back and continue what I was doing before, my eyes studying every link that appears on bright screen. My eye catches at an ad for Craigslist. I decide to take a look because I’ve never used the site before and what’s the worst that could happen.

“What really scares you?” I click the ad to see more. “I would like to observe someone put through my experiment for a total of 12 hours. 12 different studies. I will be testing your heart rate, body temperature, and several other factors through various different fear trials. The pay is $10,000. If you are interested please contact me at the email below.” The words above intrigue me, so I decide to contact him. “Hello, I’m Jess. I’m quite fascinated by your ad. I’d love to know more. If you could get back to me, maybe we can meet over coffee sometime soon.” Shortly after I send this, I heard a ding and see a reply. “Of course. Let me know when you’re free and I will set things up.” We exchange numbers and agree on a time and place, later today at a cafe somewhat close to my house.

I show up to the small urban coffee shop and order. As I stand and wait for my coffee, I look around and try to find this mystery person. The only thing I know about him is his name, Miggle. I text him, asking where he is. He tells me he is on his way, so I sit down at a small table in the back and go on my phone. Suddenly someone comes up and sit down at my table, startling me. I look up and make eye contact with the man in front of me. He sticks his hand out, waiting for me to grab on and shake. His fingers look long and boney. “I’m Miggle, nice to meet you.” He says smiling greatly at me. I immediately notice a strong, significant accent, sounding Danish in a way. He is tall and lanky, with bleach blonde hair. “My name is Jess. It's very good to meet you.” I say, hesitantly grabbing his hand.

I find out he’s from Denmark. We talk about his experiment for quite a while. “12 different studies in 12 hours. Flying, butterflies, paranormal activity, being alone, the dark, heights, public speaking, spiders, closed spaces, snakes, clowns, and aging. Most of these are all simulations, and you will not be put in any real danger. There’s no possibility for you to be harmed during any of this.”

I take a minute and think about this. Some of these things do scare me, but it’s definitely worth $10,000. “Okay.” I say in a deep breath. “Okay?” He asks, seeming surprised by my response. “Yes. I need the money and you seem trustworthy. Let’s do it.” He nods agreeing. “I can do it tomorrow morning, 7am.
that works for you.” He replies eagerly: “I agree and we finish off the details. I head home nervously, to prepare myself for the following day.

I wake up the next morning at 5:30am. I get ready and wait for Miggle to come get me, as he said he would. He arrives in a new model car. I decide to get in the back even though he gives me the option of the front seat. The car ride is mostly silent, until we pull up to a huge, dingy looking warehouse. We get out and walk up to the big metal doors and he pulls a card out of his pocket. He slides it across a detector and the doors unlock. He opens it for me and I walk in. The outside and the inside are entirely different. Inside, it looks very modern. Everything clean and bright, almost like a hospital. I start to feel intimidated, but I take deep breaths trying to calm myself down. He walks me into a room with a desk and chairs. The chairs in front of the desk are placed perfectly, as if they’re calling me to sit in them. He pulls out a stack of papers from the desk and puts them in front of me. We look over them together and discuss. They basically say I will follow all his guidelines. We both sign the papers and he takes me into a odd looking room full of chairs and leaves. As I patiently wait for Miggle to return, I notice a big red button on the wall with a sign under it. “If you press this button, the experiment will be paused. USE IN EMERGENCY” Suddenly a grey/white type of fog seeps into the room from under the door. I panic and press the button repeatedly, but I feel myself getting sleepy and then I’m gone.

I wake up on what I think is a floor in a pitch black room. A loud voice come through speakers somewhere. “Experiment 1: Flying. This is a simulation. The escape button is on the wall for your use.” and then the lights turn on. All around me it looks as if I’m in a plane. I sit down in one of the plane seats, and the entire room starts shaking, as if to express turbulence. I ignore it and grab a book set out in front of me. If all the studies are this easy, I’m gonna make quick money. I sit through the hour flipping through magazines. I hear the same voice over the speakers. “Complete. Good job. You will be put to sleep now.” The smoke comes back in, I relax and take it.

I wake up in the same situation. “Commencing the second experiment: Butterflies. This is not a simulation. The escape button is on the wall for your use.” I hear these words and my heart drops. I’ve always been scared of butterflies since I was a kid, but they’re harmless. I just keep telling myself that it’s gonna be okay. The dim yellow lights turn on and I look around. The room is entirely empty. Instantly two gaping holes open on the walls, one on each side. It looks as if the holes were covered by shutters from a camera. Butterflies start pouring out of them, immediately surrounding me. The room goes colorful, with various types of wings beating all around me. I run to corner of the room and curl in a ball on the ground. I feel my heart start to race uncontrollably, and tears instantly flow out of my eyes. The air feels thick, as if there is no oxygen in the room. All I can feel are the butterflies hitting their bodies against me, making it hard to breathe. Their small bodies don’t put much pressure on me, but all of them at once is too hard to take. It feels as if their small feet are knives, stabbing into my skin. No matter how frantically shake my body or try to get them off, more just cover me. I try to get up to press the escape button, but I can’t see anything. It slowly gets harder and harder to breathe, their presence suffocating me. I crawl to the middle of the floor as best as I can, the creatures still attached to my body. I scream, choking on my own cries. They start to crawl into my mouth. Trying to spit them out, more just come in. I can feel them crawling further down my esophagus, choking on them all. I know this is the end of me, not being able to breathe or move. The feel of my heart stopping is an unbearable pain. At that very moment, I feel death. My body goes limp and cold. There is nothing.

On the cameras from the experimental chamber, I can’t spot Jess. The butterflies have filled the entire room, blocking all light sources. I look up at the giant white screen in front of my to check her heart rate from the chip we implanted in her when she was gassed. The green lines that were once spiked are now flat. There is nothing, no heart rate and her body temperature has decreased greatly. The gas in the chamber is released to sleep all the butterflies. I run to where Jess is and pull her out and set her up in the
lab. She is connected to several machines. I try to see if there's any way I can bring her back. Her heart has been stopped for too long, she's dead. The x-ray shows butterflies wedged down her esophagus, disabling her ability to breathe. She choked to death. That and the butterflies surrounding her, she wasn’t able to move. I rush to pack up my things and load them into my small car. This experiment was a failure. Another record for my books. The next flight to Denmark is in 3 hours. There isn’t much left that I can do. I grab the gasoline out of the basement, kept there incase this happened. Circling around the building multiple times, I dump it everywhere, especially on top of Jesse's body. As I get in the car to drive away, I say goodbye to my failed fear experiment #38. I just want to know what scares people most.

I light a match and throw it on top of the gasoline, seeing the entire building erupt with flames. Traveling back to Denmark to prepare myself for another experience is next in my plans. My next experiment will be changed slightly, differentiating the simulations. I strive to see what scares people, needing to find the true fear inside them. I grab my fake passport and ID and get in my car. Driving fast to the airport, numerous amounts of fire trucks pass me. Sitting waiting for my plane, I watch the news on the small television in the corner. There is a news reporter standing in front of the charred warehouse. “The firemen were able to get the fire out before it disintegrated the whole building. Right now they're looking for victims and the cause of the fire. So far the only person is a 20 year old female. Suspected name, Jess Harrington. We found an ID and credit cards with her name on it at an unburned part of the building. Over the intercom, I hear them call my flight number. I stand up and show the lady my ticket and walk onto the plane with no hesitation.
3:30 A.M. on a Tuesday morning she awoke suddenly. The dream kept haunting her every day and night. Then she remembered… this wasn't a dream, it was reality. Ever since that Friday afternoon in 8th grade, her life had changed. She flashed back to that day that still affects her life.

“The last bell rang at 2:45 and I was so excited to get home to my new cattle. I quickly packed up my bags and ran out the door, and apparently I ran past a group of kids and I tripped one of them. I was almost out the door when I heard a ringing voice behind me.

“Oh no” I thought as I heard my principal loudly telling me to come to his office.

I sat down in the big chair and looked around his office. I hadn’t been to the principal’s office since I was a fourth grader and his office had drastically changed. I was trying to take in the fact that I was in the principal’s office for the first time, in such a long time, and that I was going to miss the bus too! My dad would have to come and get me, and all I wanted to do is get home to my cattle. I soon realized that I wasn’t listening to a word Mr. Crawford was saying.

“Do you understand?” asked Mr. Crawford.

I quickly nodded even though I had no idea what I was agreeing to.

My punishment was a lunch detention and I also had to apologize. I told him I was sorry for the tenth time and went outside to wait for my dad. When I got outside, I realized my mom and dad had tried to call me five times! They were probably worried, as they always are, that something had happened to me. I quickly called them back and my dad was on his way to get me. I decided- without his permission- to meet him at a gas station that was closer than the school.

I started off on my way and after a block walking, I past a man with sunglasses and a dark blue hoodie - even though it was 98 degrees. I thought that was really odd and I started to walk faster. After about half a block I heard a noise behind me. I whipped my head around and saw the same guy in the blue hoodie. He quickly turned his head and tried to act like he was looking at some flowers. My adrenaline was pumping - my heart beating faster and faster- I felt like I should run. I decided to act like I didn't find him suspicious, but I started walking faster with every step. I looked back quickly to see if the man in the blue hoodie was still following me. I saw that he was crossing the street. I thought to myself that I was just overreacting, that even though my parents constantly told me to be careful, things like this never actually happened and would definitely not be happening to me.

I got to the end of the third block and turned onto a side street to the gas station. As soon as I past the first house, I heard a car go by. I wasn’t alarmed because cars go by all the time at that time of day. The car quickly sped ahead and turned into the driveway right in front of me. I wondered why they were in such a hurry, and then I saw it. The windows on this black Charger were super tinted - the man in the blue hoodie got out - I froze. I couldn’t believe this was happening to me! I didn’t know what to do- should I run? Could I? The man in the blue hoodie pulled up his sweatshirt just enough for me to see the gun resting at his waist, ready to be pulled out and fired at any moment. He motioned for me to get in the car. At first I was so shocked I wasn’t able to move. Then he motioned again - and began moving towards me. I forced my legs to move, even though they still felt like mush. I walked over to the car and he opened the door. I stopped for a second to see if I could make a run for it. He put his hand on my back, ready to push me in, and whispered in my ear to get in the car, his voice forceful. I got in the cluttered back seat of the car and before I could fully sit down, the man in the blue hoodie slammed the
door. I saw with a sinking feeling that the door lock was gone - I was trapped. He got in, and we headed off.

I had gotten a good look at his face and I was trying to memorize every detail just in case I was able to escape... I just kept repeating over and over in my head that he was wearing light blue jeans with a hole in the left knee, a dark blue hoodie, he was tan, his jawline was sharp, there was a scar under his left eye, and he had dark brown hair and brown eyes. He was probably in his mid twenties and - for some reason - actually looked nervous...I kept repeating and adding details until I heard his voice.

"Look... I have to do this to prove a point. I won’t hurt you if you listen and behave,” he said with a deep, raspy voice that seemed to shake a little.

He looked in the rear-view mirror, and I nodded my head to let him know I understood. I stayed quiet and looked out the window to see if I knew where we were going... but I had no idea. I then had a thought... to text my dad my location. I pulled my phone out of my pocket and tried to put it by the door, so he wouldn’t be able to see me in the rear-view mirror. My stomach dropped... I realized that my phone was dead. I hoped my dad would realize that something was wrong and would call for help. I closed my eyes so tight, my fear just wanting to forget- but I needed to think of a plan.

I soon felt a jolt and opened my eyes wide. The man in the blue hoodie told me to get out, and I did as he said. He took my wrist and led me to a small little house. I looked around for another small house, or even a road- but I saw nothing. We walked inside...

“I’ve gotta go out... please don’t try anything- I don’t want to hurt you,” the man in the blue hoodie said.

He locked the deadbolt on the door and left. There wasn’t any windows, so I didn’t know where he went, or if he was even going to come back. I started to wonder why he wasn’t scary, or confident like I imagined a kidnapper to be. After awhile, I felt my eyes start to become heavy - I tried hard to stay awake - but soon drifted off, unable to fight sleep any longer.

I woke up the next morning to a sudden banging noise. I went to the door to try to hear what was happening. I put my hand on the door and found it unlocked. The man in the blue hoodie was cooking breakfast. I just stood in the doorway until he noticed me.

“Good morning. Get some breakfast- there are clothes in the closet, if you want to change,” said the man in the blue hoodie, with what seemed like a sincere smile.

I was so confused. Why was he being so nice to me? He didn’t seem like a kidnapper at all. Despite my confusion, I ate and then went and got changed...hoping I would be found and all this would be over...forever.”

She stayed in that house for a week - trapped, not knowing where she was, or how she could possibly escape - yet not physically uncomfortable or in danger. It wasn’t as terrible as she had always thought something like this would be, but she wanted her family and her animals!

The man in the blue hoodie had grown more anxious, so she thought something big was going to happen... would it be good or bad? She kept having nightmares and waking up to find she was still kidnapped...

The man in the blue hoodie was standing outside on a small patio arguing with someone on the phone. Almost total silence from the man in the blue hoodie - why?

He finally opened the door. He told her to come with him. He escorted her to the car. Though not knowing where she was going, she somehow felt safe.

They started off on the highway and then they heard wailing sirens - a police car was going to pull them over. The man in the blue hoodie calmly, yet sternly, told her to not to speak, and that she was his niece...

The muscular, middle-aged police officer came up to the driver’s window. He politely asked how he was doing and then told the man in the blue hoodie that his license plate was expired. The man in the blue hoodie, who she now knows is Nate, got all the registration papers and was finally given a ticket.

She kept to herself, but made sure she acted out of place and scared, hoping to draw attention to herself. Nate went to put the papers back in the glove box, and the police officer nodded, said goodbye, and walked to his car.

Nate continued down the road and finally started to speed up again. He looked back in the rear view
mirror and he looked concerned, even worried. She looked at the road and then tried to look back at what
made him worry, trying not to be obvious, not to draw attention... She saw a white minivan trailing them
in the distance. She was wondering if it had been following them for a while.

Nate soon took the exit ramp to a small little town called Belpre. She had never heard of that town
before - she wanted to go home so bad. Nate had pulled into a gas station and was filling up with gas.
The same white minivan pulled into the gas station and was filling up with gas too. She saw a man get
out of the van, but she wondered why a muscular, young man would be driving a minivan, so she hoped
for the best- maybe he was undercover. She made eye contact with him, and gave him a worried look.
He nodded and she hoped he had a plan to get her out of here.

As Nate got in the vehicle and was leaving, a bunch of cars suddenly blocked the exits. The
undercover police officer pulled out his gun and his fellow undercover cop yelled into the loudspeaker,
“Come out with your hands up.” Nate said a few words under his breath, and then got out with his hands
up. She figured he would have put up more of a fight but was glad he didn’t. She then got out of the car
and ran over to the undercover police officer. He made sure she was okay and they took Nate into
custody.

She was so happy to be getting back to her parents - and then she saw them! They came running up to her
and she was so happy the nightmare had ended. And then it happened.

She screamed, “No, No, No! Get down!”

“Stop screaming and put your hands up, all of you,” Nate yelled.

She thought, “This wasn’t supposed to happen. None of this was supposed to happen. I just want my
life to go back to normal.”

Nate waved a gun in the air, timidly at first, but soon becoming assertive.

“One of you. Bring me a phone and don’t try anything ’cause the first person to die is gonna be this
girl.”

The undercover police officer slowly got up, and pulled a phone out of his pocket. While Nate was
turned around to get the phone, the scrawny, young undercover police officer slid his gun to her dad.
She thought, “This is terrible. I hope nothing happens to him… to any of them.”

Nate got the phone and quickly turned around.

“You better not try anything,” he said while dialing a number on the phone.

Nate turned his back to her father, trying to give himself space for a private conversation. As soon as he
got far enough away, her father brought the gun into his lap and turned off the safety, and the gun was
ready to shoot. He quickly moved the gun out of Nate’s sight, just before Nate got back. After a while,
Nate was finally assured that we were sitting, behaving, and he started to turn.

At that moment her father jumped up with the gun and pointed it at Nate saying, Put your hands up…
NOW!”

Nate turned around, shocked at what was happening. He quickly pointed the gun in his hand at her dad.
BANG! The gun went off. Loud screams came from Harper, his daughter, and Ann, his wife.

A loud gasp rang out into the silence and everyone saw Nate fall to the ground. Harper’s dad had pulled
the trigger first. His limp body hit the hard, solid ground below. The sound of the gun shot through the
silence like a cymbal crash.

“All I could see was Nate falling to the ground... each time a little more violently than before. I hadn’t hated Nate, even though he did kidnap me. I hated him at first, but the more I was with him, the more I grew to like him... and even trust him. It was only a week and a half, but I knew deep down in my heart that I could trust him. It pained me when my dad shot him. I started to look at my dad in a way that made me rethink who I was becoming. I knew that he was my dad, and he did it out of love and protection for me... but my head kept going back to that last day with Nate. I would relive the haunting memory every time I closed my eyes.

I knew that I couldn’t talk to my parents about it because they wouldn’t understand. They would think I
was crazy for trusting my KIDNAPPER. I knew I wouldn’t be strong enough to talk to them by myself,
but I also knew that I couldn’t drag my friends into it. Who would ever understand me?

I started to trap that haunting memory in my brain, and I created a fiction that Nate was a terrible guy,
that did terrible things to me. I kept pushing the real memory farther and farther away, until the only thing that was truthful was the names in my memory. Everything had changed— for better... or for worse... ”
I dipped my toes into the stream and began to shiver, despite the warmth of the sun
My skin now possessed an erratic texture, as if speaking in the language of the blind
The jagged rocks below the surface prodded my naked extremities
They desired my full attention seeing their beauty had been ignored by past travelers
I wondered how long they had lived underneath, and what they so urgently demanded
Without certainty, I recited my fantasy as if they would nod with approval
But my imagination did not spike the drink submerging their bodies
Knowing I was misguided, I persisted nonetheless, engrossed in a possibility of telepathic compliance
The sparkling superficial, I manipulated with the tips of my rigid fingers
I plunged my forearm into the seemingly calm flow, my pores drinking in the yearning drops
At this moment, I became a seer of worlds, their worlds, and how they came to be
The water now to my ankles, I completely understood why sailors drown at sea
My thirst was apparent as my throat scratched the journey of my bitter saliva
I needed to be sustained with their past
Because with enough pressure they would either crack or shine
They realized my dedication to their cause, I heard them scream my name or was it singing
It was desperate and misplaced as if to trust me with their secrets would be wise
I was a record, drag an edge along my flesh and I would screech with the soul of a banshee
I was a captain, commanding my ship to deepen in the threshold of a deep fog
I was a child, filling the air around me with the vibrations of whys and hows
I was an oracle, my eyes glazed as the present played with the possibilities of the future
I was thirsty with nothing to satisfy nor quench me
But the water I could not drink; it was sacred; I did not deserve such repute in my veins
I was waist deep, cleansing the sins that I would continue ‘til death
Because even after my passing, they will persist whether in this form or another
Maybe the stream will dry and the animals will journey for a newer, clearer source
Or perhaps it will freeze over, tricking children into testing its strength, swallowing them
Or even replaced with a flow of shimmering red, creating formations not yet seen
Even they were unsure of their fate, waiting in desperation
My own hands paralleled those of destiny as I caressed their cold, rugged exterior
They whispered their demands in my ear
They wanted my company, and the curiosity that accompanied it
The rocks continued with their screams of delight as my devotion deepened
And this water would cover my own screams as I joined them
I too, would wait for another traveler to show them everything and nothing at all
From a small quiet town in Alabama, a man named Tim Cook emerged. He worked to become top of his high school class, went to college, and maintained the ideals of the American Dream as we know it ("Tim Cook", Bibliography.com). Tim Cook now sits at his desk in Silicon Valley as CEO of Apple, a man of humble beginnings who has risen to be the face of corporate success. On February 16th, 2016, he was faced with a problem much bigger than himself or even managing the multi-billion dollar company he ran. The conflict he was presented with would not only affect his company, but also set a legal precedent for user privacy around the world. The United States government came to Apple and ordered for a “back door” into the iPhone of the 2015 San Bernardino shooter, Syed Rizwan Farook ("The Apple vs. FBI Showdown"). Emotions ran high through the pristine white walls of Apple’s headquarters. Should Apple do what they felt right and defend their customers’ privacy or what is easy, and obey the government of the country they reside in? As the news began to circulate, fear spread across the nation like a plague as people began to construct their own opinions. The fear of living in a world where the nation ordered a corporation to undergo such a perilous task overwhelmed engineers and designers alike. The fear that one day the location of a user’s child or the pictures of their family Christmas could easily become the possession of a hacker. The fear of losing the freedom to know where your information goes. The fear of being watched. Although people often try and boil down the argument of security versus privacy into two black and white sides, the debate is nowhere near that simple because of the multitude of technological, legal, and moral variables that come into play when discussing the privacy of internet users versus the security of a nation.

“Data” is the overarching word that is often used to describe the ever-growing expanse of technological information being recorded. Various forms of data are constantly being gathered, sorted, sold, and displayed every single day from so many sources. In Data and Goliath, Bruce Schneier states, “Data is a byproduct of this high-tech socialization” (14). As an average American in a technologically dependent world, “high-tech socialization” is your day to day interactions with technology—which is the source from which data about you is generated. This data may be your last text message or online purchase, down to even your name, password, and location. Unfortunately, many people do not understand where their data is going—and if they did, there may be a greater desire to keep their data private. This data generated can be used by corporations to create a better and more personalized experience; with the attempt to get a user to consume more of a specific product (Schneier, 16). With so much data constantly being gathered, it is the responsibility of the people to ask if they are comfortable becoming a data point whose information can be bought and sold as a product. Or if they are willing to sacrifice their comfort and convenience to help protect their own data from prying eyes; and to help move towards a world free from unconstitutional surveillance. Some can answer this question with ease, but others may value their convenience over their information being kept out of sight—this is one of many social variables that make the debate so very complex.

Another layer of complexity is added to the discussion of privacy versus security in regards to the role that technology should have in determining how data is to be protect, and how each are defined. The Oxford Dictionary states the definition of security to be; “the state of being free from danger or threat.” Cyber security has inherited this undeviating definition of security; yet the definition of cyber-security contradicts from source to source. Cyber-security’s definition continues to change with technology or
even the systems in which it relates to. The definition is often confused with the definitions of information technology or information security. The reasoning for this misuse is most likely because authors fail to acknowledge that cyber security also inherits the characteristics of information technology. The 3 major aspects of all computer security—including but not limited to information security and cyber security—are: confidentiality, integrity, and availability (Sloms and Niekerk). However, Burmester et al. state that “a network should (at least) support confidentiality, integrity, and availability” but the goals of information security should be to “(a) prevent, or (b) detect and respond to attacks and misuse of computer and network resources” (2). This protection of user information stands to not only protect against any outside entity, including the government. While preventing and detecting attacks is a hugely important role of security, however, a very loaded definition of security has been made that results in misunderstandings about what the role of certain technologies are in a system filled with user data.

Privacy can be defined differently from person to person, the basis of its definition remains relatively unchanging. Mike Burmester and his colleagues define privacy as: “Controlling all information about oneself, including protecting identity (anonymity), personal information, and information about personal activity” (4). In other words, one has the right to determine what is known about them. In Data and Goliath, Bruce Schneier described privacy as an “inherent human right, and a requirement for maintaining the human condition with dignity and respect” (114). He continues on to present privacy as a right to control how one can present themselves. Schneier’s definition of privacy and the definition presented by Burmester et al., are similar in the sense that they are both technically correct, however Schneier brings home the idea that privacy is a right that should not be relinquished. Both these evaluations of privacy embody the general opinion of many who are in favor of user privacy over security.

The fight of privacy versus security in most cases is in terms of personal privacy versus national security. The NSA’s current tactic to find terrorism suspects is to collect a much data as they can and sort through it to find irregularities and red flags in the default pattern to things. “The general practice of amassing and saving all kinds of data is called ‘big data,’ and the science and engineering of extracting useful information from it is called ‘data mining’” (Schneier 33). We have already discussed the various sources that data can come from, but one may ask what is done with this data and what conclusions can be drawn from it. When data is simply collected about your purchasing habits and where you go, if a company would want to, can create decent estimates on how they should be advertising their products to you or other people in a specific demographic just based on data they were given (Schneier 16). The NSA (United States National Security Agency) collects and stores data on Americans in the name of security, and defense against terrorism however their process is questionable. Taking in so data and sifting through it for outliers or suspicious interactions can be a very subjective process, that leads to many false positives. In a society where the fear of terrorism and war is so imminent and primitively ingrained into the minds of citizens, it is difficult to argue the importance of privacy; especially when it is thought to be at the expense of security. The extent of information held by the NSA is obviously hard to know considering the various hoops one must jump to get to that information. Only an inside whistleblower could expose the true extent via experience, and Edward Snowden is arguably the most well know government whistleblower to this generation. He held the position of Systems Administrator Senior Advisor for the Central Intelligence Agency Solutions Consultant and as Telecommunications Information Systems Officer. Snowden released various confidential files from the NSA, letting the public know the true extent of data the NSA was keeping and what it was about. In an interview with Glenn Greenwald called “Whistleblower”, Edward Snowden said that while he was “sitting at [his] desk [he] certainly had the authorities to wiretap anyone from you or your accountant to a federal judge to even the president if [he] had a personal email” (Greenwald). Edward Snowden’s release of said files to various news outlets can be seen as a catalyst to the recent surge in people wanting know about the privacy of their data. According the Pew Research Center “86% of internet users have taken steps online to remove or mask their digital footprints…” The data from a “Post Snowden America” is nothing but blatant proof that society needed a whistle blower to push them into being more aware of what they should do to take action for their personal privacy. It does not matter if you perceive Edward Snowden as a hero or a traitor, what is more important is that he was the man who got Americans talking about a very
real and very important issue of the freedom of their data.

Still, people are increasingly willing to put their personal information onto the internet despite understanding that they are could very well be under surveillance. A question rises that whistleblowers and civil warriors alike have attempted to combat: “Why should I care about privacy? I’ve got nothing to hide.” This question was asked to Edward Snowden (screen name: “SuddenlySnowden”) on a popular web discussion site, Reddit. He crushed the argument in one very memorable line: "Arguing that you don't care about the right to privacy because you have nothing to hide is no different than saying you don't care about free speech because you have nothing to say." This analogy to freedom of speech not only is powerful, but also puts an unfamiliar topic into more understandable terms. In times where people may struggle to understand why a topic affects them or why they should care, it is a fantastic strategy to put the topic at hand into better terms. Other figures such as Tim Cook, CEO of Apple, attempt to use his well-known figure to persuade his customers and the public to invest themselves in a greater problem. In an ABC interview with David Muir, Cook argued that creating a backdoor for the government does not only directly relate to the privacy of customers but also for the safety of public information. Making a key to a single iPhone not only sets a precedent for government agencies to search encrypted phones, but it also puts every single iPhone user at the risk. Not only at the risk of government surveillance, but at the risk of hackers, viruses, and losing parts of their identity and data. It is very difficult to truly force people to care about what happens to their information if they do not have a technical understanding or are in a position where they feel their information is not important enough to be kept private. Persons such as Snowden and Cook have both forced the public to review and understand the true intricacy of this debate.

With so much conflict between tech companies versus hackers, the people versus the government and every combination of the four entities against one another, there must come a form of compromise between user privacy and national security. There are a few solutions that pertain to having a system where people are in control while not allowing those who do not have proper clearance to get a hold of information that they are not allowed to have. Various sources, such as Snowden and even members of the government both agree that authentication in conjunction with encryption is the best route to allow users to pick and choose the information they share while keeping sensitive information secure. End to end encryption is a form of security that makes messages unreadable to anyone except the sender and receiver of said message. Cook mentions that Apple phones use encryption to secure their messages. He even states that the government has helped fund encryption efforts (Exclusive: Apple CEO…).

“Authentication and privacy: being able to identify oneself is a matter of authentication, while preventing others from assuming your identity or from authenticating you without your approval is a matter of privacy” (Burmeister et. al, 4). Bruce Schneier states that although every system has its own weaknesses, “Authentication basically works” (144). While authentication is a great way to not only preserve security and privacy, a certain degree of accountability is necessary from users. The authors of “Security or Privacy, Must We Choose?” state that authentication, “allows users to maintain privacy as long as they don't abuse the privilege.” Authentication is a good compromise between privacy for users and ensuring a secure nation thanks to accountability. While it still has its weaknesses, it serves as a decent compromise.

Nearly 2 months later, the FBI calls off the court case against Apple, claiming that they have found another way to get into the phone. A sigh of relief was heard from every single person who supported Apple was felt through the nation as big tech companies rallied up their engineers to patch security issues, and squash bugs in their code in light of recent developments. No one wanted their customers to be the victims of the next big security breach. The fight does not end for Cook or his company, as he stood strong for his company and the security of millions of people who could have come victim to hacking or unconstitutional surveillance. Hopefully with time and understanding, a new generation of more aware internet users will rise, who strive to understand the true ins and outs of personal privacy and arguments for national security. Then, and only then, can society focus on being able to live a life where security and privacy are intertwined rather than picked over the other.
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“Woah!” I stammered in awe. I couldn’t believe my eyes! I was riding on a bus after a class camping trip when I paused to look out my window. Unfolding around me in the late summer of August, was the beauty of a pastoral scene. The spacious fields of gracefully swaying tall grass, were delicately woven into bold green and gold patterns of farming plots. Wild flowers of purples, yellows and pinks stretched upwards towards the warm, radiant sun that spread its love over the fields. There were so many beautiful colors! I grabbed my sketch pad and colored pencils to start drawing. But suddenly, I stopped, my hand frozen in midair. Something was wrong.

I squinted at the fields and flowers. Exactly what color were they? Were they green or orange? Gold or brown? I shook my head in frustration. I couldn’t draw the fields and flowers if I couldn’t identify what colors they were. And was that a shadow I saw? Was it gray, or black, or blue? Then all at once, I remembered the valuable lesson I had learned while teaching myself to “draw” in seventh grade: One “color” is made of many shades.

The colors that we see, in art, in nature, in life, are built from one color outwards. When artists draw, they literally build up colors, starting with one light shade, then adding and weaving in different layers and textures, different colors and patterns to create a realistic depiction of life.

When we describe a color, we are not describing that one color, but in fact, the layers, the struggle and harmony, between many colors.

However, my art experience taught me much more than just how to draw. When I looked at the world around me, I realized that the world itself is full of shades. The building of colors doesn’t just stop with art; it bleeds over onto the larger canvas of life. Life, school, people, places, ideas are full of layers and different colors.

When I began to look in shades of colors the whole world opened up. In school, I began to challenge myself to think past what I saw or read on the surface. I began to ask the question why? It wasn’t enough for me to know Newton’s Laws; I wanted to know why they worked, and what he was thinking. It wasn’t enough to know that the Boston Massacre was a misunderstanding; I wanted to know the motives and the atmosphere at the time. I wanted to delve deeper.

One of the most significant changes was the way I interacted with people - my shallow perspective on empathy changed. When I began viewing the world in color, and not just black and white facts, I looked at a people’s individual story. I tried to look at all perspectives and opinions. When talking with others during my volunteer work at the hospital and while starting an affinity group at my school. My drive to try to understand others helped me connect with them on a whole new level. I began to understand that people themselves are made of layers. Layers of pain and layers of happiness. Layers of grief and layers of triumph, which shape who they are as a person.

It’s interesting how a seemingly insignificant moment of learning about shades of colors completely changed my view of myself and others around me. I now value empathy, different perspectives and different ways of understanding. To me, life is about asking questions, wanting to learn more, and understanding that there is always something underneath the surface. When looking out on the field that hot August day, there was no one color to describe the fields and the flowers. They were made up of shades of color, just like life. I view life in shades of colors.
I drum my fingers against the desk, my brain a sloppy bowl of alphabet soup overflowing with terms and definitions and names and dates and concepts and theories. The nervous chatter of negativity envelops me as more kids file into class, dreading the hour to come. The air is abuzz with the last minute cramming of the material.

“Wait, so what was the answer to question… 24? Please, that’s the last one.”
“Ugh, I’m going to fail.”
“Do you know when the retake is?”
“Did you study?”
“Same.”
“Tell me when, when will we ever use this in real life anyways?”
“Could you see my leg from the teacher’s desk?”
“It’s totally fine, I only have a 79% in this class. And I didn’t study.”

I blankly flipped through my flashcards, not retaining any of it. With the ring of the bell, I put them away and prepared the mentally grueling process of accessing the test online.

You’re going to do fine; you’ve studied the past couple of nights! came the reassuring voice from somewhere in my head as I logged into Canvas.

Yeah, right. You know some teachers like to put random questions in there, spice things up, throw you off- see who the real smart kids are. Bet you won’t pass! snarked another voice as I scrolled past my previous tests and their corresponding scores, looking for the one we were about to take, feeling sick to my stomach.

It’ll be fine. And anyways, you have a cushion- remember the extra credit assignment?

Found the test. A small exhale.

That was just two extra points- that won’t save you when your grade goes down 5%!

Seeing that this test is timed, my nerves a little more frayed.

You’ll be fine- you go through this spiel every time you test. Be quiet and focus.

My foot begins to twitch all of its own accord.

Okay, but won’t it be fun to think of all the ways you could mess up? A misread word here, a forgotten term there-

STOP.

I type in the access code, my legs now bouncing under the table. I just want to get this over with.

“Good luck, guys,” the teacher says with a smile, and I begin my test. I see familiar terms and definitions and try to gather my wits. Multiple choice question after multiple choice question, I’m not alone when I groan at the repetition of it. I scan the choices and select one- not for my immediate comprehension- but for how I believe the teacher would have answered the question. Continuing on, I question how the choices are set up. Does answering these questions correctly even measure my understanding? How does picking the best answer out of four measly choices show our comprehension?

According to Peter Sacks, the author of “Standardized Minds: The High Price of America’s Testing Culture”, multiple choice testing promotes the idea that there are only right and wrong answers. Further research concludes that this form of testing favors male students, as studies say a subconscious connection is made like “the game-like point scoring of multiple choice questions” (Standardized Tests). My take
upon this is that if we begin to see testing as black and white, we’ll begin to apply that self-hindering sight to real-world problems and that’s only setting us up for failure- as well as being totally unrealistic. And while some will say that people will face the harsh reality of how things aren’t right or wrong, black or white, over time, why put people through that when we can immediately clarify that things are not black and white to begin with? Furthermore, multiple choice tests cannot accurately measure our intelligence if we’re being spoon-fed material that we have never had a chance to conclude for ourselves; they are someone else’s deductions we adopt every time we pencil in a multiple choice answer. Concepts and ideas should always be open to interpretation and multiple choice anything is not enabling that.

My attention back to the test: after 20 minutes, I’ve answered all of my questions. As I review my test, anxious and wary of the diagrams and my haste in answering them- I stab the blue “SUBMIT QUIZ” button before I can go through the whole self-doubt cycle of changing my answers.

The screen takes several moments to grade the multiple choice test, and I age years anxiously waiting for my final score.

Finally, my score comes back and I relax. Phew. This won’t affect my grade. I get out a book to read, to unwind and wait until the class starts talking, signaling the end of the testing period. As the chatter rises, I hear the conversations, expecting them to be positive, at least compared to the talk before taking the test- but that’s not what I hear. Instead:

“Crap. I have to come in before school to retake this. I don’t have a ride.”

“Mom is going to freak out when she gets this notification.”

“I don’t even remember talking about this.”

“How did you do so well?”

“I studied for 2 hours- what is this?”

“I DO NOT remember discussing any of what was on the test!”

As I listened to the indignant clamor, I knew that while I may have done decently and learned the material to the point of passing, I didn’t comprehend it. At least not thoroughly. I’d looked at a worksheet and memorized some key phrases that so happened to stand out and used common sense to apply that to questions on the test. As much as I didn’t want to admit it, I didn’t actually understand how this concept applied to that object and the result of such a relationship. And come next week, it would be a vague inkling of uncertainty quickly brushed aside to shallowly cram for the next quiz, the next test.

You could argue that it was my fault for not going in for tutoring, and then I could fire back with a million excuses- but at the end of the day, what I retained in class, alongside my classmates, is what I would be tested on. And I hadn’t been given enough time to soak in the information. According to a study conducted primarily by researcher Linda Valli where she tracked the 4th and 5th grade classes of over 20 elementary schools, she found that teachers were being driven to be more test-oriented as school standards were pushed higher and higher. This leads to a teacher just barely skating over several key concepts of a unit, expecting the students to stay caught up and alert of barely discussed topics so the teacher can meet school requirements (Valli). From my point of view as a student, come test time, the deep questions over the shallow overview we had undertaken is not a sound review of our intelligence. However, the same study deduced that as long as teachers taught the material thoroughly, students were completely capable when in-depth questions were asked of them, and provided competent answers (Valli). So this isn’t to whine about how large and stressful the workload is at school and how grades are totally rigged- but to say that as long as we’re given enough time to absorb new information and come to our own conclusions, we are more than adept at being asked challenging questions and investigative lines of thought. Until we can assure that all students are given the appropriate amount of time to make their own conclusions with new material, testing will never truly be an accurate measure of intelligence.

I believe that all the emphasis on testing constantly, so unrealistically and so aggressively- will set us up for failure. Testing over subjects without break and a chance to absorb the material forces students to memorize, memorize, memorize rather than grasp the concept and practice applying it. For example, Maryellen Weimer, a well-known writer and speaker in new and reformed teaching methods, writes of a time where she specifically sought out to comprehend rather than memorize and forget. Taking an undergraduate non-majors chemistry course, she wanted to apply the method of understanding the
concepts rather than memorizing and eventually forgetting. With the onslaught of all-new material, she began to crack under the pressure and made note cards of things she needed to read more upon later. But come the night before the exam, she had a large collection of note cards that even if she had pulled an all-nighter-could not get through. So she succumbed and spent the night memorizing rather than working on comprehension. The next day, she aced her exam-along with the rest of her class-but at the expense of truly understanding the material (Weimer). In other words, the speed of the curriculum and teachers forces students to memorize rather than comprehend, preventing them from delving into concepts and application of the material. The system sets students up for failure resulting in an inaccurate measure of intelligence.

Another point of which shows that intelligence shouldn’t be measured through testing was shown to me only a few hours after the test.

“How’d you on the test?” I asked my friend, Maurice, during lunch.

She smiled. “I did okay.”

“You got a hundred, didn’t you!”

“I did, yeah,” she replied, her grin splashed across her face. “I couldn’t believe it when my score popped up. But I did not study so hard this week to get anything less, so I deserved it.”

“You really did,” I agreed, high-fiving her.

As we started in on our food, she piped up in a conspiratorial tone, “Guess what?”

“What?”

“During the test, there was this whole bunch of kids cheating right next to me. They came into class and tried copying, like, this whole binder of notes on their leg. When they realized that was probably not going to work- and it took them a few minutes- they started writing on index cards and hiding it between their thighs. I only found out from how they kept glancing at their laps. No one smiles and nods like that at their lap.”

I laughed. “Did they get caught?”

“Nah, I heard them later, celebrating,” she replied.

This conversation got me thinking. What did it say about our education system if kids were cheating just to get better scores? When did we start to value a grade over our comprehension? Stanford psychology professor, Carol Dweck, says when people fixate on a scalable number, they are limited in their view of anything outside of that. She goes on to say that the quantitative score becomes their definition of intelligence, with all consideration of the measure of improvement out the window. So when students come to school, it is no longer a setting of which people come to expand and develop their minds; instead a place of competition and to determine one’s intelligence through a number. As this mindset becomes the one of the majority, too much emphasis will be placed on testing, which increases the temptation to cheat (Kolker). But if we, as a collective, could place less emphasis on test scores and GPAs, the main motivation of cheating (which is to do well without comprehending/not doing the work) would be lessened and we could just realize that test scores are just that- and not a true calculation of how smart someone is. We need to emphasize that the main priority of school is to improve as a student and as a person.

And although I understand that testing is a tried-and-true method of measuring comprehension for the most part, we need to lessen the amount of multiple-choice formatted tests out there and change the curriculum to account for the different learning styles there are in student bodies as this will help stop enforcing the mindset that a bad grade equates to an unintelligent mind. When all is said and done, we need to remember that the purest form of the student mentality is the want to learn and grow as a person so we can be content in who we become in the future. Unless we change our mentalities regarding testing, we won’t be successful.
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Jaccob Nicholson
Grade 12

Why We Need Net Neutrality
Critical Essay

Platte County High School
Platte City, MO
Teacher: Heidi Mick

Net Neutrality is an incredibly important concept for the modern age. It is the idea that your Internet Service Provider (ISP) cannot restrict data and must treat every website the same. This prevents ISPs from nickel and diming every user of the internet. But recently, it was repealed by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) who voted 3-2 to repeal Obama era Net Neutrality. This was spearheaded by Ajit Pai, a former Verizon lawyer with the demeanor of a dad trying to be “hip” and “jive” with the youngins. This is a disaster and reeks of corruption and greed. With the regional monopolies that the ISPs have created, Net Neutrality was the only thing protecting the consumer from their all consuming greed. With it now gone, the internet as we know it would cease to exist. That is why we must reinstate Net Neutrality and make it permanent. Be it by making it a law or anything. We need Net Neutrality.

First, a little background on what led to this point. Net Neutrality was instituted in 2010 under Title One legislation. Verizon then sued the FCC saying it didn’t have the authority to enforce this. As a result, the FCC reclassified Net Neutrality under Title Two legislation. ISPs hated this movie and lobbied to have the decision reversed. Now cut to the new administration spearheaded by Pai. One of his main goals was to repeal Net Neutrality to return the internet to its pre-2015 version.

As stated above, Net Neutrality is Invaluable. It protects the consumer from the greed of the ISPs. Without Net neutrality, ISPs can and will create fast and slow lanes to make sites pay to be in the fast lane. Net Neutrality also keeps the internet on a level playing field. For example, say I wanted to create a service for video streaming. With Net neutrality larger sites like YouTube can’t pay ISPs to slow down my site thus making it nearly impossible for it to get traction. Similarly, ISPs with products themselves can force them down consumers throats by slowing down their competitors and speeding up their own. And worse yet, without Net Neutrality, the ISP’s can chop up websites and offer them through different packages. They could make a social media package for $10 a month, a media package for $5 a month, a communication package for $10 a month. They would basically make the internet like cable, only offering select packages to get the most money possible. This would destroy the internet as we know it, harming innovation and restricting the way we get information. It would go from a superhighway of information and innovation to a service designed for the wealthy that is designed to nickel and dime the consumer for a basic service that modern life depends on. These last two scenarios are not just hypothetical’s, they have happened in the past and without Net Neutrality will happen again. 5 major ISPs have been accused of throttling data to sites such as Netflix. (“Webster, Andrew. Major ISPs Accused of Deliberately Throttling Traffic.” The Verge, The Verge, 6 May 2014, www.theverge.com/2014/5/6/5686780/major-isps-accused-of-deliberately-throttling-traffic.”) There are also many examples of ISPs not following Net Neutrality before 2015. For example, in 2012 AT&T blocked Apple’s FaceTime app in and attempt to force customers to use their competing service. (Press, Free. “AT&T Blocking FaceTime.” Free Press, Save the Internet, 2012, www.savetheinternet.com/at-ftimetime.) Another example involves Verizon blocking Google Wallet so that people would be forced to use their inferior product ISIS (Goldman, David. “Verizon Blocks Google Wallet.” CNNMoney, Cable
These examples show that ISPs will block services that compete with their own services. The ISPs will also separate the internet into different packages to make as much money from people as possible. In other countries without Net Neutrality such as Portugal the ISPs have done just this. Offering different packages for different internet services such as YouTube and Facebook.

I have no doubt in my mind that without Net Neutrality, ISPs will take advantage of the consumer and do what they have done in the past.

However, not everyone has the same opinion as me. FCC chairman Ajit Pai and many others claim that Net Neutrality harms innovation and infrastructure investment, it would give to much control to the government and it is not necessary for protecting the internet. Ajit Pai has claimed that the internet thrived before 2015, the year that Net Neutrality started being enforced under Title two. That this ham fisted ruling has stifled innovation and infrastructure investment. However, that is the exact opposite of what happened. The ISPs have been unaffected by the 2015 Net Neutrality ruling. (Coldewey, Devin. “Sen. Schatz on FCC: ‘They Have No Idea How Outraged People Are about to Be.’” TechCrunch, TechCrunch, 26 Apr. 2017, techcrunch.com/2017/04/26/sen-schatz-on-fcc-they-have-no-idea-how-outraged-people-are-about-to-be/.) In a Version investors meeting, they told their investors that, “To be real clear…, this does not influence the way we invest… We’re going to continue to invest into our networks and our platforms, both in wireless and wireline FIOS, and were we need to do nothing will influence that.” Francis J. Shammo, Executive VP and CFO Version. (Oliver, John, director. Net Neutrality II: Last Week Tonight with John Oliver (HBO). YouTube.com, HBO, 7 May 2017, Net Neutrality II: Last Week Tonight with John Oliver (HBO).) Keep in mind that during these investor meetings, companies are required by law not to lie. Verizon has stated that the Net Neutrality ruling has unaffected their business and will not affect the way they invest. Another claim against Net Neutrality is that it gives the government too much control over the internet. I understand that many hate how the government feels the need regulate pretty much everything. But with something as important as the internet, the government should regulate it. There are just some things the government must regulate to protect its consumers. Think about it this way, would you want the government not to regulate the energy industry. No, you wouldn’t. It's incredibly important to the American people and must be protected by corporate greed. Why should the internet be treated any different. They are both utilities we need in modern life. The final counterpoint to Net Neutrality is that it is not necessary. This is based on the idea that the ISPs will not backstab the consumer. While many ISPs have stated that they while not do this, that is just temporary. The only reason they are saying this is because at this is point in time, everyone cares about Net Neutrality. Once people settle down and move on to the next thing ISPs will take these statements back. This has already started with companies like Comcast. Recently, Comcast has removed certain parts from their Net Neutrality statement. They have walked back their promise not to throttle and pay prioritize their internet services. (Brodkin - Nov 29, 2017 6:01 pm UTC, Jon. “Comcast Deleted Net Neutrality Pledge the Same Day FCC Announced Repeal.” Ars Technica, Conde Nast, 29 Nov. 2017, arstechnica.com/tech-policy/2017/11/comcast-deleted-net-neutrality-pledge-the-same-day-fcc-announced-repeal/.) They have set the stage for an internet where it is designed to squeeze money out of the consumer.

In conclusion, Net Neutrality was and is still incredibly important with the current landscape. With ISPs having regional monopolies, Net Neutrality was the only thing keeping these evil companies from taking advantage of the consumer. Now there's nothing stopping them from taking advantage of the consumers. There was no reason for Net Neutrality to be repealed. It had over 50% bipartisan support (Graham, Edward. “Majority of Voters Support Net Neutrality Rules as FCC Tees Up Repeal Vote.” Morning Consult, Morning Consult, 29 Nov. 2017, morningconsult.com/2017/11/29/strong-support-net-neutrality-rules-fcc-considers-repeal/) and it did not crush innovation or have any negative effect on the internet.
The only reason it was repealed is because Ajit Pai is a Verizon corporate shill and only wanted to line the pockets of the ISPs. Net Neutrality is necessary for preserving the free and open internet and without it, the internet as we know it will cease to exist.
When I'm thirty... I'll be broke. Not by my own doing. Well, actually it will probably be all my fault. I'll get my first paycheck, and as I feel that cold-hard cash... Wait. It's a payCHECK not payCASH, so let me rephrase that. I'll get my first paycheck, and as I feel that flimsy, physically worthless, piece of crushed tree bark between my fingertips, I will vividly imagine its possibilities. Shoes, shoes galore, the Iphone XXX 21, being held in its ten foot wide stand in my gold-plated bedroom. Oh the cars and clothes, the diamonds and delicious gourmet food. The mansions in Florida. No! Belize. I will own my own island to put the mansion on, in Belize. I'll even buy a Green Monkey, if I want. I'll have custom made lil' Bugatti's for my children. Oh, those lucky children. What else will I buy? The great thing is, I have no idea! I'll buy anything... everything! I'll donate to the hungry and Hurricane Sebastanya relief. I'll invest in a stock from some random baby wipe company that'll go bankrupt in six months... but... who cares? It'll be the greatest time of my life. Except for the fact that my first paycheck is only thirty dollars. And I went broke after my first pair of Payless sneakers. The rest is on credit.
Mikayla Parsons
Grade 12

My One Regret
Short Story

Hazelwood West High School
Hazelwood, MO
Teacher: Abby Daniels

It was a trap from the beginning.

I already knew what I was getting myself into, yet...I just couldn’t cut off my ties with you. It was unintentional. I never wanted anything to do with anyone. I never thought that you, someone I hardly knew, someone I would’ve never met if it wasn’t for that day, would end up finding a place so close to my heart.

You were always so kind to me, always worrying about me, but I didn’t want to accept it. I didn’t want to face the pain of accepting you, only to lose you just like everyone else I cared about. Time moved on and days turned to months.
Without realizing it, you, Zak, and even Rose, all of you had become important to me. I found myself looking forward to seeing all of you, especially. The darkness that lurked in loneliness, was instantly replaced with your radiance. You became my light. Before I knew it, I was smiling and laughing for the first time in years.

Maybe that’s why it hurts so much. My mind...my heart…
It all just...hurts.

I guess it’s because you’re not here, because you’re not by my side, though at the moment that’s exactly how I prefer it to be. Every time I close my eyes, you’re always there with me, holding my hand and smiling that same, beautiful smile I love so much. But when I open my eyes again, I find myself alone, in the same dark, cold room I’ve come to recognize as my unfortunate home.

And...that’s okay.

There was always a risk. I knew, but you didn’t. There was always something that kept taking those close to me. Yet, I still took my chances with you. No matter what I did, the people in my life always seemed to disappear, they just seemed to fade away. I tried so hard to forget them...and I did. I know they were there, I just don’t remember anything about them.

This time, I don’t want to forget. I want to hold onto all of our memories so I can look back on them and remember why it is I just gave up. They came, hurting you, wanting to take you and without even thinking, without hesitation, I stepped in and took your place.

The thought of you being trapped here instead...is enough to make my heart stop. Setsuko...as long as you’re safe...I don’t care if I’m stuck here. I’ll endure any pain they give me, take anything they throw at me...if only to protect you. I’ll survive so you can as well. And...if fate allows it...i’ll be able to see you again.

I guess...I really have gone soft...haven’t I? I was so worried about losing someone else and feeling pain
again, feeling that twinge of weakness I hated so much, knowing I couldn’t protect the one I cared about. I thought losing you now, no longer being able to see you, I would be sad, but…

I’m smiling. I’m actually happy.

I’m happy that you aren’t in my position, happy that they didn’t take you and they took me instead. I thought I would feel remorse, regret, all those things I felt after losing all those precious to me, but with you, all of you, I feel nothing but happiness because this time they didn’t take the ones I cared for, they took me. This time, I got to protect those closest to me instead of them protecting me. After I let that thought sink in, I couldn’t help but smile even though my current situation is awful.

I don’t know how long it’ll be before we meet…or if we’ll ever meet again.

Sometimes I wonder…are you trying to find me? Do you think about me at all? If you do, I hope they’re only good things. I don’t want you to think about me being gone. I want you to smile like you always did. I don’t know how long I’ll last but…I just hope it’ll be long enough for you to be somewhere far away from here.

This is all just a game to them, a way to break me and, if I die, I hope you know that I died happily. I died with your wellbeing in mind. I don’t regret my decision one bit. If I could go back in time, I wouldn’t change meeting you, even if it meant still ending up here. I wish I could tell you all of this.

My only regret is not telling you how I truly felt. I never got to tell you how much you meant to me, how important you have become to me.

My only regret is not telling you

“I love you.”
Isabella Peng
Grade 8

The Bird
Poetry

Ladue Middle School
Saint Louis, MO
Teacher: Janice Davis

A bird stuck in a cage
In an eternal oblivion of hate
Forgetting how to cry
Only knowing goodbye

Once tall and powerful
Born from the mightiest of trees
Degraded to a simple sapling
Then to a small seed

The evening wind blows through
It sings for its release
Silent cries, calling out
To be noticed, to be loved
Escape is what is desired
But how long can it be endured?

The door of life opens
So much to be seen
A single light shines through
Though darkness is foreseen

Stronger day by day
The flames growing within
Power circulating through
Saving the lives of the seen

The bird flies
But fails to be free
Nothing for it to fly
For it has no more wings
The Moon watched me, casting an eerie shadow.
It Framed pale skin;
Highlighted sunken cheeks;
Illuminated sharp, focused eyes,
-gleaming with the sorrow of a widow
-gleaming with the purity of a child-
Pins and needles tickled numb fingers.
Cold sailed through,
barely noticed.
Bare trees loomed high above,
Branches brushed fingertips with heaven.

Footprints followed like shadows of the past.
-Never forgetting where you’ve come from
And where you’re going-
Snow falled fresh,
So stunning it shined like stars.

Far away pinpricks of light drilled through the everlasting night,
Cinnamon and honey danced toward me through the air;
Somewhere, a fire sang.

While Nature slumbered under blankets of white,
The People rejoiced...

Jubilees began as people clambered to be the first.
Calling to the Gods above;
Shouts and Prayers

...Sorrows
...Regrets
...Rejoices
...Dreams

Dreams of dawns anew,
Dreams of loved ones lost,
Dreams of hope regained.

Dreams so bright,
If They yelled them loud enough,  
It seemed They could crack the ice.

When the prayers were heard; Spring would come  
New life would brew.  
From the tundra,  
Hope would rise.

They screamed so loud I expected the earth to tremble.  
Mountains shall rise,  
Seas shall fall back.  
Their cries so fierce;  
Even the most tenacious man would head them.

Words desperate and free,  
Calming the harsh winter wind.  
Flooding the world with warmth so grand,  
- The sun turns green with envy -

_Its coming, they said_  
*It will be here.*  
*It is there;*  
*Just beyond the horizon;*

- The sun peeks out -
Like a Virgin (End of the Rope Remix)

“...great about this entire generation? We’re like 90 percent atheist and everyone’s morals are fucked. Like we love everything, but also—”
“...all blood, sex, death.”
“Yeah. We’re wilding out, man.”
“Especially that death part, my dude. I crave the sweet embrace of oblivion, please and thanks.”
“Amen to that.”

My mother doesn’t wear a hijab in the house so her locks flow heavily over her shoulders. In her age they should be thinner or grayer than they are, but they seem suspended under the shawl. She looks like a young woman from the back. Her face tells a different story.

“Mamoni, go into doctory. You will be so happy when you are older. Please, Shonamoni, for me? I love you,” she pleads in a saccharine voice into my chest. It seems like she is growing smaller rather than me changing at all. Every year adds another weight to her shoulders. (And more desperation into her plea for my future.)

Carefully, I untangle my labs from hers and, gently as is possible, push her back.

“No.”

It’s soft over the 6 inch gap between our faces. I back away further. Her eyes harden— or maybe I can’t see the glare of the windows in them anymore, I don’t know. She gets even smaller. A flinch runs up my fingers. I add abortively, “Sorry.” I don’t think it helped.

People talk about young love as if it’s anything more that a mad rush to satisfy hormones that are suddenly on fire. Between the cinderblock hallways of schools there are hundreds of hook-ups. Cheap cherry lip gloss travels daily down a river of spit and smiles. It’s the most exciting thing that could happen to you.

(I’m not a stranger, though. There’s a certain one. Lips cut into his face like clay, always chapped as well. A soft pink. I try not to stare as he walks by, but we are all slaves to our bodies.)

Dad comes home at 9:21 pm with a storm riding his brow line. His hospital is only 42 minutes away but he is always oceans away from us; a different weather pattern of cold updrafts and air currents. Maybe, that’s why it always ends in disaster. Frigid words crashing into the blazing tropics my mother so misses: it’s a recipe for a storm. Rain is dripping from the plaster ceiling and gathering bestowed the tiles. I find lying under the ceiling fan helps; it’s less noticeable on carpet.

(My mother’s dreams permeate the cloying humidity. To have a base to stand on, riches she could depend on when they began swinging harsh words and harsher stares would change everything for her. By God, I cannot become this. )

The weather is stifling.
“Hey. Wanna fuck?”
I whip my head around towards him.
“What?”
“I mean. I know you and you know me? It doesn’t have to be that big a deal? I know we’re both looking for some experience.”
“Umm…….”
I don’t give him a response.
(Panic.)

It’s a sin to date. It’s a sin to not marry, to not swear yourself to the first person that makes it under the folds of your skirt.
Of course I believe in God’s laws. How could I not in the home of such devout believers?

“Mamoni, think about your future. I will find you a prince and you will have wonderful beautiful children, but you need to have something first. A job to stand on. The woman should always have more power than the man so he does no push her around. Okay mamoni?”
“Maa…”
What to say in return. That’s not the future I want. I don’t want an endless cyclical fate, reruns fo my parents, a magnifying glass to all my flaws, and God forbid I don’t reign over whatever family I may build.

I haven’t had a first kiss. No relationship either. My sister lied for 3 years saying she’d never then go on day long dates at “libraries” they didn’t suspect. I’ve had nothing like it, a barren desert for a love life.
“God, I just wish I had a boyfriend, you know?” She lies her head in my lap draping her hair over my thighs. “It’s cold, and I’m cranky and want to cuddle.” She glares.
“Mmmmm, I hear you,” I say curling my pinky in her locks.
“We’ve been friends for forever. You’d tell me in you ever did anything right?” She bounces back up exuberant as ever, forcing a smile out of me in turn.
She pauses.
“Or if you did anything, right?” She wiggles her eyebrows madly, moving as if there were a oiled machine behind them, a hysterical metronome.
“Umm,” I choke, strangled and flustered. She dissolved into giggles and loud guffaws, and I try my best, but my throat seems weighed down by the cloying weight of my larynx.
The other shoe will drop at a speed of 9.8 m/sec and gravity feels too real.

It goes like this in my mind, playing like a medical slideshow of some tragedy or other—not to illicit some kind of sympathy, humanity but to stare at vacantly. Great midnight skies hanging from our lower lashes, pointing out tissues violated and arteries hit. Blank pupils we glade over; maybe they’re reflections anyway. The first slide is a title, badly printed stock font in 16 pt. script. An empty form dragging over acne down my spine, over black hairs on potting-soil skin: still dirty from dollar store body wash and hygiene habits that are slowly swirling down the faucet drain, only caught on the knotted mass clogging all my pipes. He must ignore the tack that creates my curls, trudging over the desert skin that rubs off my arms. He’d ignore the grid system my body must make, a highway system leading away and towards in equal measure with cellulite stretch marks and fat roll creases. There’s an indent from where the elastic of my three year old panties dig into my waist, and I have never bothered to fix it. It grows along with the wrinkle atop my forehead. Stunning, surely. It doesn’t matter; I flip the slide, and he ignores the jiggling fat along my thighs. I, in turn, might deny his. I don’t know. He has never been anything but a blank specter of hands and breaths and movement.

Touch is hard to create in the hollow sound of a ceiling fan and the falling hours. I make a laundry list
of adjectives instead: rough, unpracticed, unpleasant, seeking, and sorry. Fingertips reaching down into rough, purple-brown lips in the drag of calluses and dry flesh. Is it planned? Is there time to prepare or do we ignore his slightly too long nails and what gathers beneath them? We are not close. Those hands are the only place our flesh meets. Cut breaths hang in the overcast, humid skies and we do not make our wooden eyes meet. A hostage situation were we are both jailers and complacency means locking the ink running down our throats behind the pearly gates at our jaws. So I lie passively, bones seeping lower with my weight.

The slides are digressing— I could not keep up anyhow with my slurred, ink blot notes. 12 pt. text starts filling over the white backdrop and the images dwindle. It would hurt I think. I cannot imagine an all-encompassing ecstasy that brings so many back when the only thing that’s existed there has been the thick gush of blood sometime near the 20th. Friction. Girth. Hurt from a stretch that really wouldn’t disappear even after he did. Our hips would have to meet now. Despite the circumstance, maybe I’d take note of the change in shade between his glowing peach skin and my ashen brown, and, if I couldn’t bring myself to look, maybe I’d stare at our nearly brushing elbows. He becomes more human as the vision fades: he must be uncomfortable too. He must be a person like me. But I don’t want to think about it anymore because I’m quivering from the air vent at my feet, and maybe the diluted horror I can’t seem to escape.

I get up. The stray web of hairs that have gathered on the carpet stick to my arms, almost solid enough to be grounding. My wrists tremble under the weighty silence.

It’s like the feeling you get when you’re absolutely starving. Ravenous for any morsel of food that could come your way. But you wait far too long and suddenly you’ve looped back to nauseous. It’s a strange desperation of needing food, but not being able to bear the thought of it.

My parents are gone, and the house is still except for my ceiling fan. I don’t want an empty house.
In Progress

The world never seems to move. You know that the world is spinning out of place and crashing through the universe with no regard to you. But it never seems to move.
The sun rises. Clouds blossom over the sky. The ground stays. That makes you sane with open air. Still land.

You move on.

Always leaving and moving and breaking. Suffocating under the weight. Of staying in place, so you don’t. You just move on. And it hurts. Like tearing blistered skin crawling across the ground. But you can’t stay. It’s too small for you.

“Staying here long, darling?”
She says, swiping down the counter. Smiles. Tries to make conversation. Maybe just trying to get a tip.

Questions.
Your hands are shaking.
“No.”

“I’m traveling. Going ho- to my parents.”
Not home. You think you lost that.


And now you’re going back. What made it so hard. Broken home. Never knew how to. Like frayed, cut threads clinging where they can’t belong, they still call. Even while you move along. Made the decision. Abandoned their home.
Maybe yours too.

“Well… good luck honey.”
You nod dumbly.

City’s edge. There’s a shop there, selling worn-out souvenirs and dry food. Used to be a girl named Sarah. Worked every day. Trying to leave. Wanted nothing more than to find love in Paris. Tried to get there, hopelessly. With every breath.
You talked to her. She understood. That there wasn’t enough air here. Called you both claustrophobic. Plotted the day she’d go.

She cried with you. When you were stolen home. Pushed into tight walls and harsh words. Couldn’t breathe. In four walls. Dim lights. Sarah understood. You too. You cried when she was gone. To yells. Smashed plates.
Sarah died.


And you left.
She never did. You went to Paris once. Didn’t have a picture to leave, so you carved her name into a street corner. Sarah. Sarah, who never made it. Sarah, who’s dead. Sarah, who cried.

“What can I help you find anything in the store?”
“Just… looking.”

The sky is grey on one half. Brilliant oranges on other. The sky’s been like this before. Looking over Munich, you saw the same sky. It grounds you now. Still so much air.

Please.
Please.

The ground is asphalt now. Cracks. And you remember scraping skin here. Scrabbling to run. Get off before it swallows you whole.

It leads to grass. Grass to concrete. To humans. Some in houses and some in homes. Some that called you.

Do you want to see them?
Do you?


Look up.

The sky. Hasn’t moved. It’s the same you’ve seen everywhere. The same beautiful sky you’ve always seen. You’re breathing. And the sky’s a mural of the colors you still cannot understand. It’s still there. There’s still air.

And then you can breathe. The sky. It grounds you. So you breathe.

Walk up.
Inhale.
Ring the bell.
Exhale.

Look at the sky and know which of all your skylines haunts behind you.

Inhale.
And the door opens.
Jada Reid
Grade 12

I Am Not My Parents
Poetry

Collegiate School of Medicine and Bioscience
Saint Louis, MO
Teacher: Chandra Alford

1
with every crinkle under her eyes, she smiles
her smile didn’t come from her mouth as often as it did her eyes
her father had the same tendency
he’d admire things from afar
but she would never know because he was gone before she said her first word
as the crinkles under her eyes do,
he disappeared and would seldom reappear
in the darkest of corners
within the reflections of her eyes
he came
“dad?”
the cars passed her by with a rev of an engine,
as her childhood did
and she was left there,
waiting

2
I asked my mom to stop smoking,
And she held up her hands
“I will, I will” She cried
She threw the cigarette down,
And it sunk far into the ground
But it soon found her again
I asked my mom to stop smoking,
But the toxins filled the room
She quietly whispered
I have to do this for me,
not for you.
Cough after cough,
I met you, too.
Tombstone, you sound nothing
like my mother’s coos
mom planted all her seeds
planted till there were no more
she caressed her tummy softly
And quietly shut the door

She sang me sweet lullabies,
Taught me how to breathe
Gave me treasures of the world
Though i could not see

she watered me with sunlight
and watered me with love
gave me all that I could hope for,
but for some reason it never felt enough

I was so selfish,
A half empty hole
And one would think
she
could fill empty soul,

she gave me every stitch,
every bit of skin she could carry,
but still my skin was dismantled,
So she continued with her magic
like a fairy

my mother crafted me with her hands every time i shattered to earth
ciaressed me with her own bones,
softly buried me into the dirt

When i first “fell in love”
I told them i was fragile
For my mother grew me softly
With fairy magic that was agile

- so when i tell you i’ll never love you the most
  it’s because my mother loved me first

For all the years filled with self-hatred,
You were invisible
I thought maybe i pushed you away with my soft baby hands
But lately i’ve realized that you’ve always had other plans
dad where did you go?
i saw you last year,
where did you spend all of that time?
I thought you and I were one of a kind?
dad where did you go?
you said you'd call me back,
dad where did you go?
Love is everything you lacked

Mother always said you’d be distant,
But i never knew what this meant
Until i finally refused to call you,
After my final messages were sent

dad where did you go this time?
i gave you one more chance,
yet you just disappeared once again
Even though at one point i considered you a friend
dad, please stay gone
i don't think i can take it anymore
you don't have to excuse yourself
for my entire body feels sore

Goodbyes aren’t meant to be easy
They aren’t meant to go fast
But for some reason,
I hope that my goodbye to you
was the last

_____________

I felt like writing about you today.
So I picked up my pen,
And wrote
“Dad.”

Pieces of me wonder how you’re doing
While others have forgotten your name
Someway, somehow, you’re apart of my dna,
But not apart of my brain
Two-parent house
Hold that thought
I have no idea what it feels like
To be loved
By you
So I erase your name
Today I will write about me.
Jada Reid  
Grade 12  

Disconnection  
Poetry

Collegiate School of Medicine and Bioscience  
Saint Louis, MO  
Teacher: Chandra Alford

____________________

1

i feel disconnected
my skin is the shade of the earth’s dirt
i happen to be a sprouted flower
and as each bullet grazes my garden,
a petal is plucked

- how many petals must fall for us to realize that the rain is acid

____________________

2
dehumanization
for a long time i thought that there was something wrong with me.
news channels flashing on the screen,
another cold body found
guns were an outlet for the crazy an outlet for the insane
but sickness was a ploy that i had never met, something i had never felt
regardless of my brothers and sisters, clearly being killed
my grandmother would cry a lot
cover her face with the palms of her hands
she’d shake her head,
cursing about how disgusting the world was
but i would continue playing with my dolls, my little polly pockets,
because that was the only thing i knew
real sadness hadn’t touched me yet
for a long time, i thought that there was something wrong with me
because i never really cried
i lost toys
i lost shoes
due to the distance between my reality and my memory
i lost friends
i lost family
due to the distance between our homes
and i cried
but whenever people died, i never ever cried
sad movies would fill my mother’s time
more news would flash on the screen
50 kids shot 50 lives lost again
violence was a plague
but somehow i was immune to the intake
my grandma would often ask me
“how does this make you feel?”
and often I tried to string words together to make me seem more human
“it’s sad”
but i knew that i could not feel the same sadness
i just didn’t understand
years later my grandma told me she knew my emotions were different
that i was different
but i think my subconscious was trying to savour me
my subconscious was saving every last bit of heaving breath and every last bit of tears
for when i truly realized
the world around me
so for a long time, i thought that there was something wrong with me,
but it’s only the world we’ve created
- I have came to learn that we are born with our eye closed for a reason

3
my fingers are pulling every last bit of my skin from my face
my arms
my legs
every ounce of melanin is strung with my sense of humanity and i am left with my soul
i hand my pieces to those who have left
to those who have been forced to leave
but i am not empty
I am built.
to my country,
i hope we can rebuild together

_____________
The end of the game could not have been more boring. The Diamondbacks had spent most of the night running rampant around the base paths, and the only reason my grandma and I had decided to stay for the last few outs was for fireworks night. Despite the unfortunate outcome, we had really enjoyed ourselves. The decision to sit in the bleachers for our annual game had made the night special, and I knew that afterwards we would have some great stories to tell about the crazy guy who kept complaining about the wave. It would have been nice to see a win, but we were simply happy to be there.

If you have been to enough baseball games, you know that in between every inning, the players in the outfield play catch while the pitcher warms up. Since there are an odd number of outfielders, the center fielder plays long toss with the left fielder, and the bullpen catcher comes out and throws with the right fielder. At the end of each of these brief practice sessions, all the fans near the bullpen catcher would scream for the ball to be thrown in their direction—of course, he never listened. By the ninth inning, most of the bleachers had given up any hope of him sending us a souvenir. When the catcher turned to leave the field for the last time, only a few faithful kids were still calling out to him. I looked up, slightly confused as to why they thought he would suddenly change his mind. My confusion turned to shock when I saw the ball flying gracefully in my general direction.

No one caught the ball. Instead, a mad scramble ensued. The ball hadn’t quite reached my seat, but I was close enough to the landing spot that I started diving and reaching for it anyway. Just when I thought that I might lose the prize, I heard someone behind me yell “Heads up!” I quickly spun around to see our whole section yelling some form of “Over there!” and “Ball!” and pointing under my seat. Suddenly, I realized that the second ball had been thrown by the centerfielder. I went headfirst into the row in front of me, grasping for any signs of a little white sphere. The only sound I could hear was the frantic mom who had been sitting next to me. I looked and grabbed and panicked for a good two or three seconds, but the search was quickly becoming futile. I took a gamble and turned around to look underneath my own row. Just like that, I found it—right underneath me the whole time. With a triumphant grin on my face and the ball secured firmly in my right hand, I turned and displayed it for all to see. My grandma and I smiled at each other as we sat back down to enjoy the last few moments of the game. We both knew that this game was the best loss we had ever been to.
A disheveled man sat up in his bed; the darkened room was dimly lit through the window by the two moons that hang in the night sky. He was on his third planetary day without sleep, yet this was no abnormal occurrence as the days on this foreign world were a mere seven Earth hours long. He pressed his finger to a small metal circle implanted in his temple and a bright rectangle flashed in front of his dark orange eye. Slowly a display appeared showing a news channel and the audio seemed to come from within his head.

“Welcome to M-I-2 News,” a robotic voice spoke. “Tonight’s first story is on the allegations against Dr. Kordin Aplistia of draining the planet’s underground water resources for profit. Though he remains persistent of his innocence, due to the overwhelming criticism he has officially announced that he’s dropped out of the race for Prime Minister of our dwarf planet, Mikros-Imera 2.”

The man let out a sad sigh and pressed his temple again, turning off the display before the robot could continue. He shuffled over to a door in the corner of the room and it opened automatically; on the other side of it was a small cylindrical space which he stepped into. The door closed behind him and just as quickly reopened to a giant hotel lobby.

“Thank you for using Anavas Teleport Systems,” the door spoke cheerfully. “As a reminder, by using this teleport you have forfeited your right to reproduce. Have a nice day!”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever,” the man mumbled and waved his hand in a dismissive manner.

The whole lobby was surrounded in a great oxygen bubble and the floor was lined with a beautiful white tile which reflected the stars and moons above them. Various bizarre alien plants floated around the air above them in hovering pots. Around the lobby many humans, humanoid, and robots were scattered about looking for someone to complain about their difficult lives to (except for the robots, as they were programmed to not complain because that would be far too annoying).

“My boss made me write something down for her yesterday,” one human complained to another. “Like with an actual physical holo-pen. It really hurt my wrist. I might have to get new one.”

“You could sue her for that you know?” The other human replied.

“Yes, and I should,” the human said contentedly. “That would show her.”

The tired man continued through the lobby, keeping his head down as to not draw attention to himself.

“Klarr ga hrugtoo,” a purple four-legged humanoid complained.

“Geruptus brend koo, dusd ga nebak tew,” another comforted, rubbing what was presumably its arm on what was presumably the other one’s back.

Quickly a short red robot hovered over towards the forlorn man carrying a tray of colourful fizzy drinks.

“Good morning, sir,” it spoke in an old 27th century British accent.

“It’s night,” he replied.

“Would you like an elemental drink?” It asked, holding it’s tray up for him to grab one.

“What?”

“Please try one, sir,” it insisted. “Their free trial expires in 4.17 hours.”

“No I-I just need a water,” he replied, groggily.

“My systems detect that you are tired, sir, please, try an elemental drink,” it persisted. “The electric one is sure to shock you right awake,” it indicated towards a blue drink that had electricity running through it
with a holographic arrow.
“I said no, now just get me a water.”
“I cannot give you water, sir,” it said. “How about trying an elemental drink instead?”
“What?” He asked. “Why can’t you just get me a klarking water? You know, H2O?”
“Please, sir, such language is unnecessary. I cannot give you water because INFORMATION
REDACTED,” it said alarmingly loud. “I would recommend a lovely elemental drink.”
“What?” He questioned. “Are you malfunctioning or something?”
He grabbed the attention of another server bot, “Can you give me a water?”
“No, sir,” it replied. “But I do have some wonderful elemental drinks, they’re free for only 4.16 more
hours.”
“Why can’t you give me a water?”
“INFORMATION REDACTED. You seem stressed, sir. A lava elemental drink would melt that right
away.”
“The hell?” he said, puzzled. “And stop calling me sir all the time, it’s annoying.”
“Understood, Dr. Kordin Aplistia,” it replied a little too loudly.
The room stood still and turned to him, holding half empty glasses of colourful drinks. “Klark…” he said
under his breath.
He laughed nervously as the room glared at him judgmentally. They whispered rumours amongst
themselves about the the infamous Dr. Aplistia that stood in the middle of the room. However, they soon
became bored of discussing someone other than themselves and returned to their meaningless complaints
and conversations.
“Stupid server bot,” he hissed. “Now why can’t you give me a water? And don’t say ‘Informa-’”
“INFORMATION REDACTED,” it said, despite being told not to.
“Ugh. Wait, what about a water elemental drink?” he asked. “Isn’t water an element?”
“I’m sorry but we are out of the water element this evening.”
“What? How can you be out of water?” the annoyed Dr. Aplistia asked.
“INFORMATION REDACTED.”
He stared at the robot with immense confusion.
“But don’t you get your water from the planet’s own resources?” He asked.
“Yes, Dr. Aplistia.”
For every wave that leaves the sand,
Another washes up onto the land.
For every flower that withers and wilts away,
Another will bloom in its place, come a fine Spring day.
For every tree in the forest that happens to fall,
A sapling will grow to one day be just as tall.
For, as is the way of such things,
Out of every ending sprouts new beginnings.
To save the fall of tears
I cover their debt

To save the bonds of the people fighting fate
I dissipate the tensions dancing in the atmosphere

Though true
They will mourn the one of memories

Moving on is but a hitch in the plan to destiny
One must fall one way or another

And the bells will toll
a symphony of sorrows

The chosen
resort to actions that betray their feelings

though they commit to the role of the fool
with a great divide in their heart

One will fall
One will triumph

Ending the chords that spell regret
Ending the illusion of time

The symphony plays a melancholy tune to the disdained
Melodic and fitting

The boy with no sense of direction
knows exactly where he stands

His heart; the map that never stops turning
His mind; the compass that never stops spinning

He walks forwards and though there are a million possibilities
He knows how the scene will be played

He sees no point
No retribution

He knows no solution
No escape

An encore will be ordered
The last measure is approaching

Until time stands still
with the beat of his heart.

The final requiem is at hand
The audience watches in anticipation

Waiting for a key change
they will not see

The tune plays
Falling with graceful regret

Soul is weakened by the play of descending notes
A decrescendo that has lasted 7 years

And though when the first note was struck
Happiness was predicted in the end

But now as the final measure is at hand
And only sorrow will be played

The piece of life ends
In deafening silence.

An encore is forced
The outraged demand it

A new tune is sang
picking up from the last

Except
A crescendo

Skies clear with each note
A symphony of healing

Light prances on the staff
Which feels to hold sunlight itself

The one of memories once thought
The memories he held showed night blue light

But now those memories
They shine bright with new perspective

Beat by beat
The day gets brighter

And the light rages
Rages against the dark
Simone Rogers
Grade 12

Oh Father
Poetry

Blue Springs High School
Blue Springs, MO
Teacher: Julie Sturman

Oh Father
Oh Father, I am sorry
I didn’t mean to come this far
My heart is slowly beating
And may it finally stop for all

The life I live has been wasted
By drugs and alcohol
I won’t go into depth for you
For I’ll expose my pleasing downfall

I used up my sweet time
For the abuse of living to die
I never was a happy person
Because I fade away inside the mind

Oh Father, I am sorry
I have cut and sliced the pain away
For the only emotion I feel now
Is the numbness of my brain

The mornings start off easy
Then the afternoon kicks in
By evening time it starts to come
And nightfall brings the crazies in

Oh Father, I am sorry
I can’t continue on like this
Even though I know it is a sin
My life shall end today

Oh Father, I am sorry
Wide-eyed dreamer!
Child of Acadia
suckles at stalks
of bare, aching love.
Always appears, one day or another
to my feet
worshipping
my moon, my sun.
I've always asked him why
when I've never given him anything
but spite
and a few good songs.
He replies,
in a belly-up manner,
the wind
always pushed him my way.
“Ana, George and Zach, please come down to the kitchen,” Dad calls.

“Why?” I ask, begrudgingly climbing off my bed to come down the stairs.

“Luke has an assignment we all have to do for Boy Scouts,” Mom answers. My parents, George, Luke, Zach and I all sit down at the table. My parents direct us, giving us each a piece of paper.

“Put your name on it. Then pass your paper around in a circle; write something you are thankful that this person brings to your life,” Dad says as Mom hands papers and pens.

Indifferent about this assignment, I write my name down on the piece of paper and carelessly pass it off. The first person I get is my dad. I try to think of what to put on the paper. I glance up to see what my family members are doing. They seem to be considerately expressing their thoughts on paper. I look back down at the paper I have and think for a few more seconds before I reseal it with my comments. I peek back up to see my relatives continue to work. I study each of them and find something different in every one of my family members.

I observe each of my three brothers, who can drive me crazy in their own ways: George, my older brother, with his blaring music who pretends that nothing bothers him. Luke, getting ready to start 5th grade, makes me frustrated because he’s always asking questions and everything seems to come so easy to him. And then there is Zach, who is only 6 years old and just wants me to play when I have things to get done.

I take a second look—harder this time and I see more.

I see George values family. In fact, I wouldn’t be in this family if it wasn't for him. My big brother wouldn’t let the orphanage separate us when we were little. How he managed to keep us alive and together my parents say is a miracle. Born in Eastern Europe, George and I were abandoned when he was 3 years old and I was only one. We were brought into the system. When George was five, he was taken to an orphanage for older children. I was left behind. Somehow, some way, George made things so hard that officials brought me to him and let me stay in the orphanage for older children. I’ve always had George.

I then peer at Luke. The first thing I see is his big head. When he was little that head was so big, it would topple him over. I guess it’s for all the brains he keeps in there. I’m serious. Over the years, I’ve frequently heard this exchange: “Where’s Luke?” Dad asks. “Oh, he’s curled up somewhere reading another book,” Mom replies.

Luke is driven by a curiosity to learn. He’s 10 and the smartest kid I’ve ever met. He used to follow me around everywhere. He was my minion. Now, I learn from him. My mom says when we grow up he will be my best friend.
Last but not least, there’s Zach. He opens my imagination and creativity that I didn’t even know existed. “Let’s play ponies Ana,” Zach pleads.

“How are we supposed to do that? I only have one toy pony,” I say.

“You can be the pony,” laughs Zach.

I hadn’t considered that. He’s so darn cute, I agree. He’s on my back in seconds and I’m the pony. With Zach, I paint, color, run outside, and play with toy tools. He makes me smile so big. He is my heart.

To complete the circle, I look at my parents. I admire them so much. Everything they do is for my brothers and I. They adopted my older brother and I from Bulgaria when George was seven and I was five. My parents presented everything to George and I when we had nothing. They furnished us food, medical care, clothes, a home, love and a family. The biggest thing my parents gave us is a second chance. Sometimes I just need to take that second look to really appreciate all I have—the support, strength, friendship, laughter and love.
The year is 1976. A young man sees the movie *Taxi Driver* for the first time in theaters. He instantly falls for the leading actress, a then-12-year-old Jodie Foster. Soon, his infatuation turns to obsession. The actress goes off to college; the man follows. He writes letters and poems to her, signs up to attend a class with her, even though she ignores him. Time passes, and he grows more desperate to get her attention; what could be big enough to impress someone like her? After deliberating over many impulsive ideas—public suicide, airplane hijacking—he settles on something that he knows she will notice: recreating a scene from her movie. On March 30, 1981, John Hinckley Jr. shoots the President of the United States, and thus began one of the most controversial cases in recent American history, eventually featuring one of the most controversial ideas in our legal system: the insanity defense.

The insanity defense is not a new subject; according to "The Insanity Defense: History and Background", it has been in use since the twelfth century. Despite its age, it has always been controversial. There are a lot of questions surrounding the subject: how does the government dictate if someone is insane? What if they’re wrong? How can we be sure their methods are effective? All of these questions are common in the debate for the insanity plea, and all of them need valid answers in order to keep the insanity plea in use. I believe that these questions can be answered, and that they can help to keep the insanity defense in the U.S. legal system. I believe that the defense of insanity should exist in the United States legal system because the defense is used very rarely, the process of successfully achieving the defense is very difficult, and those who are truly incapable of recognizing their crimes need institutionalization, not prison.

A key point in recognizing the importance of the insanity defense is seeing its history. The defense of insanity has been around for a very long time, and it has always been controversial because of one main question: how does one define insanity? According to Emanuel Fracone, that question has never really had an exact answer. In the early 18th century, insanity had a very loose definition. In some places, it was simply knowing ‘good from evil.’ In others, it was whether or not the defendant knew what he (or she) did. The insanity qualifications varied, and it was accepted that most of the time, the determination of insanity was left to the jury.

However, in 1843, that changed following the case of Daniel M’Naghten. M’Naghten was an unstable man who attempted to kill the British Prime Minister Sir Robert Peel in 1843, believing that Peel was trying to kill him. Instead of shooting Peel, he accidentally shot and killed Peel’s secretary instead. He pleaded not guilty by reason of insanity and won, spending the rest of his life in a mental institution rather than prison. His sentencing inspired public outrage, large enough that British Parliament changed the requirements of the insanity defense, creating the M’Naghten Rule. This rule changed the insanity defense by limiting it to cognitive ability, or the ability to differentiate right from wrong. It also created two tests to determine whether or not the defendant was insane: one to determine if the defendant was capable of knowing what they were doing when they committed the crime, and one to determine whether or not they knew their actions were wrong. If the defendant failed either test (they did not know what they were doing or did not know it was wrong), they could plead not guilty by reason of insanity. It created a legal guideline for insanity, and no longer allowed insanity to be only based on the jury’s opinion. Those rules became standard in both the United States and the United Kingdom and are still in use today in the United Kingdom. The U.S. used the M’Naghten Rule for over a hundred years, but it is not regulation today.
In 1972, the US Congress tried to modernize their insanity defense laws by developing a new rule for insanity in the Model Penal Code. This new rule stated that “a defendant is not responsible for criminal conduct where (s)he, as a result of mental disease or defect, did not possess a substantial capacity either to appreciate the criminality of his conduct or to conform his conduct to the requirements of the law” (section 4.01 of Moral Penal Code). Different from the rigid M’Naghten Rule, this new code offered a broader perspective on the topic of mental illness because mental illness itself is a very broad topic. Additionally, the rule forbade sociopaths and psychopaths from using the insanity defense. I appreciate this particular addition because sociopaths and psychopaths are, in my opinion, not insane (in most cases, if there is no other disease). They may not feel the same empathy as those around them, but they are aware of the law and what breaks it, and if they have no other mental illnesses, they should not be able to use the defense.

The Code, despite being a significant step forward in modernizing the insanity defense, was not enough, and its flaws were brought to the light of the public with the trial of Hinckley. After he managed to shoot five people (one of them being the President of the United States), Ronald Reagan and Congress created the Comprehensive Crime Control Act. This now required defendants to prove with “clear and convincing evidence” that “at the time of the commission of the acts constituting the offense, the defendant, as a result of a severe mental disease or defect, was unable to appreciate the nature and quality or the wrongfulness of his acts” (18 U.S.C. section 17). The Act also included the Insanity Reform Act of 1984, which related to sentencing and provisions of those who successfully use the insanity plea. These acts helped to keep the insanity defense up to date, and more importantly, in the public’s favor. Without the enormous outcry from Hinckley’s verdict, the acts might not have been created at all. Since they were created, it works in favor of the insanity plea; if the public has a true issue with it, and the outcry is loud enough, then there is a true chance of the American government altering their policies to compromise with the public’s wishes. The rules of the defense are not set in stone.

In 1984, in response to Hinckley’s case, the United States Congress created the Insanity Defense Reform Act of 1984, which required more specific qualifications in order to use the defense, as well as setting guidelines for sentencing and treatment for those deemed mentally ill. The Act states that the defendant must prove by “clear and convincing evidence,” that “at the time of the commission of the acts constituting the offense, the defendant, as a result of a severe mental disease or defect, was unable to appreciate the nature and quality or the wrongfulness of his acts.” Proving that someone is truly mentally ill and not responsible for his actions is obviously not foolproof or without issues. However, the reforms and updates—and with likely more to come in the future as treatments and medications evolve—can become much greater than they are today and create a system that almost all can agree with. Despite improvements of the insanity plea over time, there’s still obviously some opposition to it. One popular argument against it, as reported by Alexa Davis, is the idea that someone using the plea is “getting away with” the crime of which they were accused. It’s not hard to see where this idea comes from; it is easily found in the myriad of crime shows that have turned it into a trope. A psychopathic criminal magically wows the court and convinces the jury to give him the verdict he wants, then he walks free. In other instances, the insanity plea is used as a sort of symbol that the law officers are “losing” when a criminal gets a not guilty verdict based on insanity. Sometimes people see those scenarios in popular fiction and assume that it happens in real life. The truth is, neither of those things would happen in a real courtroom. First, a psychopath cannot receive a not guilty verdict from an insanity plea. Second, the trope of the insanity defense is extremely overused in popular fiction: fewer than 1% of criminal cases use it, and those that do only have about a 25% chance that it will work (Excuse: Insanity). The use of these tropes creates an illusion of the insanity defense and makes it look much worse to the public eye.

While the reasoning due to media misrepresentation is a large factor in the general public’s dislike of the insanity defense, it is definitely not the only one. There are many reasons why some say the defense is invalid; some believe that it is an issue of morality, others believe that the term “insane” is too hard to define, and some believe that these factors can lead to sane criminals walking free. Some of these issues, however, were resolved by the legal reforms to the insanity defense (in the US). For example, in the case of
of Hinckley, all three of these factors applied. Hinckley had shot the President of the United States. The public, understandably, wanted Hinckley to go to prison. Their moral compass essentially only pointed them one way: this man had done something bad, and he should be punished. Most were (and some still are) convinced that by Hinckley being sentenced to a psychiatric facility instead of prison or the death penalty, he was avoiding his punishment. This belief was compounded by the fact that he was released from the facility in 2016, although he does have many restrictions upon his movements.

Whether or not a criminal, mentally ill or not, can be rehabilitated is a question to which there is no definitive answer. Each criminal and crime is different, and it is virtually impossible to determine if a criminal has the capacity to reform. However, those who are mentally ill and are not capable of determining right and wrong should not be punished in the same manner that someone who is aware of the consequences of his actions. This does not mean that the crime is any less devastating, and if the insanity plea was used as frequently as it is in movies and on television, then there would be cause for great concern regarding misuse. The current standards and methodology for determining if someone may use the insanity defense mean that such defendants truly did not know that their actions were wrong.

In conclusion, the US legal system needs to keep the insanity defense. The current tests and standards to qualify for the defense are sufficient for modern times; if the time comes that they aren’t, they can be changed. The defense provides possible mental treatment and psychiatric care that an offender might not have the chance to get if they were sent to prison. The insanity plea gives mentally ill criminals a chance to get better, rather than putting them in prisons where their mental condition could worsen. It has been around for hundreds of years, and if it’s stayed necessary this long, it will stay needed for many years to come.
“Don’t bother coming in here ever again!” I screamed, slamming my door shut. Growing up for eight years in a commodious home surrounded by loving family members, I had never felt unwanted. Sure, there were times when I thought my parents favored my brother, but sibling rivalry felt natural. The only times I had ever felt abandoned were remembering my parents’ decision to send me to China when I was one year old. When I would discuss their decision with them, however, the only solace I received was that from being sent to my room. Nevertheless, our arguments could never change the fact that they sent me away for two years. I believed there was only one explanation for my parents’ decision: they hated me.

Present

Though my parents shipping me to China seemed like a childhood atrocity nine years ago, I possess a more nuanced understanding of their decision now. In fact, living in China was only the first step in the chain of events that shaped my grasp of the Chinese language. From laborious Sundays spent at Chinese School, to daily conversations I have with Waipo (grandmother) while cooking, language is an integral part of my identity. Though the path to acquiring my Chinese language skills often felt grueling, without my family’s drive to keep pushing me toward mastery, I wouldn’t be able to appreciate the joy of language today.

Interviews

“I missed you every day when you were in China,” my mom said, smiling sorrowfully. I thought back to my overreaction years ago, wishing my younger self could have heard the full story. Though I eventually forgave my parents, a part of me had always held a seed of indignation. From my view, my parents did not want to go through my “Terrible Twos.” Instead, they shipped me to China so that Waigong (grandfather) and Waipo could deal with me. But all that time I had failed to see it was a difficult decision for my parents.

“It was hard to work full time and raise children at the same time for a woman. I was barely making it with one child. I couldn’t handle it with two,” my mom explained. Her words hit me like a bullet. From Arlie Hochschild to the Gender Equity Organization, I had long heard of the “Second Shift.” But seeing the concept played out in my own household made me feel hopeless for my own future as a mother. However, without my mom’s drive to give me the best care growing up, I wouldn’t have learned Chinese.

“There was no way I would let your mom quit her job to raise you,” Waipo said, spouting the Communist outlook on the situation. My grandmother had been indoctrinated by Mao’s philosophy, a former Communist official herself. Though the dictator had caused much strife in China, one positive idea he inadvertently promoted was gender equality. One of his most famous sayings was “Women hold up half the sky.” Waipo had worked hard her entire life to prove that statement, attending China’s top engineering university as one of the two women in her graduating class. She had wanted my mom to follow in her footsteps, working a full time job until retirement. “I offered to take care of you in China so that your mother could work and take care of your brother. But after a year, he joined us too,” Waipo said, smiling.

Though I don’t remember much of being in China, I do remember this,” my brother remarked. “The second I showed up, you told me to go back to America.” I shook my head, embarrassed of my two-year-old self. Though I had been a quiet baby, once I learned Chinese I couldn’t stop talking. Like most
toddler, I told people exactly what I thought, causing my family members to call me a “sassy” kid. “You would always make fun of me in Chinese. But since I was still learning the language, I could never challenge you back,” he said fondly. My brother was my role model growing up because he seemed to excel at everything—math, science, reading, writing. The only thing I had over him was Chinese. Though I dreaded my extra math lessons with Waipo, I could tolerate her Chinese lessons. Learning another language gave me power. At first that power was over my brother, but as I grew older, it extended to school and strangers. I realized that talking to people in their native tongue builds a bond. It reaches their heart.

“I was jealous how fast you picked up the language in China,” my dad said. “One of my biggest regrets is never learning Chinese. To think, I’ve never had a conversation with your grandparents.” I stopped to think about what my life would be like without Chinese. Without truly knowing Waipo’s strength or Waigong’s modesty. One of my favorite aspects of Chinese culture is its strong emphasis on family. Though none of my American friends’ grandparents lived with them, I treasured my time with my grandparents at home. They raised me just as much as my parents raised me. It was Waipo who gave me the joy of language. A part of me wanted her to know how thankful I was for our time in China together and her countless Chinese lessons since. But the other part of me knew she wouldn’t understand why I wanted to tell her that. Growing up, Waipo had never told me she loved me. “I love you” was a phrase rarely spoken to family members in China. It was simply understood. Somehow I knew Waipo understood me better than even my American family members. I could say one word and she would know how I felt. That was the joy of our shared language.

Post-Interviews

Nervously clutching my rough draft, I brought my family members into the living room to share this piece with them. While my English speaking relatives laughed and cried while I read the piece aloud, Waipo sat silently. As I continued to read the draft in English, I watched Waipo’s reaction to the foreign words. Though she had given me the joy of language over fifteen years ago, I had never given her anything as valuable in return.

“Joy is xi yue,” I translated, looking to my grandmother. She met my gaze with surprise, because my mom usually translated for my grandparents. Walking over to Waipo, I began to teach her the two unfamiliar English words in my piece’s title. Though I was many years late, there was still time for me to give Waipo the joy of another language. Starting that day, I began my daily English lessons with her. I knew if she could gain the same resilience, power, and love that I had acquired from Chinese, then my trip to China sixteen years ago would have been truly meaningful. Far from showing my parents’ disdain for me, their decision gave me the ability to love and appreciate my grandparents on a deeper level.
This may be a shout to the void because the creators of Vine 2 will not take into consideration what I believe and who I think should be invited back to Vine 2, but I feel this is necessary to say or the possible downfall of comedy will impact me severely. The people deserve to have a say! In case you were wondering, and I do apologize for leaving you out in the dust like that, Vine is a social media application for six second videos which was recently deleted, but is making a comeback as Vine 2, and we, I speak for many, really hope these people do not feel the need to return and infect the app with stale humor. There are two types of people in this world. Those who are funny, and unfortunately, those who are not. This about those who are not, more specifically those who give a bad name to social media. Now, this isn't me trying to ruin careers, okay I lied that is what I am trying to do here, but it is not my intention to come off as mean. Quite frankly, I will never understand the humor of some people. It's like their only jokes come from an abyss at the lowest level of human function as possible and I get second hand embarrassment from it. This is me taking a stand for something I feel strongly about.

The first person I am going to address is one who comes from the early version of Vine before the passing of its glory. Lele Pons, just hearing her name brings joy to my cold, decaying heart. The sole purpose of my hatred for the antithetical of real comedy. Though falling off of tables and embarrassing yourself in front of your crush may be funny to dunce people who don’t appreciate real comedy and inveigle in stale jocularity, it doesn’t necessarily interest us comedy connoisseurs. Not only did Lele have the audacity to contaminate Vine, but she took all of her brainwashed followers to YouTube, a safe zone for many. Just when you thought it could not possibly get worse, it did just that. Lele, this is the nicest and possibly the only way to say this, please do not come back.

We mustn't forget the repulsive brain cell disease of the internet. You may wonder who, and you may think my words are harsh and uncalled for, but in all reality- he is very deserving of this. I cannot fathom, I cannot understand, I cannot wrap my head around why Jake Paul is famous. He’s known for using outdated trends un-ironically and reaching five-million subscribers in six months, which he will not ever let you forget, ever. The amount of attention he gets for just being discomforting and irritating is aggravating! The chances of him returning to Vine 2 are low considering his ego is so unreasonably high and he feels like he is too good for everything, even the one thing that started his senseless tragedy of a career. Jake, although you are 20 years old and your content can be seen as pedophilic considering your fan base consists of little girls, please retire your career and do not return to vine.

This list also includes those who use stereotypes as comedy, you will not ever be funny, and you sure do not deserve a paragraph for yourself. Now I may come off as bitter, but it is simply that I am not too fond of these people, nor do I believe these people should have the number of followers that they currently do. I do not support their careers based on who they are as people, as you would naturally, but man oh man does being an embarrassment to comedians everywhere really put them in a bad spot. To end my nonsense and rambling on a note, and to come to a very appreciated conclusion, entertainment is only a meaningless distraction from the void but that does not mean the ways people choose to waste their time should be spent on people who are not deserving of it.
The color yellow, it is what I am not  
although I wish to be  
My heart spins on a record player  
You make me feel yellow  
everlasting light, my yellow.

I am tawdry  
My parent’s disappointment for me is immeasurable  
Their aggression feels hot and comes off red,  
It rests along the silence as black  
I don’t deserve this yellow light  
My feelings are covered by drapes,  
emotions hung by hangers in the closet,  
love closed tightly in Mason Jars.

I started to grow use to this ache in my heart  
Agony is black  
Day by day, the light I hold tightly in my palms, fades  
vanishing into darkness, into space  
I became blue again

The days started to feel like they were repeating  
Almost like my scratched records  
Anger builds inside of me, red

A pair of unclouded, vibrant eyes  
Suddenly the white noise surrounding my room became humming  
I then realized rain is a state of mind  
but this blue is nice  
White with tranquility

Laying in the tall, green grass  
Resting my head upon your chest,  
using your heartbeat as a metronome,  
you hum your favorite song.  
My yellow light has returned

Till it is time to leave  
… I do not wish to follow the blue.  
I paint my walls yellow
With limited salary space, some big-name Royals will be hitting the Free-Agent market. The Royals were 55-49, right in the thick of the pennant chase and had been playing solid ball the few weeks leading up to the trade deadline. With players like Alcides Escobar, Eric Hosmer, Lorenzo Cain, and Mike Moustakas destined for free agency after the 2017 season, the Royals had a difficult choice to make. Royals General Manager Dayton Moore and his staff made a huge decision to not trade any big-name Royals at the Trade Deadline at the end of July, hoping for one more playoff push with this core group of players. However, this gamble failed.

Over the past 4-5 years, fans around Kansas City and even across the United States have fallen in love with the Royals due to their excitement and energy they play the game with. I loved watching the anticipation of the “Salvy Splash” and calling out “MOOSE” throughout Kauffman Stadium. I remember hooting and hollering when the Royals won the 2015 World Series, the culmination of three decades of work to get back to the top of the MLB. Unfortunately, four impactful players’ contracts expire after this season (four days away) and they will be looking for a new contract this offseason. Hosmer, Moustakas, Escobar, and Cain all may have a new home come the 2018 season. During the 2017 season, Escobar had the lowest salary (6.5 million/year) while Hosmer had the highest at 12 million per year. I certainly think that these players deserve a higher salary, and therefore, a higher price tag on the free-agent market due to their consistent play over the last several years.

Alcides Escobar has been a staple at shortstop for years and has not missed a game this season. While his hitting may not be top-notch, his stellar defense and speed has helped the Royals win many close games these past few years. Lorenzo Cain has also captivated fans with his incredible catches in center field, and his clutch, consistent hitting at the top of the lineup has made him a valuable part of the Royals’ recent success. Mike Moustakas and Eric Hosmer have had career years this season. Hosmer racked up 192 hits on the season, posting a .318 batting average with 25 home runs. His passion and energy that he plays the game with is a staple at all Royals games. Hosmer is the blood and soul of the Royals, along with Salvador Perez. Without his presence on the field, other Royals will have to step up and bring energy day in and day out to get the crowd pumped up just like Hosmer has done for years. Moustakas set the Royals single-season homerun record with 38 blasts and raised his batting average from previous seasons, resulting in many “MOOSE” calls at ballgames this past season.

These four Royals have combined for over 1730 runs in their careers with Kansas City. This astronomical number showcases how special these players are to the Royals franchise, but as their contracts expire, they will be looking for higher salaries that the Royals cannot afford due to being a smaller-market franchise.

Looking back, it’s easy to say that the Royals should’ve traded away one or two players to get minor league prospects in return for our star players. Those prospects would then be the structure of our rebuilding process to get back to another World Series.

Now that no trades were made and there were no post-season appearances in 2017, the Royals need to
make one big offer to either Hosmer or Moustakas to try and keep them in Royal blue. Retaining one of
these players will lock down a corner infield position for the foreseeable future and keep strong offense
and defense in the lineup. With Raul Mondesi able to take over shortstop, Cheslor Cuthbert to man the
hot corner, and a ton of outfield depth in the minor leagues, the Royals will be able to fill the voids of
these departing players with young talent for the next several years.

Royals baseball just will not be the same without the players we’ve grown to love over the years.
We will remember the great moments, the thrilling plays, the World Series Championship. We are
thankful for everything these four players have done for the Royals franchise over the past several years.
However, if some of them sign and play for a different club next year, it will be very hard to say goodbye
and not see them playing at The K next summer.
What we have is anyway love,  
world of crossed sticks.
Once the wet clay banks of our eyes  
in a shared rearview mirror:  
how lovely a girl’s own sweetness  
told back to her.  
Once with electric-fuzz halos  
around our church curls.  
Later, we shed our light

on makeup wipes, peel off  
our torn-up jeans.  
Put our blackened feet in running water  
and perch our bodies on the edge of the tub,  
relics of our younger ghosts:  
girls at the end of a dock.

Once with lemon juice in our hair, now  
we kick up dust into the face of the sun.

Once, you were so many  
things at once: your shin guards, allergies,  
tiny gold hoops.  
Now you are the messiest thing  
in the room to love.

Once with eyes artless and working,  
nights like eyes like zodiac  
looking into time in both directions, some instinct  
you won’t say why.  
Now in the lot of a Phillips 66,  
your most quarrelsome eyes when riled  
hold in them a small town’s most famous fires.

Once suffocated by the love they offered, now longing  
for the old ones of our youth.  
Now with danger in our girls’ belligerence, danger  
in our bad-teeth beautiful, overwrought and doomed  
and beautiful, unhome-unlovable  
and still very beautiful.
Once we slept like sinking stones.
Now with trouble and a taste for trouble,
we place our stock in newer days, hunt down
a party to lift our spirits from the dead.
We sleep with maps to trusting minds
in our lake water jeans. Now periphery’s 20/20
and we’ve got no use for it, chasing the fossil tails
of grandfather constellations.

We wonder are all women’s best sleeps
behind them, the ones
on their cousin’s girlfriend’s sister’s cots,
the ones that didn’t poke at them.
Now, once again, we are yesterday-born,
crying out to the sunless night
you’ve outdone yourself in darkness.

Once we wished to go out grandly,
with sun burnt lips and skyward toes.
Now we hope to die like paper boats,
by a gentle push downriver.
In childhood, roosters
fanned out their wings like Christ on a necklace
and their mighty trumpet-calls wakened Gabe,
his hair like a hay bale in the first fingertips of sun.

The daily grind marked up his hands plentiful,
calluses hardening to their state of permanency,
knowing what to pluck from the ground and when
like it was the instinct for motion or sex.

The air was pandemic with sweet pea and milkweed
and the sound of circumstance blighting Gabe’s harvest,
pipe dream in the language of song-stifled bird—
sometimes during movies Gabe says for Christ’s sake listen.

Of the city, he loves
that the people extinguish their porch lights at nine
to engineer perfect silence as if it were a token of the natural world.

Of morning glories, he loves
that they are not morning glories awaiting their parents’ approval,
that they grow not for the sake of a life mapped out
before them, but only by the impulse
to expand.

Of the passenger who broke into dialogue
on Gabe’s first-ever plane, he thinks
a man who grew up without mud-chores and chickens
must always pursue small vapid conversation
because he never fell asleep with just the hum of cicadas
and woke to the grand racket of ducks
leaving trails in the water.

Of the city, he hates
that he and the man file into the same mobs
for coffee and baggage claim,
scanning the place not for lovers at the foot of the escalator
but for drifters with their names on signs
and keys to the taxis that take them apart.
Riley Schmidt
Grade 12

Beauty Is Pain
Poetry

Platte County High School
Platte City, MO
Teacher: Marnie Jenkins

Beauty is Pain:

It’s beauty you say
As you slip on
You’re too tall heels

It’s beauty you say
As you limp home with
those blistering heels

It’s beauty you say
As the needle pierces
Your soft cartilage

It’s beauty you say
As blood leaks
From an infected hole

It’s beauty you say
As hot wax is poured
Over your face

Its beauty you say
As it burns and
Tears your skin

It’s beauty you say
As the bleach is lathered
Into your hair

It’s beauty you say
As your scalp burns
And your hair brittles

It’s beauty you say
As you push aside
Your untouched plate

It’s beauty you say
As your stomach screams
For one more bite
It’s beauty you say
As they draw the dotted
Lines across your face
It’s beauty you say
As they begin
To change your face
It’s beauty you say
And beauty
Is pain
Seven billion, six hundred thousand, and progressively increasing. This world has changed for the worse in the last decade, anything but a positive outlook. We, the human race as a whole, have been doing it to ourselves, calling one another vindictive names, abusing others’ rights, and discriminating others, simply because of the pigment of someone’s skin.

Vision, a very powerful sense. Out of the five senses, this one can repercussion the most. When we physically see the issues, we are typically aggravated the most. Then comes hearing about the issues, which is typically a not-so-serious approach to whatever that matter may be. If you were to ask as to how we see or hear about these issues, I’d give you the most blatant response...social media. This world has been granted so much access to so much technology and innovation. Sure, from a productivity aspect, it’s what keeps this country going forward, but at the same time, it might also be the suspect for keeping us at a halt.

According to the *Huffington Post*, following former 49ers quarterback, Colin Kaepernick’s controversial National Anthem protest, police killed approximately two hundred and twenty-three innocent African Americans. Disregarding the town in which every death took place, nobody would’ve seen, or heard about these tragedies, the reason that people were internally and externally outraged by these actions, was because they learned of it through social media platforms. Whether it be video, articles, or body-cam footage...why post it? If you have comprehended that it will only snowball down from there, why make the situation worse?

Walking among others, cruising by others, working among others, it seems as if we do all but help one another. Why do we share and post all of the disappointing things that take place in society, but nothing that shows how healthy the human soul is? Yes, both sides are shared on varieties of platforms...but it appears to me that only the substandard things go viral. Do we crave the sight that of people being abused, disrespected, and prejudiced? We are all born with emotions, some are just more sensitive than others, but why on Earth do we keep pushing those emotions aside to tear others down when we know what that disparity feels like?

One hundred and fifty-five years since eighteen sixty-three. Why is it that we still have yet to realize we are all born equal? Two hundred and forty-two years since our founding fathers signed a document stating this. Take that as cold hard verification. Some of the most influential people in American history agreed on social equality, so why can’t the people of modern-day estimate how to treat one another with the respect we were all born to be treated with? I know exactly why. This world has come to such a disgusting, and pitiful frame that we tend to exclude one who diverges from man. However, when we discover the handful of relative human beings like us, we admire, adore, and love them. The concept I’m reaching for is...accept the identical, accept the varying, love all.

Life itself is a beautiful, and magical thing...but what we are currently living in, is a brutal, ghastly, and vile world. When you make the personal decision for the betterment of yourself, peers, and community, the world will become a brighter, more innovative, and healthy environment to call home. Until then, our world will continue to discriminate, separate from, disrespect, and taunt those who diverge from oneself. The human race is born equal, with varying characteristics, but the same amount of respect in which should be given to one another. So please... stand with me, and countless others who want to see nothing other than unity, love, and serenity.
One slippery step.

Tiptoe across tile and clean carpet,
walls so bright they blind

under fluorescent lights,
and there’s sweat tucked into mildew surfaces.
And there’s the music spilling out the drive thru window

across the street,
which sings so loudly
she can hear it on the seventh floor,
and she can hear the cashier’s heavy breathing

as he asks for her sister’s order
one more time,
and one more time
it plays in her head,
because it’s all brighter and louder in Wichita, Kansas.

A small stride into the death trap.
Hands grasp for teardrop steel
and slip against it, now,
the water’s getting hotter,
it’s spilling down her spine
and her stomach, which she holds desperately

to keep from spilling over her arms,
now, a trepid jerk forward,
oh she aches to be cooler!
One more time, but,
the clock doesn’t move forward
and she finds no release from the
linoleum confides

of the hotel room shower.

Naturally, she will fight back.
Fist collides with the wet wall,
pounding until knuckles bleed,
and up to her eyes,
she rubs raw
because *which parts of her are worth seeing anymore?*

Flesh torn from her, abused
washes away down a clogged drain
and she falls to watch it slide
along the grout and through the filter
on bruised knees and cracked hands,

willing it to feel better.
Willing her body to be clean.
Willing happiness to rain down through the spout.
Showers are supposed to be safe.

But this one,
it’s hurting. And she is burning,
and it keeps hurting

and it keeps burning
and it keeps hurting

and it keeps bur…
“Sleep.”
The man in the booth flashes the signal—
it’s time.
Gnarled hands grasp the knob and slide
the saturation to zero
dim the lights
set the reel
find the keys to an piano and begin to pound Chaplin song.
Screen flickers awake.
READY?

FIRST FRAME:
Something is wrong.
Dimly lit room with checkered walls
Familiar faces possess disconnected smiles
Glass door in the left corner, and then,
Something I cannot see
so I pretend I cannot feel it watching me
eyes traveling up and down the curve
of my shoulders and the back of my legs.
No matter how fast I turn my head
pivot round
flash eyes,
something I cannot see.
I reach out to feel
but what I touch is not attainable —
static.
Something is wrong.

SECOND FRAME:
Silent,
We sit side by side on gray rocks
brushed by gray waves
shadows play on gray sky
and I wish I could cry but I can’t!
I can’t move
I can’t speak
I can’t ask why I feel no pulse
but I hear pounding in my ears
and I want to watch his eyes but he’s fading, something I cannot see
pulling me into the gray sea, and I too am gray.
Body resolves to seafoam, please,
please!
I didn’t want to leave yet.

THIRD FRAME:
Running
My fingers yank my hair for the pain
of the tug at my scalp
but that can’t save me now,
climbing
up a ladder to the top of a steel monster
with chipped paint
and abandoned train cars,
kicking,
I am trapped atop the beast.
I don’t want to go down I do not want to fall,
clawing,
please let me out, please let me go,
something is wrong!
Falling,
stomach plummets,
I’m going to die, I know I’m going to die!
Spilling.

FOURTH FRAME:
Driving through the dark
on roads hanging from the stars
above the ground
with strangers who are laughing
but I can only hear the sound
of a man who’s taunting
“You don’t know who you are, do you?”
We’re moving too fast for me to look —
“You don’t know where you’re going.”
To whom do I owe this favor of fear?
Something I cannot see.
Something I feel,
something is wrong
How do I get out of this car?
And suddenly the static finds its voice —
“Wake up.”
What?

STOP.
Aching fingers slide off the keys
and put an end to Charlie’s song.
A door has opened in the theater
light is pouring onto the seats
into the booth
illuminating wrinkles on old hands
working to add color back into tired eyes.
Reverse the work of the subconscious.
Something is wrong, something I cannot see—
just a dream.
The air acts as molasses,
slow and sticky
salty, sweaty –
As I rise
I hear my thighs peel from the chair
and I feel the sting that follows
hot days and naked skin,
all to get a cup of
fluorescent yellow Gatorade,
undissolved powder sticking to the edges
of its paper cone home.

On my journey across the mess hall
I hesitate in front of the beating fan
sleepy murmur heartbeat
providing protection from the heat –
feverish frenzy disease –
purposefully placed between a curtain and the makeshift infirmary,
where a small girl complains about
the recently obtained bloodstain
on her brand new
pink green polka dot socks.

Along the cement floor I go,
past a gander of gossiping girls
“I’ll trade you this Snickers for that Reeces,”
and then the moms,
crowded around the lone air conditioner
blowing dust instead of relief
“I’ll trade this brat for that snitch”
I keep on my way.

Ignoring the rubber cement rubbing alcohol lemon grass fume,
Ignoring the dried roly-poly mountains,
Ignoring the dark wood displaced in disarray across the floor,
and I finally reach my destination:
a bright orange holy grail spilling golden treasure
into a Dixie cup held
by calloused hands.
I take a sip
and gag a bit –
the consolation for my
Journey across the mess hall.
Sophia Sheeley
Grade 12

This I Believe
Personal Essay/Memoir

Emil E Holt Senior High School
Wentzville, MO
Teacher: Lucille Bauer

Everything Happens For a Reason

I believe that everything happens for a reason. Whether to make you stronger or show you the strength you already have; there’s a reason for all happenings.

People believe they’re being punished when terrible things happen, but they don’t see how it helps mold them into the person they’re supposed to be. In January, 2012, my sister became the driver of a car accident which resulted in the death of her best friend, Jessica Self. December, 2012, my father died from alcoholism. Between these two monumental deaths in my life, I attended thirteen other funerals for people I loved and cherished. 2012 is definitely considered the worst year of my life, but I know it made me who I am. God tested me for all that I was that year and I came out a stronger, better person. Now I forgive easy, I tell the people I love I love them every chance I get, and I know how fast someone can just disappear from your life forever. After learning more about Alcoholism and the way it affects families, I began speaking at AA meetings. Using the sadness surrounding me, I chose to make a difference in the world instead of letting it consume me.

Good things also happen for a reason. The best things in life come to you and get taken from you so you learn not to take anything or anyone for granted. Along with all of the hardships I’ve endured at such a young age, I have also received the greatest gifts: a perfect nephew and another on the way. I’m also blessed with a wonderful stepfather who always has my back. Making unforgettable bonds and touching lives by speaking about the tragedies I’ve encountered has also been a blessing. A beautiful life is what I live, and if you fight through the moments that are made to break you, you will have a beautiful life too. Sometimes it’s hard to believe such harrowing things happen to help make you the person you’re supposed to become. When people go through breakups or divorces, they sometimes feel as if their lives should end. One day though, they will meet the person that will complete them and show them true love.

You should never picture your life as over due to a tragedy occurring, it should teach you how to live better and become a better person. The people that dwell and sit in sadness over hardships generally become the ones that never grow as humans. Everything happens for a reason, and we need to expect that. I believe death can be a terrifying thing, but I also believe it happens for a reason. Whether it’s the person you love has served their purpose here on Earth, or they’re suffering here; there’s always a reason. You can’t go through life wondering, "why you," or, "why them."

No matter how painful, sad, or happy things can be, I believe that they happen for a reason.
“This is it Liz, a new town, a new school, a new start. No more hiding in the shadows of the lockers, no more staying home every weekend. No more loneliness...” I whispered quietly to myself as I saw the bus rolling my way. It was an unusually small bus compared to what I’m used to. Well, I guess it's not L.A. anymore...

As I stepped onto the bus heading to Normington High, I was shaking. Everyone's eyes were on me. Hmmmm, where are the open seats? Oh look there’s one! I slowly walked over to the seat, but the girl who was already sitting there, slid her books over. She gave me a glare and said in a harsh voice, “Sorry, I’m allergic to fresh meat!” I looked down and walked to the back of the bus. There was an entire row without anyone in it, and then there was a row with a girl, with chocolate brown hair, who looked to be my age, sitting in it. I decided to walk towards the clear row, when the girl looked up at me and waved. She then pointed insistently down at the spot next to her. I smiled and nodded. As I was sitting down, she extended her hand and said,

“Hi, my name’s Traci, Traci Kelly!”

“Hi, I’m Elizabeth Heartly, but usually people just call me Liz for short.” I said shaking the excitable girls hand.

“Ooooooooooo, I love your name!” said Traci, “and by the way, I don’t really have a nickname, I wish I had one though...”

“How bout’...... TRES!” I said.

“I love it!” Tres said back.

We both started laughing together. But then, I started looking down at the ground again, thinking of the previous incident.

“Hey, don’t worry about Becka, she’s just a burnout without a purpose.” Tres said as she discreetly pointed up at the girl who had slid her books over.

“Thanks,” I said with a half smile.

Tres and I continued to talk all the way to school, she's lived here in Normington her whole life. She has a brother who is a year older than her, but he rides to school with his friends. Tres said that he was a part of the “popular” crowd, because he’s on the football team, and that most people don’t even know that they’re related...

As we were pulling up to the school, we finished comparing our schedules. We discovered that we had lunch and science together! As we headed off the bus, I had to meet the principal for a tour of the school. Our move to Normington wasn’t planned, so I hadn’t had a chance to tour the school before summer was over.

I told Tres goodbye and said I’d see her at lunch.

I was greeted at the door by who I assumed was the principal, because of her pin skirt and her blazer. I was correct.

“Good morning my dear, and welcome to Normington High! I am going to be your principal here, Principal Lanigan that is. I hope that you have a great year with us, and that you feel comfortable talking to any of us teachers and staff here at our fine school!” she said with a toothy grin, complete with a smudge of red lipstick on her front teeth.

“Hello ma’am, I am Elizabeth Heartly, it's a pleasure to meet you.” I said, with a returning smile. I knew
she was going to be fun.

We finished our tour and I learned what a goof the principal was. We lost our way many times throughout the tour. Once I returned to my classes, the day slowly drifted by. When it was finally time for lunch, I headed to the cafeteria. I found Tres and went to sit by her. She didn’t have anyone sitting next to her yet, so I asked,

“Hey where are your friends, do they not have this lunch period with you or something?”

“It’s not that,” she said, “see, I wasn’t completely honest with you. I -um- well ya see…” she looked down, not wanting to meet my eyes.

“Hey, it’s okay. I don’t really have any friends either. I’ve always moved around a lot ever since I can remember, I was never very good in the friend department, or the guy department for that matter.” I said.

“Well it doesn’t look like that’s going to be a problem here,” she said as she made a gesture to her left. I tossed my long, dark blonde hair over my shoulder to make my spying less obvious. And there he was, a tall, blonde haired, blue eyed dream boat. And he was looking at me! ME! Oh no… we made eye contact! He didn’t look away. He sat there, staring at me. I could feel the blood rushing to my cheeks, I had to turn away. I made a quick spin back to my lunch box, and stared at it, until I remembered that Tres was next to me and I looked to her.

“Who was that?” I said a little louder than I had meant to. I scanned the room to see if anyone had heard me, I don’t think that they did, so I turned back to Tres.

“Who was that?” I whispered.

“James Anderson,” Tres said with a sigh, “the hottest guy in school.”

“Are you sure he was looking at me, I mean, I don’t even know for sure. He could have been looking at those girls over there, or maybe he was lost in thought, or maybe h…”

“It was you, he was looking at you.” Tres said as she cut me off.

I blushed, hoping it was true.

The bell rang, and I realized that I had barely even touched my lunch. Shoving the rest of my PB&J in my mouth, I hurried to French class.

Tres is taking Spanish, like most sophomores, but I had already taken Spanish last year as a freshman. They usually wouldn’t allow it at that school, but my teacher thought I had a higher level of comprehension than my peers. I was excited to learn French, however, in my excitement, I forgot my way there. Embarrassingly, I went to two wrong classrooms before I found the right one. However, I can’t really be blamed, if you had been there for my tour this morning, you would understand.

As I walked in I apologized to my new teacher, Mr. Clark.

“That’s alright, it’s your first day, but I expect you to be here on time tomorrow.” Mr. Clark said with a barely there smile.

“Thank you for understanding.” I said.

“Why don’t you take a seat next there to... Mr. Kelly! -And just so everyone knows, these will be your spots for the rest of the year.” said Mr. Clark, as he turned to continue teaching.

I went to take my seat, it was in the very back of the classroom. I saw the only open seat left and I couldn’t keep from rolling my eyes. He was sleeping already. As I sat down, he jumped and rubbed the sleep out of his eyes, still lying on the desk half asleep. He finally looked at my and immediately sat up straight, trying to act cool.

“Hey, I’m Asher.” he said.

“Hi…. I’m Elizabeth.” I said back to him.

“Hey you’re new here aren’t you, I’m pretty sure that I would remember y -I mean I’m good at remembering faces.” he said catching himself. His face beginning to turn to the shade of a beat. With my own face reddening I said, “Shh, we’re gonna get in trouble!”, but I couldn’t hide the smile growing across my face.

The end of the day came sooner than I expected, and my head spun with excitement! As I was packing up my things, Tres came to my locker and said,

“So, how was your first day?”

“Fine,” I said.
“Meet anyone interesting?”
“Ehh, no one better than you!”
“Hey, you should come over this weekend, you could meet my parents, and my brother! But be warned, my brother isn’t always friendly, and he judges people pretty harshly.”
“I’d love to come over and meet your family! Hey, the bus is here, let’s go shall we?”
“Yeppers,” said Tres.
As we were walking to the bus, I looked over my shoulder, because I felt like I was being watched. And there was James Anderson. Now I was sure that I was the one he was looking at.
The rest of the week went by fast, and now I was at Tres’ house.
“Hello Mr. and Mrs. Kelly, it's a pleasure to meet you!” I said.
Mrs. Kelly replied, “Heaven sakes dear, call me Angie, I’m just so glad that Traci has a friend over, you know that she hasn’t had one since she was.”
“Mom!” said Tres.
“Sorry hun,” said Mrs. Kelly, “my son won’t be home until later tonight, football practice and all. But we got some pizza for you girls, and you can stay up as long as you want, just don’t cause a ruckus.”
“Okay thank you,” me and Tres said in unison.
We talked for hours, about my past, school, our dreams, and of course boys. Eventually we decided to go to bed, so I went to the bathroom to first brush my teeth and wash my face.
I had just put soap on my face to the point where it looked like a bubble machine exploded, when I heard the door squeak open.
“Sorry Tres, I’m almost done in here,” I said.
No response.
“Tres?” I asked.
“Uhh, what are you doing here?”
I heard a familiar voice. It was Asher.
“Uh, what are you doing here?”I said.
“Well it is kinda my house.”
Oh my word, how could I be so stupid! Asher Kelly, how did I not connect the dots, he was Tres’ older brother!
“Um, just give me I minute I’m almost done,” I said splashing the soap off my face.
“UH, still, you never answered my question, what are you doing here?”
I looked down and patted my face dry, “I’m friends with your sister.”
“Really, her? You’re way too pretty to be friends with my sister.”
“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said.
I tried to slide past him, as he was still occupying the doorway. He put his hand on the door frame, blocking me from leaving the bathroom. His arms were so strong and I knew I wouldn’t be able to get past him. I looked up at him, meeting his eyes.
“W-what,” I barely managed to squeak out.
“Nothing,” he said, quickly removing his arm from the door frame.
I stood there a couple more seconds, then hurried back to Tres’ room.

Weeks passed, and it was almost time for homecoming. Tres and I had our dresses, hair, and makeup plans picked out, now all we needed were dates...
Asher and I were still “talking” here and there in Mr. Clark's class. Tres saw us talking one day, and now she teases that we love each other. She says that she can’t wait for us to start dating and how we’ll get married, then we’ll be sister-in-laws. I would have thought that if she found out I liked Asher, and I don’t, that she would have hated me. I guess I was wrong, but anyways, I definitely don’t like him -right?
As I was walking into lunch, James was standing there with a banner and flowers. The banner read, “Homecoming?” Some lucky girl was about to go berserk. I went to sit down and eat lunch with Tres, when out of nowhere I heard my name.
“Liz!”
I turned around, and James was right there, his flowers and sign. He was asking me.
“Liz,” he said, “I know that we don’t really know each other that well, but I’m hoping that we can change that, will you go to homecoming with me?”
“I don’t know what to say, it’s a great offer, but”
He cut me off saying, “Come on, just give me a chance!”
“Alright, I’ll go to homecoming with you.”
“Yes, I’ll pick you up at 7:00 sharp,” he said kissing my hand and handing me the flowers.
Tres and I freaked out together after that.

Homecoming.
My first dance ever. And now in this moment, my first slow dance. James went to take my hand, but I hesitated, and I don’t know why. But I took his hand, and as I did, I saw Asher. He was sitting by himself, crossing his arms, looking at us. He picked up his jacket to leave, and I couldn’t bare to see him go.
“I’m sorry, I don’t even know you, I have to go. But I’m sure that there are a thousand other girls that would love to dance with you. As a matter of fact, go ask Traci Kelly,” I told James.
“Uh, whatever, I could do better than you anyway,” he said.
“Yup, you have fun with that,” I said as I walked away.
“Asher!” I yelled.”Asher! -Asher Kelly!”
“What do you want!” he turned and said to me, tears in his eyes.
“You,” I said, grabbing his arm pulling him close.
“Well it's about time!” he said, as he gave me my first kiss.
BLACK HOLES

UNIVERSE SYMPHONY by Charles Ives begins to play. The CREDITS ROLL with a black screen. The names are written in ROBERTO MONO font and not capitalized and in no particular order. The title, BLACK HOLES appears on screen. It is the same font as the credits and it is “typed” on the screen. The title FADES.

While the screen is still black, some words appear on screen. In the top half of the screen in the center, the word UNIVERSE is typed in the same font of the credits. Below it, “the totality of known or supposed objects and phenomena throughout space” is typed. As that fades, the words BLACK HOLE are typed in the same place that “universe” had been. Underneath it, “a theoretical massive object, formed at the beginning of the universe or by the gravitational collapse of a star exploding as a supernova, whose gravitational field is so intense that no electromagnetic radiation can escape” is typed. The words fade from the screen as the MUSIC STOPS. The first line is delivered with a black screen.

EMMA
Why? Well, there’s got to be other things out there right?

MOZART’S SYMPHONY 40 IN G MINOR begins softly in the background and it gradually gets louder.

FADE IN:

EXT. SPACE

In the bottom right corner of the screen there is a small white light, gradually increasing in size, eventually, we see that it is a galaxy. The camera enters the galaxy and stars fly past left and right.

EMMA
There’s no way that we are the only living creatures in the entire universe, in the whole vast unknown world, however big it is. There has to be another place, another planet close enough to a star for anything living. I guess that it goes on forever, there can’t be a wall where it ends, right? It’s space, so there has to be more, space, always. The universe can’t just stop at one point. It just can’t.

CUT TO BLACK.

EMMA
Space is completely silent, you know. Well of course you know, but it is. There’s no atmosphere in space, so there’s no medium for the sound waves to travel through. When you go into space, it’s silent. And even though you could see earth right there, and it looks so close that you could touch it, it’s silent up there. And you can see stars more close up than you could ever imagine, so many balls of chemicals that would incinerate you if you touched them, yet they look so beautiful. And there are trillions of stars, more than anyone could ever imagine. Because the universe is so big that we don’t even know what is there and how many stars there are and what is out there and who’s waiting for us, if they’re waiting for us, or if they aren’t even there. (breath) What if you went inside a black hole, and all of a sudden, you see earth. But it wasn’t the earth we know, it was earth millions of years ago. If you went in that black hole and that was time travel. You time traveled back millions of years before people even existed.

FADE IN:

EXT. SPACE
As the lines are read, there is a visible black hole in the center of the screen. Inside of it there is what looks like Earth. As Earth gets closer, dinosaurs appear, roaming around the land. On the right is a Velociraptor, running through thick forests. There is a LOUD ROAR, and on the left is a Tyrannosaurus Rex, finishing a meal of some other animal.

EMMA

We think that black holes devour everything near them, but what if they’re moved? What if they’re not destroyed, you know? I guess, they could be destroyed, I don’t know. But if they aren’t, what’s happened to them? What if you went in a black hole, what would it look like? I saw this research that said it would feel like you’re falling through the horizon but you don’t know it’s the horizon until you fall through because it was invisible to you until you got there.

Suddenly, the visions of the dinosaurs start to rewind, all the way back to the black hole, the tempo of the music SPEEDS UP.

EMMA (excitedly and quickly)

There’s galaxies inside galaxies inside galaxies and planets in those places, with things, maybe people, maybe creatures, but whatever they are, I want to meet them and I want to see them, and who’s to say that black holes aren’t portals to other lands. Other things are out there somewhere, no matter how long it takes for me to get there, I want to try. We’re all related if you go back far enough. We’re made out of chemicals, right? And most of the chemicals are made in the stars, so we’re kind of like little stars. If dying wasn’t a problem, wouldn’t you want to go out there too? If you could travel anywhere you could have ever dreamed of, in this galaxy or not, but not have to worry about how long it took or how long you have, wouldn’t you want to see? Not just the world, not just our galaxy, but others, other places, things that we’ve only dreamed of, or haven't dreamt of at all.

In the center of the screen, a MAN’S FACE is shown, filling up the majority of the screen. He is FBI AGENT JASON WRIGHT. There is a filter on the screen to make everything appear more yellow-brown than it is. It sets an eerie and disturbing kind of tone. This filter continues throughout the film. He is taking notes and appears confused. The MUSIC STOPS.

EMMA (exhausted from talking so much)

I guess (pause) that’s why I broke into NASA, sir. I wasn’t going to steal anything, I just wanted to see if you knew anything else about the universe that I didn’t yet. So forgive me, sir, I’ll just be going now. My mom is probably sick of me.

AGENT (confused)

Don’t you mean worried sick?

EMMA

No, just sick of me.

CUT TO:

EXT. PARKING LOT OF NASA HEADQUARTERS- SAME DAY

EMMA walks out of the front doors of NASA with white headphones on. She is wearing a white shirt that has black sleeves and a black right breast pocket. She has faded jeans and an Adidas baseball hat on. Her shoes are dirty grey Converse. The camera follows a few feet behind her as she makes her way to her destination. The FIRST MOVEMENT of VIVALDI’S FOUR SEASONS begins. She walks through police cars that have flashing lights, not acknowledging any of them. She arrives at a car. It’s a blue minivan with school stickers on the windows and dirt at the edges. MOTHER, 37, waits impatiently inside. The camera behind the car with the back end of the car taking up half of the screen. On the other half, we can see Emma opening the car door. As Emma opens the door, the MUSIC STOPS. From outside the car, we hear Mother.

MOTHER
(annoyed and angry) What the hell is wrong with you? I’m absolutely sick of this! Emma turns her head and this is the first time her face is shown. The camera zooms in on Emma as she delivers her line.

EMMA (to the camera) Told you she was sick of me.

CUT TO:

INT. FRONT SEAT OF MOTHER’S MINIVAN

The FOURTH MOVEMENT of Vivaldi’s Four Seasons begins as Emma gets into the passenger seat of the car.

In the center is MOTHER’s face, her brow furrowed and she is gripping the steering wheel so tightly that her knuckles turn white. She is wearing a green and black plaid shirt with the sleeves rolled up. Her sarcasm is shown through a series of exaggerated face movements.

MOTHER Skipping school I can look past, you’ve done that plenty of times. Do I like that you do that? No, but (pause) there are worse things to consider at this very moment. But stealing my car? And doing what? Heading over to NASA of course, just to check out the rockets and test all the random crap you see? The camera switches to Mother’s perspective and we see a red hybrid that starts to pull into the lane that Mother is driving in. Mother honks. The camera switches back to showing Mother’s face.

MOTHER (yelling) What the hell is wrong with people today?! (starts to have a mental breakdown) Being a mom is so hard, Emma, and I don’t even think you understand what kind of pressure there is. (switching back to being mad) But you- You are grounded for eternity. And before you interrupt with your science shit and say that we make time up and everything and eternity to one person could be something different to another, we’re using my idea of time today. Forever, for the rest of you damn life you are not allowed to leave the house, maybe I’ll just slide your food under your door like a prison just for fun or something. I don’t know, but what I do know is that you’re impossible. Why can’t you just follow the rules like everyone else? Now I have to call the school and apologize and say what?

Mother picks up her phone from a cup-holder in the car and pretends to be talking to someone.

MOTHER (sarcastically being nice and calm) ‘Ah, yes, she couldn’t come to school today because she was busy with breaking into NASA and looking at stuff. Not even anything interesting like stealing, but just looking.’ The camera switches to being in the backseat of the car as if we are passengers. Mother looks at Emma and then at her phone. Her and Emma make awkward eye contact. Mother begins to pretend to press in numbers before placing the phone back by her ear.

MOTHER Oh, and then calling your father. ‘I guess she was serious about breaking into NASA Dan, because I’m here driving home after visiting a hell of a lot of FBI agents, but no big deal. What’s for dinner? Oh, chicken, my favorite!’” No. This is incredibly insane. I can’t believe you did this!

CUT TO BLACK.

The screen is black for around 15 SECONDS as the fourth movement of Vivaldi’s Four Seasons continues to play and then ENDS as the screen lights back up to:

CUT TO:

INT. HALEY’S ROOM- SAME DAY

The THIRD MOVEMENT of the same symphony BEGINS. In the center is a smiling brunette girl’s face. This is HALEY, Emma’s best friend. She is wearing black leggings, pink and black striped fuzzy socks, a
red pullover, and her hair in a high bun. She appears eager to hear what someone has to say. Her room is painted a light blue color, with a purple and blue flowered bedspread and many pastel pillows. There are pictures hanging on the wall of Haley and Emma, as well as other posters and shelves. Emma is laying on her back on the bed with her hands on her stomach looking at the ceiling expressionless.

HALEY
(overexcited)
This is incredibly insane, I can’t believe you did that! I mean, was it hard, breaking into NASA? How’d you get past all of the guards and stuff and sneak in, did you use the vents like you talked about that one time? Or was that just a joke? (waiting for Emma to respond) Probably just a joke, okay, but anyway, tell me everything, what you saw, what you heard, what you took. Oh, right, you didn’t want to take anything. That’s “immoral”. Whatever. It’s still cool that you saw all that stuff. Did they have any idea about the black holes you’ve been talking about? Or other life forms? Were there pictures? Models? Robots? New technology? Come on, tell me every last detail. I bet you’ll be all over the papers and the news tomorrow, or if you’re lucky, later today.

Haley lays down on her bed quietly and stares at the ceiling for a few seconds before jolting up.

HALEY
(gesturing)
‘Young girl breaks into NASA just to look at things’, that’s what it will read, and everyone would think, ‘What type of dumbass would break into NASA and not take anything?’ That’s what I would wonder, anyway, if I wasn’t your friend and didn’t know you at all. But I do know you! You’re my best friend so I obviously know you. But I guess you’re just like that, whatever and all. Come on, get to it, tell me about your adventure.

She stands up on her bed, crouches, and acts like a spy.

HALEY
Were you like a spy? Did you wear dark clothing or anything or just what you’re wearing now? Who caught you? What were you doing? Did you touch anything that you shouldn’t have? Did you meet any scientists or engineers or astronauts? Did the FBI come and question you? Did the president?

She sweeps her feet from under her and flops on her back onto her bed again, throwing off a few pillows. Emma turns to her side to face Haley.

HALEY
No, of course not, the president sure didn’t come to NASA for this, right? Oh god wouldn’t that be the coolest thing? If you snuck into NASA, got caught, and then met the president? That would be totally worth it. I guess, just breaking into NASA in the first place is pretty cool too. I mean, how many times in your life do you get that opportunity? I can tell you the answer for most people, not one time. Because really, who wants to break into NASA anyway? No one does that! Besides you of course, because you’re insane.

CUT TO:

EXT. TAYLOR’S NEIGHBORHOOD - SAME DAY

The Taylor’s neighborhood is a typical middle-class neighborhood with some of the houses having fences. Emma and Father are walking on the sidewalk. The camera appears to be on the ground and following behind them a few feet back. VIVALDI’S VIOLIN CONCERTO IN A MINOR begins to play.

FATHER
You’re insane, Emma, I don’t know how else to put it. I mean, most fathers have to worry about their teenage daughters going out and getting drunk and pregnant. Me? No, no, I get to worry about my daughter casually breaking into government facilities.

Father stops walking for a second and Emma stops a few seconds after realizing that he stopped. He rubs his non-bearded chin and continues to walk.

FATHER
You know, when your mom and I found out we were having a baby, we bought every single book we could find about raising a kid. And let me just say, it was EVERY book. We were what? 22 and 24? I mean, I can confidently say that there was nothing in ANY of those books about what to do when your
teenage daughter breaks into NASA. Maybe I’ll just write one. (mocking Emma) “Oh what a great idea, dad! I’d definitely enjoy reading that!”

As Father looks at Emma for a response, she mumbles inaudibly.

FATHER
Well, that’s not very helpful. I just...okay. You know, wait until your grandfather hears about this. Honestly, he’d probably be over the moon about it. Pun intended.

He winks. Emma groans.

FATHER
Sorry, just your old dad makin’ a funny. But seriously Em, when you told us that you were going to break into NASA, we thought you were kidding. I mean, your mother and I love that you’re curious about these things. But we were hoping that you would maybe go to work for NASA one day after graduating from college instead of breaking into it. But hey, no judgment from me. Props to you for going for it, but next time maybe just ask before you go breaking into high security buildings and getting questioned by the FBI.

CUT TO:

EXT. WASHINGTON D.C.
The music continues to play as various shots of Washington D.C. are shown. There are shots of the sun rising and various people walking along the street. The music slowly FADES OUT.

CUT TO:

INT. SCHOOL’S SCIENCE LAB

Everything is completely SILENT. The camera is positioned outside the CLOSED DOOR. We can see Emma standing by the front of the room at a desk with a test tube. She is wearing a forest green jacket with a white tank top underneath and black pants. There is DARK, THICK LIQUID inside the test tube and she picks it up. She examines it, swirls it around in the tube, and sets it back down. After waiting for a few seconds staring at the liquid, she leaves the vision of the screen and returns a few seconds later with a glass filled with CLEAR LIQUID and a pipette. She takes a pipette and gets some of the clear liquid. She puts a few drops of the clear liquid into the test tube and it begins to bubble. Emma takes a step backwards and examines what’s happening.

We begin to hear a two females harmonically humming in a voice over in a tune that is unsettling. The liquid bubbles over and begins a FIRE in the test tube. She disregards the fire and turns around to kick the wall. She slams her fists on the desk and the test tube is KNOCKED OVER. The fire spreads around the desk and she begins to panic. She grabs her hair and pulls on it, but still not doing anything to put out the fire.
Paterson wakes up without an alarm, sharing a few short but sweet moments with his wife Laura before getting dressed and eating a bowl of cereal. He walks to work, to the garage where his bus is kept, and spends the time before his day begins scrawling poetry in his “secret notebook.” After arriving home from work, Paterson eats dinner with his wife then takes their dog Marvin out for a walk, promptly depositing the pooch outside a bar, entering it himself, and slowly sipping a single drink before returning home where our Everyman begins his daily ritual all over again (Travers).

Paterson follows a week in the ordinary, routinely life of a bus driver named Paterson in Paterson, New Jersey. Moreover, to avoid any confusion, “the film takes its name from three things: its setting, Paterson, N.J.; its main character, a bus driver named Paterson; and William Carlos Williams’ epic poem "Paterson," one of Jarmusch's inspirations” (Rose).

Jim Jarmusch is an American indie film director, best known for such films as Stranger Than Paradise and Down By Law, both quirky comedies set in American cities. When discussing Paterson, his thirteenth film, “Jarmusch says he got the idea for the script more than 20 years ago on a trip to Paterson, where one of his favorite poets set one of his most famous poems. William Carlos Williams worked as a pediatrician in nearby Rutherford, N.J., and much of his work draws on the lives of his working-class patients” (Rose). Just the mere concept of Paterson involves significant factors that accentuate the film’s Realist identity: its setting in a real city and its focus on the working class.

More often than not, people tend to stick to a careful routine—one with minimal deviation, preferring to walk the same path day after day, seeing the same sights and people in their own comfortable corner of the world. Conversely, Transcendentalists are all about deviating from the norm and creating a new path on one’s own. A Transcendentalist would steer clear of routines that would limit and inhibit an individual, but Paterson shows that there’s potential within that routine for artistry to flourish (Edelstein). In reality, everyone has some sort of routine that they adhere to, a familiar schedule that keeps them cycling through a regular day. Paterson illustrates the feelings of familiarity and day-to-day relatability that Realism strives to evoke from its audience through Paterson’s routine, the film’s location, and the independent though intertwined lives of the characters.

The purpose of a Realistic work is to provide the audience with a story permeated with authenticity that mirrors the everyday occurrences of real life. Who better to illustrate the mundane aspects of modern life than a simple bus driver who lives “a quiet life, its rhythms determined by labor and the old Monday through Friday routine. Like most people’s workweeks, his story opens on a Monday, that word stamped on the screen” (Dargis). Paterson’s schedule does an exemplary job of highlighting the routine that people in the workforce fall into; he leaves home early, goes to work, comes back in time for dinner, and then goes out to enjoy time after work. The film’s stroll through the nine-to-five, Monday through Friday workweek is as close as one can come to showing what life is like for a typical middle-class American citizen. Not only does Paterson perfectly present an average worker's personal routine, it takes its time showing that “Paterson’s work demands consistency, routine, punctuation and safety (no speedy action-
flick escapades here), which create a kind of meditative flow” (Dargis). With each passing day of Paterson’s week, an obvious pattern begins to arise that forces the viewer stop and think about their own routine. The vast majority of adults get sucked into an unvarying schedule, and Paterson shoves that very lifestyle right under the audience’s noses, laid bare for them to see and reflect on. Paterson, as our Everyman, and his routinely life are used to better connect and relate to an audience that is forced to deal with their own dull workweek and the everyday problems and situations that come equipped. Another relatable aspect of Paterson is its illustration of the ups and downs that can all occur in a single week. “Things happen to Paterson — he has a rough Friday and Saturday, though a better Sunday — but Mr. Jarmusch doesn’t turn problems into drama. Life is enough” (Dargis). Events occur later on in the week that drastically alter Paterson’s set routine; his bus breaks down, a man comes into the bar he frequents wielding a gun, and his dog rips up his “secret notebook” that contains all of the poetry he’s written. The fluctuation in emotions that accompany disruptions of daily life are something experienced by everyone, especially when going from a good day to a bad day in less than a minute. With the realistic portrayal of soaring high points and drooping low points throughout a week comes a strong feeling of relatability from any audience. Nevertheless, the contradictions of his week aren’t the only factors influencing the rhythm of Paterson’s life and routine. For instance, where Paterson’s “life is dedicated to working his way through his daily routines, his wife, Laura (Golshifteh Farahani), has more exuberant creative impulses, an explosion of ideas in which one day she might pursue being a baker, the next a musician or printmaker” (Jarmusch, Interview with Mark Olsen). It is not realistic to assume that everyone works well going through the same motions over and over again, day in and day out; there will be some who thrive off of impulsive decisions and doing things when and where and how they feel like doing them. Paterson’s personality and routine is completely different from his wife’s, but they are a lifelike example of how opposites attract and have the potential to coexist seamlessly. Paterson’s work week routine serves to demonstrate the typical experience of the everyday working-class citizen.

Regionalism, a literary movement closely related to Realism, ties its subjects directly to a particular geographical area, most often incorporating that region’s dialect and culture into its contents. Paterson is set in the city of Paterson, New Jersey and aims to capture the commonplace, unremarkable atmosphere surrounding the city and its inhabitants. However, Jim Jarmusch, director of the film, has stated that “our Paterson is admittedly an imaginary Paterson” due to the fact that the city is made to look so beautiful in the film while in reality it’s a very rough and difficult place (Jarmusch, “Jim Jarmusch Talks About”). But while Paterson may not accurately portray Paterson, New Jersey specifically, the city’s character is one that can be seen in countless other cities throughout the United States. In fact, Jarmusch makes a point to be “respectful to it visually and to its ethnic diversity, because it’s incredibly diverse” (Jarmusch, “Common”). The Vulture’s David Edelstein catches this attention to detail when he notes that “Driver’s driver Paterson in Paterson registers as a very odd man out, and not just because he’s the only grown white male in a cast composed of black, Indian, Iranian, and Japanese actors” (Edelstein). When casting for a movie that’s set in a real place, it’s important to consider the ethnic makeup of that specific location so that the film will correctly represent how that area would tangibly appear. The representation of a variety of ethnic groups in the film emphasizes the importance of real people in their real setting, which was very desired by Realists. Additionally, Jarmusch and his cinematographer, Frederick Elmes, are able to capture the city of Paterson “in all its cracked-sidewalk glory” wherein they are sure to include “Rent-a-Centers and Foot Lockers, places we don't usually see in movies unless the filmmaker is trying to make a statement about ‘urban’ life, with all the divisions those quotation marks imply” (Zacharek). However run-down the city of Paterson may appear to be, the lazy hustle and bustle of the urban environment contributes to its lively though ordinary atmosphere. Combining the diverse cast of Paterson with naturalistic city elements produces an extremely realistic and familiar urban backdrop to the film.

Relationships in movies are often idealized or completely unrealistic, but Paterson manages to yield satisfying and solid relationships that remain true to life. For example, Paterson and his wife Laura are very different people, and while Jim Jarmusch could have engendered a dramatic conflict to push them
apart due to their apparent incompatibility, “he doesn’t present this as a problem to be solved; it’s just an intertwining of lives, the way lives often really are: imperfect, occasionally maddening, ultimately poetic, in an utterly individual way” (Stewart). While Laura and Paterson remain independent characters for quite a lot of the film, they always end up back together, sweetly and easily slotting back together. Even so, Jarmusch decided to focus not exclusively on Paterson and Laura’s relationship but on Paterson’s relationship with everyone he might interact with on a day-to-day basis. This opens up several avenues to explore such as his relationship with those at his workplace, with those he meets on his bus, with other patrons he meets at his regular bar, and with strangers he may randomly encounter on the street. On one of Paterson’s regular mornings arriving at work, he greets a co-worker, asking them how they’re doing and the co-worker responds:

DONNY: Now that you ask, no, not really. My kid needs braces on her teeth, my car needs a transmission job, my wife wants me to take her to Florida but I'm behind on the mortgage payments, my uncle called from India and he needs money for my niece's wedding, and I got this strange rash on my back. You name it, brother. How 'bout you?

PATERSON: I'm OK.

Paterson’s interaction with Donny encapsulates the idea that each and every individual has a separate life; no two people share the exact same struggles. Paterson’s co-worker Donny seems to be under a significant amount of stress trying to juggle all the distinct pieces in his life, while Paterson is, at the moment, completely content with his quiet life at home with his wife and their dog. Speaking of Paterson’s life at home with his wife Laura, it’s pointed out that Laura is “very accepting of who [Paterson] is, in the same way he is of her. And that, to me, is a love story. There’s no conflict here, really. They love each other for who they are, and they’re different” (Jarmusch, “Common”). With such affection and understanding that is shared between Laura and Paterson, it is obvious that they love each other a great deal. However, you get the feeling that they each have their own discrete spaces, areas of their life in which they can escape to and explore if they would like. Paterson’s is poetry and Laura’s can be described as whatever passions she’s pursuing at the moment. At one point in the film, Laura is excitably chatting and sharing news with her husband:

LAURA: I know it’s silly, but I’m so excited about the new farmers’ market. Because if my cupcakes are a big sensation then I might be on my way to a very successful business.

PATERSON: That would be amazing, honey.

LAURA: And you know what else? My guitar should arrive today. My harlequin guitar direct from Esteban.

PATERSON: Is Esteban gonna deliver it personally?

LAURA: [laughs] Who knows?

While Laura and Paterson’s relationship on screen may not be the traditional and most familiar to audiences in terms of movie-relationships, it is an honest interpretation of many real relationships between significant others who find themselves deeply in love but still needing their own time to continue to be independent and productive as individuals. Furthermore, each individual character possesses their own story that the audience merely gets a small glimpse of and which is very symbolic of real life interactions; countless lives are intertwined together—paths constantly crossing and uncrossing—all the while only meeting and connecting briefly before moving on in life.

Jarmusch has created a film in which the focus is a rarity for “movie screens these days: a regular guy” (Wilson). A film that follows a week in the life of a bus driver by day, poet on the side in New Jersey seems like the plot of a movie set up to fail. Who would willingly watch that? Compared to any other film, Paterson would seem uneventful and insipid, but “if this all sounds a little underwhelming, that’s sort of the point. It’s a celebration of the everyday” (Perry). With Paterson, those sick and tired of the gruelling monotony of the day-to-day get a chance to see small subtleties of life celebrated on the big screen. Every now and then, people need to be reminded of the joys and beauties and surprises that can be found in the simplicity that is everyday life. There are times when people begin running through life at breakneck speed. Sometimes it can’t be helped, but other times it’s necessary to slow down and in those
quiet moments contemplate and reflect on what’s going on, not only in your own life but in the lives of those around you. Take a leaf from Paterson’s notebook; on any given day “he finds either beautiful things or interesting things to write poems about or to be the kind of jumping off point, the point of departure for a larger reflection” (Jarmusch, “Jim Jarmusch On Iggy Pop”). Paterson is able to continuously and artistically capture in neat, plain-spoken poems what have been called “the marvelous in the everyday” (Kenny). It’s a wonderful idea—to search for and ponder the small things in a day that make it a little brighter. Grand, adventurous stories are unnecessary because “Life is enough.”

Works Cited


Oviya Srihari  
Grade 8  

may, august, november  
Poetry

John Burroughs School  
Saint Louis, MO  
Teacher: Joy Gebhardt

may  
Let the snow melt off sleeping flowers,  
Let children buzzing with anticipation leave their desks with crows of joy,  
Let hot sun wrap in its rays,  
Let lazy breezes stir the town,  
Let sprinklers strew water over the lawn in a continuous *hiss-hiss-hiss*,  
Spray the kids  
Spray the dog  
Oh—heck, spray the grown ups, too,  
It’s flowers and freedom and jumping through jets of splashing water now,  
Never mind that December’s cold breath will stain everything monotone, snowy white,  
I can still let you breathe in the sweet sunshine and  
wish on dandelions and  
kick off your shoes and let your toes sink into waterlogged grass.

august  
paper stacks wrapped up in shiny plastic like a gift—  
two for the price of one oh do you need a pencil case too where’s the list  
oh don’t tell me you didn’t bring the list of school supplies we need to buy—  
mechanical pencils in a brilliant array of color stood on end  
new shoes with crisp  
white soles—can’t we go shopping tomorrow? I want summer to last longer—  
the office aisle strewn with cotton-candy-pastel binders and glitter pens  
post it notes in the shape of  
neon-smiling-hopping frogs—are n’t they just adorable? I have to have them!— and fluorescent lights  
glinting off  
rows of water bottles—what do you mean, school starts in a week?—backpacks on shelves, all shapes  
and sizes, fifty percent off cheap spiral notebooks shoved in the corner,  
the kind that fall apart in two and a half  
weeks—am I reading the price wrong? Oh, well there must be some sale on those textbooks what did you  
say there isn’t a sale? May I speak to a manager may I bargain may I may I may I— the last snatches of  
hot pavement and  
tank tops and chasing the ice cream truck down the street  
same feet pattering  
on cooling asphalt to catch the school bus.

november  
November is tough love,  
Chilly and cold, but when you’re looking for it  
You can catch the hints of a warm breeze or a sunshine when it counts.
Caught at opposite ends, brilliant light spilling everywhere
Glinting at harsh angles on frosted-white grass
Trying to thaw with lackluster, thin rays of light.
So you walk outside in short sleeves, feel the frozen bite deceive you

But the sun is out!
Isn’t it warm?

When you tip your chin up high,
looking for some semblance of July to drape you in its sunlit warmth,
All that you see
Is an exhale of crystalline white,
A cloud of mist that tells you
You were wrong this time.
(It won’t stop you from doing it again.)
A Loss of Nerve

I. April

The cruelest month lazily began to slip away, glazing over the sky in an ephemeral nacre color. Only a stubborn gash of low-lying cumulonimbi remained, clinging amongst the trees who pointed to the sky, proud and idealistic in their ambition. Ruth left the shore and began to swim to a dense cluster of limestone lining one of the islands that inhabited the body of water, exercising and stretching in fluid, languid motions until she felt the mossy algae that nestled in the many aberrations of the boulder encroach upon her fingers and toes. The stone had once been part of the cliffs that loomed above, but its sedimentary nature made it weak, and here it had found its final resting place, awkward at a tilted angle, half submerged in water and half exposed to the sun. She nimbly clambered up onto the surface and flung herself into a supine position, feeling crisp droplets of water run down her skin, inhaling its strong scent. Crawling up further onto the bank, she rooted her hands through the landscape of the island, feeling the newly green flesh of sprouting tubers and flowers stretch towards the sky, yet still, they persisted halfway underground in shy abnegation of the sunlight that had grown increasingly radiant within the passing week. That gaseous, brilliant bulb, gazing downwards upon the newly reluctant multitudes of tubers and flowers, still hiding in the undergrowth just out of reach, remaining pale against her tanned skin, almost alive.

II. In church

The girl scrunched her brunette eyebrows even more than their usual state, and placed two fingers on the bridge of her nose, accompanied by the fluttering shut of her eyelids, as if attempting to catch hold onto fleeting wisps of an answer that was just out of reach. She began to think rapidly, as one does after their first encounter with death, about all the curious bits and parts of life, its problems, issues, mysteries, and tragedies, trying to find her way around in this little labyrinth that was both real and inchoate. Why did the dog have to die? That one was simple. But there were others… ones that haunted her sleep and prodded at the back of her mind. Why did her mother so firmly insist that the dog could go to heaven, even though catechism said it couldn’t? It was little things like this, little hiccups in resoundingly simple convictions that made her brain twist itself over. It seemed to her parents, the sky was a bit duller, the roses did not blush so profoundly, nor did they experience this magnitude, this eternal wave and tide of information. The girl wanted to see the truth, to live in the light where colors so vibrantly reflected. It was almost as if she was assembling a little painting, a curation of life inside her mind and looking at her, expression furrowed, one could see everything about to turn. But what an absurd painting life was then! It began to frustrate her, when she tried to understand it all, comparing this to that, and trying to figure out what her own place was in all of it. Every Sunday she would sit in the pew, and listen to the sermon, eyes widened and eyebrows raised, bombarded with new pieces and parts never seen before. Every day she
would traverse these strokes of thought; in the hopes one day the painting would encompass truth in entirety. She pressed her forehead into her clasped hands, quiet, and closed her eyes until the inside of her eyelids ebbed a brilliant sanguine.

III. Wager

The drapery of the bedroom quietly faded from their flushed sunlit color and obeyed the oncoming gray. And so too, did the sunspots pique and scuttle, fleeing to the corners in fear, off the large cloth canvas painting as Ruth, older now, tore a cover over it and secured it with a sense of finality.

“I am not going to finish it.”

There was a gravelly blunt formality in her voice as she stood back, examining her silenced work. Her sister scoffed….

“Why?... the sister startled in a half-laugh…. “Are you feeling alright...? You look terrible....”

All of this was said in her usual tone of voice reserved for family, one whose denotation was insulting, but among Ruth, the connotation was something more familiar and light-hearted.

But the girl did look peculiar, she could feel her lips contort into some horrible zigzag, and her color dwindle away with every tick of the old, mossy grandfather clock. Ruth attempted to respond, naturally argumentative, but instead bit back her formulating response and the spirit died in her throat. In the absence, her sister began to raise her voice in exasperation.

“You shut yourself up to work on this .... And you are just going to give it up!... You’re so .... dramatic…”

The girl just stood there for a spell and resigned to promptly fling herself onto the bed which creaked from neglect and old age.

The girl could see her sister’s lip curl in an annoyance…the desired effect, yet a rare occurrence, from her monotonous façade.

Her sister examined the waned, waxy figure in front of her. If the death of the dog had opened up an underbelly of thought, then like a rotating bicycle wheel, another death would bring full finality to this expedition. This dream slowly closing into selective ignorance, because in the time between the death of the dog and news of her mother, no other explanation, to be more specific, comfortable explanation had been found. It was no longer an abstract theory, it was an unfortunate reality that manifested in the illness of her mother. But all of this would take too long, it was too personal and could not be formulated in a sentence aloud,

“I put too much of myself in it.”

Ruth settled for, her voice cracked and sotto voce. Encircling her mind was a whirlpool of thought, all flushing down a drain. The beauty of the painting, its fine strokes, crisscrossing in many lines, like the circulatory system, branching and flowing, dispersing life that pulsated through the veins and emanated from the aorta, regal and poised, yet vulnerable. The sun was uncomfortably bright now, encroaching upon everything and prodding against the back of her neck. It followed her to sleep and haunted her dreams. The world did not make sense anymore, so the painting had to be stashed away. She was done.
To live in the full extent of light was uncomfortable, and it was easier to place faith in a simple, comfortable organized convention. She had to stop...because the world did not match up. Yes, that was what needed to be done and bet on, the painting’s gauche use of sunlight was now under a comfortable duress of darkness. Her sister walked away and slammed the door.

IV. Wasteland

It was in early spring the family felt death’s breath once again brush against the hair of their necks. Of course, the girl, though tenacious in her attempts to relax through all the conventional comforts of Catholicism, twitched and trembled in fear as white-hot adrenaline branded her soul and laced around her body in a tight coil. Sunlight poured down upon her in entirety now, yet she managed to escape this bind just enough to reach to the car ignition, her shadow racing down streets until she reached an old familiarity of her youth. This was a different body of water, but it did not matter, for every platitude of the ocean was universal. She crawled onto the dusty bank that shied away from the eternal tide, and a tempest of sea spray flecked at her face her head lolled exhaustively as she drifted into an uneasy sleep. The waters appeared to be frozen now, including a river that dispersed into the larger chamber. She examined it, the rushing water beneath a thin layer of ice. From a safe distance she continued to bury her hands in the ground that had in the dream, now turned from sand into dirt, feeling the roots of plants just beginning to reach for the sun, still not knowing and ignorant of the light. Then the girl saw it, a flash of the painting... it danced across the iced stream, beautiful and youthful, a sunlight wiry figure beckoning to follow. The girl’s gray cheeks bloomed as blood vessels burgeoned against the crisp air and she was overcome with emotion. Color was cast into her frame, enlightening the limbs like dry bones brought to life. Her eyes now glowed and laughter reverberated around refreshed vocal cords. The girl ran after the figure of the painting in a fleeting dream, walking across water. For a moment the air was thick and stood still. But sunlight is required for color, and soon the laughter resounded in unison with the crack of the ice. Regret and fear seeped into her skull and pulsated like poison in her veins. Rushes of the water-filled eardrums and the sun was suddenly unbearable... a brilliant sanguine... Ruth opened her eyes, back to where the tempest of sea spray flecked and pinpricked at her face and she began fearfully tearing at the grass and plants that were sprouting in the bank in anger. This continual eternal motion, this wave and tide... Only when her sinews strained and her hands were bloodied, only then did she stop and stare at those tides, the unfathomable waters, arrant in their unbounded gallop, until the obtuseness of it of it all numbed the prodding sun in the back of her brain.
I stood in the middle of my brother and father in the dark study. *Always in the middle.* My brother’s long arms remained crossed while my father’s light brown, wisdom-filled eyes stared at his own son carefully. *I bet Jonas can’t see any of Father’s wisdom, yet I bet Father can’t see the strong, handsome, adult his son has turned into.* I glanced up to the closed window that threw darkness on top of me. *Why can’t you be open?*

“I am your father and I should be able to—” my father paused to correct himself. “No, I *am* able to tell you what you need to do. And do you know what you need to do?”

“What? What do I need to do, Dad?” Jonas leaned in closer to my father, but Father didn’t seem to care.

“You need to listen to me and stop right now,” started my dad in such a strong voice, it could pierce through your words as they flew out of your mouth.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Am I bothering you with my “attitude”?” Jonas spat.

“In fact, very much so,” my dad fired back.

I wanted to yell at both of them to stop criticizing their own family, but I didn’t dare to risk getting caught up in the madness. I just couldn’t speak up. *No one should have to see this. Especially not a fourteen year old like myself. Why can’t I just close my eyes and let them rise in the same, old gray library with all of Dad’s “classic” books from when he was a kid? Everything would be the same, expect Jonas and Dad would be shaking hands and laughing about whatever their fight started with in the first place.*

Although there was light coming from the window down the hallway, it barely lit up the dull gray walls and the wooden bookshelves filled with my father’s old collection of books. *If only they could stop fighting. If only they would.* The window they closed when they fought would be open if they would just stop. I would squint my eyes at the light of the outdoors, for I have not seen it from that window in quite a long time. *I want that window to be open. I really, really do.*

“Right, Sasha?” Jonas and my dad stood staring at me with their hands open towards me getting their victory dances ready in their heads.

“Umm, repeat please?” I asked carefully.

Jonas threw his hands up in the air and shouted, ”Oh come on! Whose side are you on?”

*I don’t know. I really, really don’t.*

“You’re no help,” my father mumbled, hoping that no one would hear him. I don’t think Jonas did, but I did. My dad left the study with loud footsteps. After Jonas shook his head with a deep, disappointed look, he shuffled out of the dark room and turned the opposite way of my father down the hall. I ran over to the door and slammed it shut. I shrunk down against it and let my anger and sadness slide out of my body into puddles on the floor.

I looked down at my pruny hands that my salty tears had caused after covering my eyes for more time than I could count. I searched the room for something that would take my mind off of the fight my family had been gnawing at for days. *Weeks. Months. Or at least that was what it felt like. Why can’t they just be done? Why can’t they resolve it? It can’t be that hard, can it? My eyes traveled to the bookshelf. Most books were unfamiliar to me. I wanted to lock the door and read all of the books for so long that when I climbed out, my father and my brother would have hands over each other’s shoulders, and not because they want to strangle each other.*

The books were crammed on the shelf so tightly I couldn’t even pull one off. *If I was one of the books, I*
would be that one right in the middle. My eyes stuck to a thin novel with a faded, red cover. The book was shoved in the center between everyone and everything, yet no one could see it struggling. Expect me. If only the window would shine light on it. It could shine hope on it. But of course, the window was closed because my family still fought.

“Sasha?” Jonas’ booming voice made me jump at half of a foot off of the dark wood floor. “Sasha? Where the heck are you?”

I struggled to stand up with the tightness in my chest that was holding me down. Pulling the gold handle of the door open, I saw my brother looking around a little bit farther down the hall.

“There you are! I need your help.” Jonas urged.

_Not again._ “But, what about Dad? He doesn’t want to hear your battle plans.” I said quietly, hoping that my brother would agree and keep me out of the fight.

“He just left. He was looking for you, but so was I. I just told him to leave you alone.” I wanted to say, _“Well, call me before Dad leaves dummy. What if he had something really important to talk to me about?”_, but I knew he probably just wanted to talk to me about the same things that Jonas wanted. _And leave me alone? That sounds nice._ I wanted to fire at my brother for talking to my father the way that he did, but I didn’t dare to get on Jonas’s bad side.

“So, what do you want?” We walked slowly down the hall. My gaze turned to Jonas’ tall face. His ruffled brown hair swayed with his every step. His blue eyes were said to be what people know our family for. I started to realize how much we really did look alike. He was once my best friend, but since he has been in a fight with one of the only people that I love most, my opinions slightly changed.

“You know how you think that what Dad is doing to me is wrong?”

_Umm... Yes? No? Sometimes? How do you know what I think?_ “What do you mean?”

“Like, how he thinks he is the boss of me?”

“I guess? I don’t know. I can’t pick sides.” Jonas stopped and looked at me with emotion of confusion, disappointment, and plain sadness. I couldn’t tell which emotion was the most present. _I just can’t pick sides. Sure, Jonas is my only sibling and he was my best friend, but he said..._ No, Sasha, stop it.

_How could he say that?_ Stop it!

“Jonas, just leave him alone.” I yelled into the gray library where Jonas and my father stood close to each other. “See? Sasha is on my side.” My father said as he turned toward Jonas.

Jonas stormed over to me and put his hand up. Pointed one of his strong finger close to my face. Too close.

“Don’t get into this! Do you understand? I don’t care if you are “just trying to help”. Okay? Okay?!” yelled Jonas.

“Okay.” I said softly.

“Don’t talk back.”

“I didn’t! And you aren’t my father!”

“Whatever, Sasha. I don’t need you anyway. I never did, I never will. EVER!”

_That was then. He apologized, but that doesn’t erase what he said._

“Sasha. Hellooo?”

“What?” I replied quickly. “What? What?” I said more urgently, afraid that Jonas knew what situation I was looking back to.

“Nothing, nothing. I was just trying to get your attention.”

“Oh,” I blurted with a sigh of relief.

The front door on the other side of the wall creaked open.

“Sasha, I’m home,” my father yelled, purposefully forgetting to mention Jonas.

_Dad! Thank goodness._ Jonas rolled his eyes and walked towards his room before my father turned around the corner. I wanted to call after him, but my father would hate that. That was the fact that I hated.
“There you are!” my dad said as he outstretched his arms with a bag in his hand. “I’m here. And so is Jonas…” I trailed off. My father let me go out of his arms and set down his paper bag.

“Want to come with me to get some new books?” he said with a smile.

_Tempting. But what if he tries to get me on his side? I hate that feeling. Plain uncomfortable._

“Umm, no thanks,” I hesitated. “Maybe, tomorrow?”

“No, I’m working at the university late tomorrow. Come on. It will be fun.”

“Ok,” I replied nervously.

We hopped into the black car and my father turned the key. As we strolled down the neighborhood, my father began his lecture.

“So…”

_Here we go again._

“Your brother has been really acting up lately. Don’t you agree?”

“Well, I don’t know. I don’t really think that he—”

“I mean I know he is an adult, but he is really, really…”

“Let me guess, immature, childish, or maybe a little too unsophisticated for your taste?” I said while limiting myself to a non-sarcastic tone.

“That’s exactly what I was looking for! How did you know?” my father asked suspiciously, but I could tell he thought I was against Jonas with that comment.

“Let’s just say I know you well.” _That’s not true. Or maybe it’s too true. It’s not the real reason I know that. I won’t go back. That was a long time ago. I won’t go back. I’m his daughter. How could he say it to my face? He didn’t mean it. Did he?_

“Sasha, I can’t bear to see you talking with Jonas.”

“Dad, he’s my brother. I have the right to talk with him no matter what.” My dad clenched his teeth and fists together so hard I thought he would scream. Or explode. We both sat in silence as the black car stumbled past the plain old brown houses that surrounded me. That trapped me. I wished I could hop out of the car and run to where I didn’t need to listen to fathers and sons constantly arguing like at home.

“Sasha? You know what? I can’t believe you are on that—that child’s side instead of the genius’ side,” my father began while motioning his hands towards himself. “He’s just... an immature, childish kid. I don’t care if he has turned into an adult, technically. I am still the boss of him. I am his parent. I thought I raised him to be like me. You know what Sasha?”

“What?” I mumbled.

“If you go with him and all that he says, then you will turn into a child who is little bit too unsophisticated for my taste. Like—a stupid child with no brains.”

_I didn’t dare to stand up for myself in front of my father again. He didn’t even say he was sorry._

“Sasha! Why do you keep getting distracted? Jonas and I are at a serious argument and I have no one to turn to but you. So listen! Is there something bothering you?”

_Nope, nothing at all. It’s not like the two people I love the most hate each other right now._

“I’m fine.”

“Oh, shoot. 7:34,” my dad read off of his watch like many times before. “Bookstore closes at 7:30 and the Library isn’t open on Sunday.”

“That’s okay. I’m not really in the mood to get a book anymore,” which was definitely true.

As we drove up to our small ranch home, my dad whispered to me, “Don’t tell Jonas what I said about the fight. And also how I know you are on my side.” _Hm. That sounds very similar to what Jonas had to say. Weird. I thought as I rolled my eyes where my father wouldn’t see._

I opened the squeaky door to our house, and for once I was relieved to feel the warm air surround me and the odd cherry scent of our home climb into my nose.

“Wait, Sasha,” my father pulled me back outside so Jonas would not hear our conversation.

“Hang on, Dad,” Jonas said with a smirk as he peered in the doorway. “Caught you that time. I need to talk with Sasha for a moment.”

“Sorry, she’s on my side,” my father said as he put his arm around me and began to kiss my cheek.
Jonas looked surprised and mouthed “What?”. I pushed my father’s arm off of my shoulder and walked inside to the other side of the room.

“Look,” I began, “you guys both think I am on your “side”, but I am my own person. I won’t support my brother over my own father, or my parent over my best friend. You guys have to settle this between the two of you without relying on me. Sure, I have reasons to support both of you, but I can also see both of your flaws, too. I will not choose to only focus on one or the other just because you want me too. Plus, we are family. Families should not fight. You guys are always there for me to talk to, get your opinion, lean on, get help from, and more and more and more. If you guys can’t trust each other for the same things that you trust me with, I’m sorry, because you are really missing out. A family is a family. Right now, you two are nothing close to what real family is.” My words fell out of my mouth quickly. It felt like someone lifted a fifty-pound weight off of my chest with every word I said. I walked out of the room with a confident stride. Finally. It feels so good to talk to people who understand me. But do they understand me right now? Was that even a good idea? Will they both hate me now?

I woke up the next morning and found my brother and father were not in their rooms. I didn’t have to search for long before I came across the open door to my father’s study. Oh, boy. Another round of the fights. I walked into the room and saw my brother and my father sitting in chairs smiling. I questioned my own eyes for a moment, then I noticed something more appeared to be different. Suddenly, the thought came rushing to my head. The window is open.
Waking up in a room full of people who I’ve never met before. Cops in the corner and nurses running left and right. “She’s awake”, the nurse says. They all start coming towards me I suddenly feel trapped and then I remember. Heading home from work when I saw him. A dark brooding man, but that’s just a New York night until he got closer. I slowly picked up my pace towards my apartment, he starts to close in but when I reach the door he’s right behind me covering my mouth. “Don’t scream and you won’t get hurt, open the door and walk in.” I grab my keys and open the door. He pushes me down to the couch then he slams something over my head and everything goes dark. Suddenly I snap back to reality and break down into tears. “What happened to me? What is going on here? Someone please tell me?” I pleaded as the tears streamed down my face. A nurse starts to walk towards me but is soon cut off by a cop. “M’am you were a victim of sexual assault,” the cop says with a blank face. “I was what?” I say questioningly. “Did you at least catch him.” The cop starts inching closer and closer “Hadley I am very sorry but he was gone by the time anyone found you.” “Who found me?” I say. “We got a call about some disturbance in your building and we came across your door opened and you lying on the floor,” the cop says. The nurse steps out from behind the cop. “Excuse me we need to run some tests on Ms. Whittemore.” The cops walk out the door and the nurse starts a series of tests that I know nothing about. Then my mind goes blank and I start to wonder who did it. Why would someone want to follow me around and decide to rape me. I close my eyes and wonder if this is just a bad dream I haven’t woke up from yet. As soon as I opened my eyes the cops are back and are firing questions at me. “What happened? Do you remember his face? What do you remember?” Stop yelling at me stop pushing me so hard just leave me alone. That’s the only thing I wanted to say but all that came out was “I don’t know for sure.” Whatever I said must of been the wrong answer because they started pushing me to remember details again. So I told them what I remembered but that still wasn’t enough. If I knew more I would tell them but I don’t so stop asking me things I don’t know. As I was on the verge of a nervous breakdown the nurse walks in “That’s enough with the questions Ms. Whittemore.” They began to shuffle out one by one, then I slowly began to fall asleep. When I awoke the nurses had some clothes laid out for me to wear. As I put them on I start to notice the bruises along my legs and stomach. Then I can’t move frozen with fear stuck in that spot until I hear a knock at the door and come to. “Ms. Whittemore it’s time for you to leave.” But I don’t want to leave I just want to stay here where it’s safe where I don’t have to live in fear of him coming back. I decided to take a cab home since I have no one to pick me up. Ever since my parents kicked me out the day I turned 18. Now I am 21 and living alone in the Big Apple. In a run down apartment on the west side, with a job that is hardly able to pay the bills. Pushed back into reality, as the cab pulls to the curb I step out and am suddenly hit with a memory. Laying face down on the couch with my dress spread out on the floor. But then I am back to reality parked in front of my apartment with a key in hand. I step out of the cab and tears start falling down my
face but I walk in anyway only the see a mirage of the night that will forever define me.
I decide to go to my bedroom and lock the door to have some courage to stay in the same place that he
was in. Wondering what he touched, what he took from me not only material items but key parts of me.
As I look around I start to fade away so I can forget everything. I wonder to my bathroom cabinet and see
a bottle. I decipher what I could do I have nothing left it is no longer worth it. I start to pick up the bottle
when I realize that it’s empty, knowing that I have to live with the constant memory of him everyday.
Being confined in the silence the pain becomes worse with each second my breaths become quicker my
heart speeds up and I crash to the floor. Curled up in a ball I start to cry letting the floor soak up my tears,
and cradle my body. Never wanting to get up incase he were to come again.
I begin to awake and the pain sets in. As I walk to the kitchen I can see where it happened where my
innocence was taken, where the old me will forever lay. Deciding to leave the apartment without the
constant reminder of him. Ready to face the outside world head on without anyone knowing.
I get down the street without wanting to turn back. Going further along until I start to see him everywhere
not knowing where to go. I pick up my pace and run into someone, the memory comes back and I run.
Sprinting as if my life depended on it relieving that moment over again. Looking back as if he was
chasing me all over again nowhere to run nowhere to hide. Wanting to be away wanting to end it here
never wanting to be afraid. Wishing I had someone to hold me to help shake away this fear of him.
By the time I snap out of it I am at my door getting ready to be in the safety of my apartment. I run in lock
the door and notice that someone slip a paper under my door.

Dear Ms. Whittemore we forgot to give this to you before you left. This is a paper that will show you some
support groups for others like you. We wish you the best!
Wish me the best, how can they say that? You can’t exactly wish the best upon someone who has gone
through the worst. I throw the letter away no one can change my mind, no one can help me.

Iumble into the next room I find a bottle half filled sitting on the counter as if it were waiting. As I pick
it up I wonder if my worries will be diminished. I start drinking and my world starts to turn black.
Waking up the aching of my head doesn’t compare to the pain in the rest of me. I start to walk to the door
when I remember that I need to refill my prescription. The sooner I do that the sooner the pain fades. I
walk into the bathroom, pick it up, and walk out the door.
Walking down the street it feels like all eyes are on me. This lump in my throat starts to rise and my chest
starts to ache. I pick up my pace and make it to the pharmacy.

“You here to fill a prescription”, a cheery voice says.
“Yes”
“Okay have it out in a minute.”
I start sweating and shaking immensely, and I can’t stop it. The pharmacist comes out and hands me my
prescription. I head for the door as fast as I can. Then the memory comes flooding back, there is no
stopping it.
The images flash across my face of that night. Unable to control it I start to run into people. By the time I
get back to my apartment I realize that it is time.
I rummage through my cabinet looking for a paper, pencil, and a bottle to wash away my thoughts. I sit
down at the table and I start my writing.

Dear World,
I essentially blame you for this pain that I was caused. The man who took my happiness, and my life from
me this is for you. You not only assaulted me, you took my will to live. As I write this I feel no empathy
towards you if you get caught. I hope you rot in jail with your sick persona. I had everything taken from
me twice in my life and I won’t let it happen again. Fool me once shame on you fool me twice shame on
me. That is why I made the decision to end it all before I spread my unhappiness. Screw you world and
your sick games.

- Hadley Whittemore
I walk to the couch where everything was taken from me. I sit down and lay my note on the table. *Should I really do this? Is there more to life than this pain?* I ultimately decide no, I am ready to no longer be a part of this world. I pick up the bottle and grab a handful of pills. The pills feel different in my hand. I grab the bottle, put the pills in my mouth and take a big gulp. I lay down and wait for the world to diminish. Everything starts to go black, the pain suddenly fades, and so does the rest of the world.

“On Saturday night rape victim Hadley Whittemore was found in her apartment dead along with a note. Police say she died of an overdose and alcohol was in her system. Police were called to the scene after a smell was reported. Neighbors say they never knew her due to the fact she mostly kept to herself. If you know anyone who may fall victim to suicide please call the number on your screen. Back to Harold with the weather.”

I will always be the girl who fell victim to suicide and rape. Now I don’t have to worry about him coming back for me. But then again I will never have to worry of feeling anything again. Never see or hear anything, all I will know is what I found out while I was living. But I wasn’t truly living while being in the constant fear of him. Now I Hadley Whittemore am just another cautionary tale told from time to time.
Dink dink sounded the rain as it pelted the roof, distracting me from my homework. I need to get it done so I can have a free weekend. For the first time in my life, I will have the house all to myself. I was going to have a horror movie marathon starting with Hush. Just me, my dog, Max, and my house. Between the creaky old floors, unlatching windows, and its location at the dead end of a road. It’s about as decrepit as they come. This weekend is going to be amazing.

“Ally, come down please. We’re leaving!” shouted mom from the bottom of the stairs.

“Coming!” I yelled back. Setting my books aside, I got up and went down to the garage. I entered just as my dad put the last bag into the silver car. They were going to a teacher convention. Dad is a college philosophy professor, and my mom teaches 7th grade English. Normally, their conventions fell on different days, but this year that was not the case.

“Are you sure you’ll be fine?” my mom asked in her sweet, Snow White voice, “You know I don’t have to go.”

“Alice, she’ll be fine. It’s only the weekend,” my dad stated annoyed, leaning against the car.

“That is true, but I just have a bad feeling.”

“Mom, I’m going to be fine. We live in Salem, Oregon, not Massachusetts. No witches here.” I joked. She smiled and gave me a hug. When she pulled away, her hands rested on my shoulders, twirling a piece of my jet black hair.

“Really though, if you need anything, call,” I promised her that I would. Max and I watched as they pulled out into the sky’s tear-stained concrete.

“I guess it’s just you and me babes. I’m thinking pizza,” I remarked to the red golden retriever sitting beside me. I put in the first movie, called Dominos, and waited. I had just finished Hush when the pizza arrived.

“One Medium Philly cheese steak pizza,” said Will, the delivery boy, who is in my class.

“Thank you,” I replied handing him the money.

“You live far from town. I thought that someone screwed up the address,” he said.

“Yeah, but it’s nice and quiet.”

Once he left, I went back to the couch with my delicious smelling pizza. By ten p.m. I had eaten the whole pizza, taken a shower, and put on my majorly oversized green sweater and black leggings. By the end, I was really tired, so I decided to turn in for the night.

“Maxy, bedtime!” I called. He got up and went to the front door. I let him out, and I felt the dark night sky consume me. The October breeze rustled my hair. I never liked taking Max to the bathroom at night because it was truly creepy. Like the dark forest from Harry Potter. Tonight was no exception. It was foggy with only a little shred of light shining through from the moon. The wind howled into the eerie darkness. The sound of leaves rustling made me look out into the somber forest. “It’s nothing, Ally. Just a deer moving. You are fine,” I told myself.

“Max, hurry up!” I cried frantically trying to beckon him up the stairs; I really wanted to get inside and away from the horrific setting. I glanced up from Max to the edge of the woods, and there a shadow was. It moved a little and the moon’s ray revealed a man. He stood there watching me with a look of wonder. My blood ran cold. I backed up slowly to the door, never taking my eyes off him. I opened it a fragment and slipped through. Max followed. I closed the door fast and locked it. Instantly, I looked back through
the glass; the man was gone. Maybe I just imagined him.

It started storming again, and I was thankful that I wouldn’t have to go to bed in silence. I laid under the sheets with Max on the ground next to me. Did I actually see a man? I thought. Maybe I shouldn’t have watched Hush.

Thunder shook the house. Like a child waving their rattle. Lightning flashed. Casting shadows on my walls. One shadow looked like it was from a human body. Max was standing with all his attention on my window. I sat up in bed and guardedly looked over to the place that held his gaze. There he was, the man, looking in watching me with a smile. I screamed so loud, I was sure my voice would be absent. Frozen, I stared at him. That’s when I noticed the knife. He tapped it on the glass, and the silent message of “soon” screeched throughout the room. He dropped down and ran off into the woods. I didn’t sleep at all that night; I was too scared that he might return.

Once the sun rose the next morning, I spent my Saturday at the library. After last night, I really wanted to be around a crowd. By two in the afternoon, I managed to convince myself that it was most likely a night terror. I got up from my seat and set out to find a new book. I wandered to the part of the library that everyone calls the “maze.” It has a bunch of dark shelves laid out in rows with many twists and turns. I walked until I got to the classics. I scanned the shelves.

“Excuse me, miss?” asked a 28-year-old man, making me jump. “Do you know where the classic horror section is?” His voice had a menacing edge to it that made my skin crawl.

“Um... You go straight then make a left,” I replied, my voice unsteady. He looks familiar, but I could not place him.

“Thank you,” he started to turn away but stopped, “Your eyes are beautiful, silver blue.” With that, he continued walking. A shiver ran up my spine. I had to get out of here. I hastily made my way to my car. As soon as I was in my seat I started thinking. The events of last night flashed through my head. I decided that I should go to the police, but when I got there it was vacant. How is this possible? I left a note with my name, address, number, and what was going on. It was about five-thirty in the evening by the time I got home. I went straight to the attic to grab a wooden bat. If that psychopath comes back tonight, I’ll be ready. It was about seven p.m. when Max started barking at the front door. My heart was pounding. I was sure that I had seen the doorknob turn, and that’s when it happened.

The door swung open, and he came shooting in like a lightning flash. I ran to the kitchen, but when I got there the house was silent. Max’s barks ceased, and there were no creaks from the floor but from my own steps. I haltingly made my way back to the living room with my bat ready to strike. Max was nowhere to be seen. I looked out into the foyer and saw the door was shut. Inspecting it further, my eyes landed on a white piece of paper. I picked it up and it read, “My dear Ally. Why have you done this to me? You stole my Emilia’s beautiful eyes. You’re tormenting me, agonizing me. I can’t let you do that anymore. I must retrieve them back.”

My heart started racing. I dropped the note and ran out into the darkness. I was going to try and put as much distance between me and this house. I made it to the backyard when I heard the leaves crunch under his boots. I backed up and that’s when I saw it. The crawl space! I opened it and hid inside. I prayed the crunching noise would continue, but it didn’t. I held my breath.

“AUHH!” I screeched. Hands wrapped around my ankles, pulling me out of my hiding space. He rolled me over and held me down as I tried to fight back. Taking out his knife, he cut my forearm. I writhed in pain. He had a look of satisfaction on his face that soon turned to pain when I kneed him in the groin. Immediately I got up and ran. My throbbing legs made it through the front door and I locked it. I ran upstairs to my room and stood with my back against the wall. I suddenly heard a drip from the shower. Unsure but curiously, I walk into my bathroom, picked up the toilet paper holder, and in one abrupt motion I flung back the shower curtain. Relief flooded me. I must not have turned the knob all the way off. Just then, two strong arms wrapped around me. I gasped. I stomped on his foot and his hold fell. I ran to my balcony and flung open the doors. He was advancing towards me so in a split second I made a decision. I climbed over the railing.

“FREEZE!” came a voice from below. Startled, I lost my footing and fell. Two strong arms caught my hand. He pulled me up. I came face to face with a police officer. Looking over the railing I saw another
“Oh thank God!” I yelled letting out a breath of relief. “He’s in my bathroom you can’t let him get away.”

“Miss, no one is here but us. Let’s get you to a hospital,” he said.

As I sat in the ER bed, they questioned me. What does he look like? What happened? Eventually, they left me in peace. Looking through the curtain I saw them talking to a doctor in light blue scrubs. She then came by and stitched up my arm. By the time she was done, another doctor in olive scrubs was there. I knew that color. He was from psych!

“Hello, Alison. I’m doctor Levington. We’re going to get you a room upstairs. We called your parents, and they’re on their way,” he said.

“I’m not going upstairs! I’m not crazy!” I shouted back. He gave a nod and a doctor forced me into restraints.

“Alison, you are a danger to yourself. You believe that someone was trying to kill you, but it was all in your head. You were hurting yourself.”

“You don’t know that for a fact.”

“We have sufficient reason to. When you were little you attended therapy because of a tremendously uncontrollable imagination. You had multiple night terrors. When the police inspected your house there was no sign of a forced entry. No sign of a struggle. Now we are going to get you upstairs.”

“No! No! You can’t! He’s real! The police will need me to ID him!” I said, resistance lacing my voice. I felt a sting in my arm, and I felt a drain of energy. My eyelids started to get heavy. Like a bag of sand was attached to them.

“They won’t need you for that. The guy you described died 5 years ago,” Levington said before everything went black. I woke up in a nightgown. Light streaming in through the window like it is trying to make up for all the darkness it’s left me in. A doctor walked in my room.

“Good, you’re awake. Ally, I’m Dr. Sam Huntington, and I’ll be your doctor while you’re here. If you need anything just press the call button.” he explains.

“Where am I?” I inquired.

“St. Claire's Mental Institution.” I rolled my eyes at the name. “We’re going to take good care of you.” He got up and left, but stopped and turned ever so slightly. “Your eyes are beautiful,” he said in a volume almost inaudible. My breath caught in my throat. As he continued out the door all I could think is, “NO! It’s him.” I started screaming. The days after that are a blur. I was kept heavily sedated.

I’ve been stuck here for a year now, and I don’t know what to believe. Maybe I am crazy. However, the event from that night felt so real that it would be impossible to make them fraudulent. Sam is no longer my doctor due to being a trigger. I still catch him watching me through the little window on my door. One night I tried to sneak out but got stuck in the file room for hours. I started looking around. I found files that contained death rates, when doctors started working, and more. What I found was this: since Sam started working here, 12 girls have committed suicide, and all of them were here suffering from something like what I supposedly have. This could just be the “crazy” talking, but what if Sam has stalked these girls that have some sort of physical feature like his Emilia’s and made them look mad? Just to have them put here to watch, then kill for what they stole to be returned! I might be wrong but if I’m right, but I may be in for the fight of my life. I was right when I told mom not to worry about witches. I just had to worry about psychopaths.
I had woken up to a stench, something burning. I hurried down stairs in my pajamas to see my little sister with her hands on her head worried, and her eyes squeezed shut. The toaster was on, and smoking, about to be on fire.

“What are you thinking!” I’d yelled. I had been so tired of having to take care of her. I’d walked over to the toaster and unplugged it.

“I was trying to make a toaster tart.” My little sister had said. She sat at the kitchen table and started to cry.

Ever since my mother left on vacation my life has been an obstacle course, one of the worst you could experience. My mom went on a two week vacation this summer. It’s been three days past when my mom said she would be coming back. I still hoped that she was coming home knowing it would get harder, with my sister and I starting school tomorrow.

I had found myself hugging Andrea and rubbing her back, to calm her down, until her sobs turned into sniffles.

“Mom will be back soon.” I had said to comfort the both of us.

The day went by fast and normal, although what is normal now isn’t like it used to be. I’d watch T.V. with a small bag of Doritos, while Andrea was coloring pictures, or playing with her karaoke machine. I was just hoping that tomorrow would be a more ‘normal’ day. Ever since Mom had gone on vacation we had both slept in her room together, and we did the same thing tonight.

I had woken up to the beeping of the alarm, Andrea was still asleep beside me. I stopped the alarm and shook her awake.

“Lexi?”

“Wake up. Andrea wake up, we have school.” I’d said, as I threw a pillow at her, from across the bed.

She sat up groggily, rubbing her eyes.

I had fixed cereal for the both of us, and we had sat at the table eating. Sleep still in our eyes.

I had walked with Alexis to the end of the driveway, when she was all ready. I remember her grabbing my hand and swinging it back and forth, right before the bus came down the hill.

“Bye Lexi.” Andrea called, as she had climbed onto the long yellow bus.

She waved through the window, with big smile on her face, and I waved back. As I had walked back inside, I was thinking about how I was going to pay for more groceries, since we were running low.

I’d gotten myself ready for school and grabbed the keys off of the coffee table. I didn’t think Mom would have wanted me getting into trouble, driving her car, but she was the one who left us in the first place. I made sure to lock the door, before I left the house, and had gotten into the car, heading for school. The whole day was chaos. I had gotten so used to the quiet at home, I had forgotten how loud the halls were at school. Every time someone had shouted out in the classroom, or the bell had rang, I jumped. I couldn’t wait until the end of the day, when I could go back home.

As I walked out of school, towards Mom’s car, I saw my best friend, Jessa.

“Oh my goodness, where have you been Alexis!” said Jessa, with a lot of excitement.

We hugged, and Jessa talked about her summer, while I listened, since all I had done was watch T.V. at home, and take care of Andrea.
“I haven’t seen you all day, where were you?” I asked her.

“Where were you?” she said, emphasizing the word ‘you’. “You were supposed to save me from all of the big people. You know how short I am.” The funny thing was, I did know how short she was. I still had a picture of us from sixth grade, standing next to each other after soccer practice. I had almost been the height of my mom, when she was only up to my shoulder.

“Well, gotta go best friend,” I said to her, as I climbed back into my mother’s car and went home.

Later that day, after Lexi and I ate dinner, and had gotten ready for bed, I thought about how I was going to help pay the bills. Honestly, I had been thinking about it all day at school, too. Finally, I had an idea that I knew would work.

The next day, school seemed to go by faster than usual. I had planned to meet up with Jessa after we had both done all of our homework, at different houses.

A couple hours after I had gotten home, I saw her gray car pull up. I got into it, leaving my house that now looked abandoned. My sister was still at school and Jessa had told me she would watch her while I was at an interview for at Polly’s Doughnuts. I had already forged my mom’s signature on the papers, in the best copy I could.

“You ready?” My best friend asked me, when I sat down heavily.

I looked down at the outfit I was wearing. The lace sleeved, dress-shirt, with leggings and gray flats. I gave her the papers, and she looks what I’ve done. She nodded and I had my answer.

“I think that I am,” I replied.

After the meeting, I had walked outside to get into her gray vehicle, sitting with a sigh. I noticed Andrea in the backseat laying down, fast asleep.

“Did you get it?” The look that she had given me was such a terrified look, that I started laughing. I couldn’t stop, not even acknowledging that my sister had been in the backseat.

“Stop it,” she’d whispered while smiling. “You scared me, so bad.”

She covered her face with her hands, laughing with me.

I had been nervous too though. When I first walked into the shop, I thought he was going to say no at first look. Trying to be the normal highschool girl I am, and my mom at the same time is difficult.

Jessa dropped me off at my house. I had had to carry Andrea inside, as I stepped over anything that could trip me.

I walked upstairs, into my mother’s bedroom, and layed her down on the soft bed. She twisted from side to side, a stressed look on her face, but eventually got comfortable.

I went downstairs getting a hot pocket from the freezer, since I hadn’t ate anything all day besides breakfast. When I finished my hot pocket I went upstairs towards my mom’s bedroom. I saw that the bathroom door was cracked open, the light peeking through the space. I heard the sound of someone throwing up, knowing that it was my sister.

I walked across the room and into the small bathroom, which was the only place that had remained, mostly, clean.

I saw my sister curled into a ball sniffling, tears falling down her cheeks.

“What’s the matter Andrea?” I asked, kneeling down and gathering her in my arms.

She shook her head, and all of a sudden seemed to be clinging to me for dear life. I pushed the hair out of her eyes, and she buried her head in the crook of my neck.

“Lexi, I don’t want you to leave me.”

I was shocked at what she had said. I would’ve never left her and she knew that. The second I felt the anger rising, I pushed it back down. My little sister had a reason that she was thinking like this, I thought.

“I would never leave you Andrea, I already told you this.” I said, “You know that I love you don’t you?”

She nodded, lightly knocking me in the jaw. “At school, Callie said that people who don’t have no more parents, get taken away.” She cried even harder as she said it.

“How does she know that?” I asked. “The only reason she’s saying that, is to scare you Andrea. Don’t even think that I am going to leave you, I love you too much to have someone take you away.” The tears
didn’t come anymore. “Mom will be here soon, because she feels the same way.”

That night could’ve been happier but I was glad that I had got the job.

I work every night for the week. Every night I come home to see Andrea asleep on the couch or the floor. It’s like everyday repeats itself. The same pattern, for the whole two weeks that my mother is away, somewhere enjoying herself.

Everyday I come home thinking about how much I miss my mother, and how I hate her, because she left me and my sister. How much I miss her cooking. How much I miss arguing with her. I miss just the scent of her perfume in the morning when she was getting ready for work. How much I miss telling the truth to any question that they ask. I hate her so much for leaving us, and want to be mad, and not miss her, but I can’t find it in me. I just want her to be here.

So tonight when I got home, Andrea is asleep in the room upstairs. I say bye, and thank you to Jessa, but don’t really have any enthusiasm. She leaves and I go up to my mother’s bedroom. Tonight instead of going straight to bed, I think about how much I miss my mother, and wish for her to come home.

The next morning, I am back to my routine. After breakfast I walk Andrea to the end of the driveway and wait for the bus to come, thinking of an excuse for my missing science homework. After she gets onto the bus safely, I walk inside to myself ready for school. I drive Mom’s car back to school, and prepare for another paper to sign, this time from the ISS teacher. School comes and goes. I don’t see Jessa at the end of the school day, remembering that she had an appointment to go to in the middle of the day, and was going to stay home the rest of the day anyway.

I drive my mothers car back home, a little late because of the homework I had to stay at school for, and the extremely crowded halls of other late high schoolers. I know my sister might be worried about me, and call someone. She might be at home sitting outside the door, thinking I wasn’t going to come home, but none of that stopped me from driving slow. I took as much time as I needed, just hoping for the end of the day to come by sooner.

When I finally reached home I pulled into the driveway and, got out of the car. I would’ve stuck to the daily routine, but I saw that the door to our house was wide open, Andrea’s bright pink backpack in the entrance. I hurried to the front door, hoping nothing was wrong. I was paralyzed, looking at my little sister wrapped in the arms of a woman that looked extremely familiar. I couldn’t see her face but knew exactly who she was.

Her long brown hair, was down and had grown out a little more. She was a little taller than me, but looked exactly like she could be my twin. I know for a fact that she would be as pale as a vampire, if the sun hadn’t tanned her almost as dark as her hair.

The woman stood head down holding my sister, while she was crying into her shirt. She was holding my Andrea, the same one I had promised I would never leave.

I knew all of this was happening. I knew that she was here again, but I still stood paralyzed in the doorway of my house, just staring at the woman holding my sister. My mouth open, unable to produce words.

When the woman looked up, finally noticing me, I wasn’t surprised at who it was because I had already known.

Still holding Andrea, she came to me in two strides, and wrapped the arm that was around my little sister, around me. I didn’t notice, I was crying until Mom wiped the tears from my cheeks. When I noticed that I still hadn’t moved I wrapped my mother in a tighter hug than I have ever given anyone. None of us could speak for the rest of the night. Instead we curled up on the queen sized bed in Mom’s room and stayed there.

My wish had come true, my mother had finally come home. Our life would go back to normal.
I walked into the woods, searching for solitude – finding it smothering me in the oversaturating presence of millions of surrounding creatures. I had found my river, I had come to the end of my Siddharthic journey. Here was my ever-changing same, my ever-same transition of waters. Rather than jump in like the archetypal Hessian, I sat.

Satan embraced me in my post-modern asceticism. With no concrete buildings around me, their concrete morals vanished, and I found myself in contemplation of an absurdist end. I found in the river the transience of my life, the inevitability of my departure from it. Whence these thoughts came was my solitude, was my implosively overlapping mind; Human reason almost always amounts to suicide. Here was my human reason, pulling my lonesome heart towards the deeper parts of the tide.

There came Gabriel. From her side of the stream, she walked, child in tow, to the cold flow – some twenty yards from me, some twelve yards downstream. In the late Autumnal sun, her hair of smooth brown and grey highlight glinted a moving picture almost unbelievable, as though nothing living could outshine her solar pelt. In unison, she and her fawn stooped Earthward to drink.

In that moment, in my self-immolating hour of dark, there shown God. Such beauty, in the natural piece of pre-historical, pre-human art of her hair; Such order, in the stooping of necks to the silver water; Such beautiful innocence, in my total invisibility to her, in her total awareness of her child; from these things came the Divine to the base of my skull, to my accelerating heart, to my now-smiling eyes. There was God: in the entirely unhuman nature of the deer mother yearning for a quenched thirst, in my entirely human perception of my utter insignificance.

Then came my Beatrice – my herald of Divine Comedy. I realized in my bliss that, though by itself my worthlessness validated a swift and unceremonious death, when placed in view of the vast beauty in untouched nature, it is exactly that triviality of existence which God intended. Not, however, so that we humans must grovel in Fear and Worship so that we may be raised up and made into more than ourselves – rather, that our status as puny observers allows us to behold the infinite elegance of a mysterious Universe.

I heard, then, the bends of a bird calling far off. I reminisced about my childhood music, hearing the choral hymns that lifted me from my Sunday fog, the harmonies that would alleviate the failings of the sermon. The idea that elaborate, monumental symphonies could ever even approach the stark, singular beauty of one songbird seemed foolish. That thought led me to the imagination of all art as the effort of the child outside a movie attempting to recreate from memory the themes, plot, and setting of the master work they had witnessed: farcical.

Then, still watching my heavenly Messenger finish her drink, I knew my own birth was a ticket of admission to the nose-bleed seats of the greatest musical theater show of all time, unable to truly hear the more obscure messages, capable only of a holistic glance at the Universe’s true beauty. I knew then that suicide would mean leaving the show, would mean killing the lights on such amazing actors and sets as Heaven itself. Like a man crying for lack of tears, the act now seemed laughable.

Indeed, I did laugh – so humored was I in my delirium. My own ecstasy was my end. By my cry of
joy, Gabriel looked – startled – right at me. Before my eyes could see my mistake, the mother, then, immediately, the child, fled out of sight into the trail-starved brush. Again the morphinomimetic chills, the rush of endorphins. To think, a walk to escape civilization metamorphosing from descent into savagery to an ascent to Heaven, all from one oblivious Bambi and her child. The smile from my moment of Natural revelation lingered as I returned to my home; returned frequently, as the songbirds in the church-tower extolled their creation on Thursday, the fourth day. And there was God.
The reign of Adolf Hitler in Europe was one of terror and full of some of history’s worst horrors. He nearly decimated an entire race of people and caused one of the worst wars in history. Even though the Allied Troops eventually came together and defeated Hitler and the Nazis, millions of people still died, some after years of torture. The Allied Nations won the overall war, but they should have done more to protect the Jewish population, the one most greatly affected from the Nazis. Many countries could have done more to help protect the Jewish population before the war. Instead, these countries took extreme measures to block the Jewish peoples out of their countries, but yet this trend is happening again, almost one hundred years later, with the Syrian refugees.

Before Hitler’s reign had even begun, America started to make immigration laws that would later harm the Jewish peoples. There was a congressional report in 1920 that suggested a “temporary suspension of immigration” saying, “It is impossible to overestimate the peril of the class of emigrants coming from this part of the world, and every possible care and safeguard should be used to keep out the undesirables.”(Ratner) America also introduced three acts to decrease immigration greatly. In the 1917 Immigration Act, there was a literacy test to keep out all “idiots” and all those who could not read. Next was the Emergency Quota Act of 1921, which restricted immigration to three percent of what it had been in 1910. Lastly, was the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924, which restricted immigration to two percent of what it had been in 1890. Even though all of these were issued before the majority of the threats to the Jews arose, America did not remove the laws. All of these laws were in place until 1965, long after the end of World War II and when the Jewish people needed the most help. Hasia Diner, professor of Hebrew and Judaic studies and history at New York University says, “It’s very possible that if those laws hadn’t been in place, many of the Jews from Germany, Czechoslovakia, Austria, most of the Jews from Poland, would have been saved.” If America had rescinded those laws, many Jewish people would have been able to make it into the country and not end up being forced into being the victims of the Holocaust (Ratner). The story of Rae Kushner brings up this topic. Kushner and her family were blocked out of America as “the doors were closed” and they were then caught in the Holocaust. If America had opened their doors earlier and allowed Jewish peoples refuge, they could have saved many lives.

Though America introduced laws to block refugees before the threat to Jews arose, Australia introduced these laws to specifically keep Jewish peoples out. On December 1, 1938 Australia passed a law that the country would only accept 15,000 refugees every three years (Bartrop). The government allowed for 12,000 Jewish people to come to the country that could not be exceeded, but they allowed for the number of other immigrant populations to be exceeded. This made it so that many Jews were blocked out from Australia while other races or religions were let in, even though the Jewish peoples were the ones who needed the refuge the most. One of the government’s officials who helped make these decisions, Thomas Hugh Garrett, said in his report, The Garrett Report, “We visited several Ghettos. The types of individual seen and the conditions under which they live are almost indescribable and unbelievable to a westerner. They are undoubtedly as low a class of white people as we have seen.” Garrett was talking about the Polish Jews who he did not want to grant refuge in Australia. He viewed the Polish Jews as just barely above “blackfellows” and thought they would harm Australia’s reputation and the country overall. Though he disliked the Polish Jews the most, he also was against letting any of the other Jewish peoples into Australia (Bartrop). Garrett’s full report can be found in the National Australian
Archives. Once Australia declared war on Germany, they completely shut off immigration. In reality, they let people who were non-Jews in, but not the Jewish people (Bartrop). In light of all of this, Australia could have unquestionably done more to help the Jewish people. Instead, they introduced laws to discriminate against the Jews and turned a blind eye to the fact that they were an accessory in one of the worst genocides in Europe, and the world’s, history.

Though Britain offered asylum to some of the Jewish children, the country was far from perfect and were not very welcoming to the Jewish people. In Louise London’s book she talks about the British’s choices during and before World War II, regarding the Jewish peoples. American-Jewish organizations raised enough funds for around 70,000 Jews to be rescued by the British. The British refused, with their opposition being, “the difficulties of disposing of any considerable numbers of Jews should they be rescued from enemy-occupied territory.” (London) The British were unwilling to rescue 70,000 Jews from possible death and torture even though the funds were raised for them. This is because they did not know what to do with them or how to handle the uncomfortable situation (London). This was one thing among many, that Britain failed to do to help protect the Jewish peoples. Although all of the European Powers could have done more to help save the Jewish population from a massacre, France and Britain were two of the powers with the most resources and opportunities to aid the Jewish people.

The way that multiple countries shut out the Jewish refugees has a correlation with how President Trump is shutting out Syrian refugees and using the current travel ban. The travel ban was issued on the Holocaust Remembrance Day, which caused a great deal of outrage and shock in the Jewish community. The Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society felt that it was ironic timing, as it reminded people of when the Jews were prevented from coming to America (Demick). In the 1930’s and 1940’s the Americans were worried about people among the Jewish refugees possibly being Nazi Spies, which caused America to change its protocol with Jewish refugees (Ratner). Today, in 2017, Americans are worried about there being terrorists from the Islamic State within the groups of Syrian refugees. President Trump said in Executive Order 13769, “Terrorist groups have sought to infiltrate several nations through refugee programs.” This ideology caused the President to release a travel ban in Executive Order 13769 on seven countries; Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen (Trump). These blockages of refugees happened almost a century apart and show that the world has not learned from its mistakes. This also shows that they have not thought of what they should have done in the past and could do now to make up for it. The terrible events of the past should be used to move the world forward, not backward as America is moving now.

America is not the only country ignoring the past. As of June, only twenty three percent of the aid that had been pledged by the International Rescue Committee has been given (Stone). In Hungary, the Prime Minister Viktor Orban is against the Syrian refugees, as he is scared that they are a threat to the European Christian culture (Stone). This sounds like some of the views from during World War II because many did not want the Jewish peoples to negatively impact their cultures. Israel also has pre-Holocaust like views on the Syrians. Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel’s prime minister, said, “We will not allow Israel to be submerged by a wave of illegal migrants and terrorist activists.” This demonstrates the idea that many countries had in the 1930’s and 1940’s about the Jewish population as they did not want Nazi spies coming into their countries, the same as countries now do not want terrorists coming into their countries. Saudi Arabia pledged to take 100,000 Syrian refugees but has not actually accepted any (Stone). Though this could be for a number of reasons, Saudi Arabia should accept those refugees, maybe even more than 100,000, so that they can do all they can do to help prevent a repeat of history. Turkey has accepted many refugees but on October 7 of 2013 they built a wall to stop refugees from escaping into Turkey. Many countries have just passed laws to keep the refugees out but Turkey took it one step further and built a two meter wall to keep the Syrian refugees out (Syrian Refugees). These four countries are not alone in their views on the Syrian refugees, they are a small portion of countries that are allowing history to repeat in harrowing ways.

Too many countries turned a blind eye to the needs of the Jewish population and did not do all they could have done to help the Jews. Some of these countries went to great lengths to keep these peoples out; this is happening again in many countries with the Syrian refugees. This ideology of blocking refugees out of a country is one that needs to end. Not only could damage happen to the refugees
blocked out, but the country that does the blocking then suffers from damage as well. The country suffers a great loss when they do not allow refugees in, all of the insight they provide, and all the great people within the groups of refugees. These amazing qualities are kept away from a country when the government of that country makes the poor decision to not let refugees in. This blockage has caused many conflicts in our history and is now as well. To learn from the conflicts of our history, our people need to find compromises to prevent more atrocities from happening.
Once a diluted hallucination for British colonists who first set foot on East Coast soil in the early 1600s, the American dream—happiness, freedom, and property ownership—has strengthened and evolved throughout generations to satiate the desires of modern Americans. To countless optimistic Americans, from the diligent immigrant to the multimillionaire businessman, this infectious dream appears both entrancing and obtainable. With temptations ranging from wealth to a brighter future for their children, Americans prepare to dive into the workforce, believing that hard work alone will equate to success. Even James Truslow Adams, who coined the term “American dream” in 1931, presents a naive illustration of a “social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable...regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position” (Adams 404).

Although optimistic, Adams’ perspective overlooks the influence socioeconomic status plays from a pragmatic standpoint. Opposing Adams’ preconception that equal opportunity runs abundant in United States society, young Americans gradually begin to turn away from this aspiration in light of certain stark realities. With contemporary issues such as economic mobility, poverty, social oppression, and hostility towards immigrants affecting the ability to elevate their social status, increasingly more millennials recognize the hidden role luck plays in the draw for success. In a 2015 poll conducted by Harvard’s Institute of Politics, 48% of millennials personally considered the American dream dead (Bump), foreshadowing a spiraling lack of interest in the conviction. Although Americans stress the American dream as symbolic of the land of opportunity, its inherent barriers against the less fortunate stem from power and greed.

First, the prospect of economic mobility perpetuates false hope of financial advancement among Americans in order to encourage increased consumerism. Although a few fortunate Americans attain the rags-to-riches trajectory only achieved in stories, Americans neglect to also consider its rare occurrence. This myth traces its origins to early colonial history, a period fraught with indentured servants and sons disadvantaged by primogeniture, a right asserting that only first-born sons could inherit their father’s estate (Olson-Raymer). Enticed by the opportunity to obtain land plots and gold, lower-class British citizens migrated to America in order to escape the economic statuses their incomes bracketed them into (Koven and Gotzke 4). However, upon arrival, these hopeful colonists found themselves trapped in another social hierarchy. In the Southern colonies particularly, wealth distribution skewed towards large plantation owners, who monopolized greater amounts of assets and political power when compared to smaller tobacco farmers (Kennedy and Cohen 69). Exploiting their exponential profits and labor forces, plantation owners took advantage of the headright system, paying colonists’ passage to America in order to accumulate fifty acres of land per person transported (Gentry). Thus, wealthy planters treated ordinary colonists like ends to their means of materialism. In reality, under the colonists’ desire to obtain more economic freedom in America, their spreading numbers contributed to the already prominent wealth of elite one percenters. Inadvertently, these colonists caused their dreams of advancing into the upper class to grow ever distant. The practice of taking advantage of working-class Americans has remained constant over the centuries, metamorphosing into a component of the current United States’ capitalist-based economy. With a sharper focus on pure profit rather than land, economic manifestations of the American dream have evolved from greed for property ownership to a hunger for tangible consumer goods to flaunt.
financial stability.

In addition, the silent, yet widespread issue of poverty and a lack of substantive relief exemplifies the shortcomings of the American dream when providing for poorer citizens. When analogizing poverty to homelessness, the American dream’s shortcomings develop into extremes. Endangering the United States’ homeless population, poverty restricts Americans from easily acquiring life’s basic necessities, such as food, water, and shelter. Without the security of a home and comfort from a full stomach, which the American dream claims that homeless civilians possess the capability to obtain, America’s homeless find themselves vulnerable and terror-stricken. In the Declaration of Independence, the literal embodiment of the American dream, Thomas Jefferson asserts that every American’s inalienable human rights consist of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Yet, without the fulfillment of human fundamental needs, homelessness deprives its victims of these very same intrinsic rights. Not only does the American dream neglect to secure quality of life for its citizens, but it also fails to supply the homeless means for self-sustainment. These shortcomings are due to unequal access to education and employment, engendered by a decline in affordable housing. As the Center for Housing Policy reports in 2014, affordable housing grants the homeless a personal record they can use to enroll in schools or apply for jobs (Brennan et al.). However, capitalists argue that affordable housing cannot feasibly occur in the status quo, instead chancing after false preconceptions claiming that supplying affordable housing will reduce the “use value” of properties in the area and potentially deter future homebuyers (Ellen et al.). Therefore, as America distances itself further away from economic equality, it also neglects to supply the finances needed to support a nation based on egalitarianism.

Furthermore, racial discrimination, a manifestation of white supremacy, marginalizes minorities from achieving their fair share of the American dream. A popular stereotype closely linked to the American dream is social equality for all, an objective America has yet to achieve. Beginning when the first slaves were brought to Jamestown, Virginia in 1619 and ending when the United States formally abolished slavery in 1865 (“Slavery and the Making of America”), the enslavement of African Americans discredits the liberties and moral rights America claimed to uphold during those two centuries. In almanac author Benjamin Banneker’s letter to Thomas Jefferson in 1791, he critiques the hypocrisies hidden between the lines of the Declaration of Independence. Vexed by Jefferson’s famous assertion that “all men are created equal,” Banneker retorts, “you should at the same time counteract his mercies in detaining by fraud and violence so numerous a part of my brethren under groaning captivity and cruel oppression, that you should at the same time be found guilty” (Banneker). Banneker’s sentiments reflect the duplicities associated with the justification of colonial slavery; white plantation owners manipulated slave labor to achieve their gluttonous dreams of excessive wealth, supreme power, and lofty status. While one race achieves their versions of the American dream, their feats transpire at the expense of another race’s desire to get ahead. After slavery’s abolition, this pattern evolved into a strengthened version of racism. With repressive groups such as the Ku Klux Klan, discrimination in the form of police brutality, and acts of domestic terrorism like the Charleston vehicle attacks in August 2017 burgeoning in America, African Americans constantly find themselves targeted and dehumanized. Consequently, African Americans face an upward struggle to rise above society’s prejudices against their skin color. A 2016 article by the New York Times notes that the unemployment rates for blacks are approximately double the statistics for the national average, and the poverty rate for African American children has remained steadfast since Martin Luther King’s assassination in 1968 (Gates). With the metaphorical window to a life of success and opportunity barely open wider than a crack for them, many African Americans cannot secure the advancement the American dream promises. If black lives do not matter during the full awakening of the American dream, no lives truly matter in perspective when this dream draws to a slumber and the metaphorical window slams shut as a consequence of lust for power.

Lastly, America’s open denial of the aspirations of illegal immigrants by revoking the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals act (DACA) projects a universal message of intolerance for the dreams of civilians Americans label as outsiders. Synonymous with dream is hope, and for young undocumented immigrants, the ability to legally enroll in schools and find stable employment, regardless of their lawful status, serves as that hope (Finnegan). In a 2017 article by the New York Times, Honduras-born immigrant
Monica Lazaro testifies that DACA “allowed [her] to blend into society in every way” (Jordan). For the eight hundred thousand immigrants protected under DACA (Krishnakumar et al.), this act paves the path for integration into the broader American community. The federal government’s recent actions have instead ignored these immigrants’ personal contributions to society. By dismantling DACA, the federal government intends to forcibly deport immigrants back to countries they have no recollections of, all based on their status on a sheet of legal documentation. Once the Trump administration fully terminates DACA, recipients currently employed will lose their jobs (Krishnakumar et al.), worsening the US economy. As the Cato Institute reports, “a repeal of DACA would cost the federal government $60 billion in lost revenue, and the impact on the economy would total $215 billion in lost GDP” (Brannon), potentially harming the financial prosperities of other American citizens and downsizing the labor workforce. With the looming threat of deportation growing steadily, the hope of these immigrants to secure their economic stability and start families in America vanishes due to their broken trust in the federal government. Ironically, DACA recipients also refer to themselves as “DREAMers” (Walters), but the United States plans on removing the right for them to achieve those dreams. From a cynical standpoint, perhaps the presence of illegal immigrants threatens the United States’ legislative legitimacy, as undocumented “aliens” are unable to be governed as securely as full American citizens. Rather than fulfilling its responsibility to protect civilians within American borders, the Trump administration adopts the role of the Greek Fates, dangling the fraying string of dreams for immigrants over a proverbial chasm of deportation. Thus, the American dream devolves to nothing more than a fantasy if the United States government can abruptly strip the key for a brighter future from the lives of thousands of hard-working hopefuls.

In conclusion, although the American dream publicly takes a firm stance towards granting all Americans the opportunity to fulfill their greatest potential, the avarice prominent in American communities ultimately bars unprivileged citizens from climbing the social ladder. An important facet of this dream is its variability and changeability—no one American will share the same ambitions as another under any context or point in time. As controversial misdeeds such as police brutality accumulate attention from the media, the American dream will once again evolve to reflect the social needs of its followers. For African Americans, their dream may consist of racial equality. Similarly, for the homeless, their ambition may comprise a warm home and consistent meals. Part of the American dream’s legacy can be attributed to its inspirational nature—no matter how daunting the pursuit of such lofty goals appears, the dream never fails to motivate Americans to persevere. I share a similar sentiment; although the American dream represents nothing more than an optimistic hope for me personally, the thought of a prosperous, happy life still remains enticing. However, Americans should develop a balance between harsh realism and foolish naivete as they chase after their aspirations. When applied to the present day United States, James Truslow Adams’ definition of the American dream loses relevance, as socioeconomic status and race present too high hurdles for the less fortunate to overcome. While the federal government does promote the United States as the land of opportunity, unless the puzzle pieces of socioeconomic status fall perfectly into place, not every American citizen will attain their desires.

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Ethan Ventress
Grade 12

ScapeGoat Screenplay
Dramatic Script

Platte County High School
Platte City, MO
Teacher: Angela Perkins

Scene 1. Ext
As the sun is setting over a corn field, there is a figure running toward the camera in the distance. Every so often the camera cuts to analyze the figures feet running by. The figure as it gets closer is a man. As eerie violin music plays, it begins to be drowned out by the sound of a radio broadcast.

Scene 2. Int
There is then a cut from the corn field to inside a country home where a family is eating dinner. The radio still broadcasts in the background.

RADIO
This is an emergency news report from the 96.1 news room. Police reports have confirmed that today is the third day since a prisoner from the Arkansas dept. of correction maximum security unit has escaped and is navigating through farm fields in the local area. The prisoner has not invaded any homes but is still at large. If you live in the following counties, it is advised that you lock your doors and turn in for the night: Jackson, Buchanan, Clay, Platte, Bogan, and Clinton county. And now for you local weather.

The FATHER points at the radio and turns to his son.

FATHER
Rudy. Shut that off will ya.

RUDY gets up from the table and reaches up to the radio and turns it off. He stays standing and turns to his father.

RUDY
Dad. Do you thin-

FATHER
Son don't worry about it. Out of all the houses spread throughout all those counties, I seriously doubt he will show up at our door.

Rudy looks nervous. His father gives a comforting smile.

FATHER
Come on. Let's finish dinner and we can play some marbles alright?

Rudy gets an excited look on his face and hurries to sit down.

Scene 3. ext/int
There is a cold shot of the outside darkness. The outside setting is a long driveway with a barn to the right. There is a lonely barn light on, a shadow creeps across it. Then we cut back inside the house. There is a split where the dad is in the kitchen cleaning dishes and Rudy is in the living room playing marbles and with the family dog. There is a noise outside and the dad moves over to the door. Looking through the blinds, he sees nothing odd. He shuts off the light in the kitchen and turns into the living room.

FATHER
You got them set up?

RUDY
Yeah! Maybelle almost ate one but I stopped her though.
The clock ticks away from the time 8:30, as it time lapses to 9:13, there's a disturbance outside in the barn. Rudy shoots the marble but it goes passed the two and under the couch.

RUDY
Aw man!

Points at dad playfully.

RUDY (con't)
You better not cheat while I get that.

Rudy runs off to retrieve the marble while father is fixated on the noise outside. There is another crash from the barn.

FATHER
I think I'm going to check the barn.

He stands and walks over to a flashlight resting at the corner of the room.

RUDY
Dad can I use that? I can't this-

With a hint of worry in his voice.

FATHER
No Rudy I need this. The barn light is broke and I won't be able to see without it.

He starts to exit the house, as he does the camera shows Rudy looking at his dad.

FATHER
I'll be right back.

He smiles. As he exits, the view of Rudy is closed out by the door closing. This is the last time Rudy will see his father alive.

Scene 4. ext

There is a wide shot of the father walking to the barn. The light swings with his movement across the shadowy trees and parked cars. Right before he gets to the barn, he stops right up to the camera and gazes from a distance. He glides the light across the inside of the barn. He creeps closer into the barn. As he does, he notices that cabinet doors are flung open and that his toolbox has been tipped over with tools slipped all over the gravel on the ground. As he takes notice, there is movement behind him.

FATHER
Aw hell.

Father steps out of the frame to reveal a figure emerge from under the closest parked car. Clenched in hand, a screwdriver, in the foreground you can see the father crouched down cleaning up the mess. From over the father's shoulder, the figure inches forward toward the father. We see from the figure's pov, how he inches closer and closer to him. The figure is then right behind the father, pausing for a moment, then reaches up with screwdriver in hand. With the view from the barn rafters, we see the figure swing down, piercing into the fathers neck. He screams in tremendous agony. As he does, Rudy from inside sits up in a sudden jerk.

Scene 5. ext/int

In the barn, the father's struggling body falls to the ground, blood pouring out of his wound. The figure starts to approach the house. Inside, Rudy runs to the table and grabs his dads phone and starts to dial 911.

RUDY
Hello? Hello?!

911
911 what's your emergency?

RUDY
My dad has been hurt by someone outside! And I don't know what to do!

911
What is the address of your home?

RUDY
I don't know I dunno!
Can you describe the house?

RUDY
It's um, white and-

He notices a piece of mail laying on the table. He grabs it and spits out the address frantically.

RUDY
211 highway 91!

There is a thud at the door. Rudy screams, drops the phone in panic, and darts away from the door running deeper into the house.

911
Are you able to stay on the phone with us? Hello? Hello?

The door is eased open and feet glide past the discarded phone. Rudy sees him (our audience does not) and he screams and pushes open the doors to the basement. He sprints down the stairs and when he reaches the door, he bolts through it, turns and slams it. In the darkness, he hides behind the furnace. As the figure steps down the stairs, there is an echo in the room. The door opens to reveal a wide dark room. The figure steps forward and the door slowly closes behind him.

scene 6. ext
From outside, in a distant view of the house, we see a shadow creep into the frame from the dark. In a pov, we see the siding of the house, and the light escaping from the basement. We get closer and creep down next to a foundation level window, investigating around the window. Inside, crouched behind a desk, trembling in fear, is Rudy. From inside we, as if we were next to Rudy, we look up to the window and see a faint familiar face. The escaped prisoner. Through the night he had stumbled upon the country estate seeking refuge. After seeing the boy in the basement, this informs the prisoner that the inhabitants of the house are awake. He rolls to the side of the window, back into the darkness of the night.

scene 7. ext
He stutters up backing into the camera as he fully stands, giving a very close close up of the prisoner. His eyes scatter around and focus on the barn. Sirens faintly pierce the air around him. He bolts for the barn. From inside the barn, we see the prisoner bolt in but soon stop dead in his tracks. The camera glides down to reveal the slain body before him. The siren becomes more prominent, the prisoner stares to his left and sees a police car drive up the driveway that leads to the barn. He has no option. He sees the discarded tools and focuses on a crowbar. He grabs it and darts into the barn hiding behind whatever he can find, sharing the same space with the deceased father. The prisoner hides behind an outdoor cabinet, and from around its corner he can see the police car creep into frame. As we pan down, we see the prisoners grip on the crowbar tighten. The police officer steps out of his car and examines the murder in the barn.

POLICE OFFICER
Oh my G-

He grabs his radio within the car.

POLICE OFFICER
This is car 109, reporting in a deceased white male at the address 211 HW 91. Haven't investigated the house. Request immediate assistance.

As he finishes he prisoner is struggling behind the cabinet. His shirt is caught and as he tries to free it an object sitting atop the cabinet falls. The officer becomes immediately on the alert, drawing his pistol.

POLICE OFFICER
Alright! Who ever is back there, come out. Put your hands where I can see them!

Nothing.

POLICE OFFICER
Show yourself and come out with your hands up!

The grip on the crowbar is loosened and the prisoner turns the corner

POLICE OFFICER
Freeze! Drop the crowbar!
The prisoner puts his hands slightly up but still holds the crowbar.

PRISONER
Hey man. I didn't do this, I-

POLICE OFFICER
Shut the hell up and drop the crowbar!

The prisoner takes a step forward.

POLICE OFFICER
Step back and put the crowbar down!

Takes another step.

PRISONER
I didn't do anything to this man, you got it all wrong!

POLICE OFFICER
Drop the crowbar!

In a urge of panic, the prisoner takes three steps.

PRISONER
Man I didn't do i-

POLICE OFFICER
Step back!

The prisoner raises his crowbar hand higher and steps forward fast.

PRISONER
I di-

POLICE OFFICER
Step back!

A shot rings out, the officer fires his gun.

The prisoner's chest is pierced by the bullet round. As he falls to the ground, there is a spinning close up of the prisoner (like when Plato was shot in "Rebel Without a Cause").

Scene 8. ext

The police officer grabs his radio again.

POLICE OFFICER
This is car 109. Engaged armed assailant. Threat has been neutralized.

The camera pans out to see that our figure, the true killer, is strutting away from the house after escaping a basement window.

POLICE OFFICER
Going to investigate the house now, but I repeat. Threat has been neutralized.

Our true killer walks into the camera, blacking it out, ending our story.

THE END
It’s midnight, and he finds that it’s impossible to sleep. He isn’t exactly sure why, though he suspects it’s because his mind has wound itself into a series of complicated knots. There’s an abundance of loose ends as well, and he wonders which one carries the most weight.

His pillow is getting too hot.

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12:45 AM. Not even an hour gone by, but it feels like he’s been craving sleep far longer than that. When he looks out the window, he doesn’t even see a moon, let alone the sky itself. What appears to be a cloudy evening, he decides, is his new least favorite thing.

(He hears a vaguely familiar whispering somewhere)

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It doesn’t take long for him to realize that he simply can’t close his eyes. Instead, he settles on waiting for sunrise. He’s never witnessed one anyway, and the more he thinks about it, there are a lot of things he’s never seen or done before.

Despite the activity in his head, he finds that his body is glued to the mattress and bound by the sheets. Solitary confinement, he thinks to himself. When he tries to hum something he’d heard on the radio to pass the time, he realizes that his voice is gone, and that a glass of water would actually be wonderful right now.

His arms and legs seem to ignore this, as well as the possibility of perhaps being useful.

The more minutes that tick by, the more he believes that his situation really is similar to that of a prison. He’s trapped, it’s dark, and there’s nothing to do but wait. Come to think of it, he can’t even make out the shape of his fingertips in the inky black that is his surroundings. It’s boring.

(For a moment, he swears he catches a dizzying whiff of something smoky and sweet and just beyond his reach. There is a brief rumbling in his room and nothing more.)

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It starts to rain, beginning as small, erratic taps on the bedroom window. And he wonders for a minute if someone is throwing rocks outside. Then the wind picks up, and he remembers that he doesn't know anyone who would want to summon him for adventures in the middle of the night or share secrets that can only be told this late.
He heaves a solitary sigh and tries to ignore how his blanket has become a furnace.

(\textit{The whispers return, and they morph and crescendo into agitated footsteps. But again, it could just be the storm})

--

It's been over an hour, and he's worried that the rain is unending, that maybe he'll just have to suffer through a different sleepless night for his first sunrise (waking up early just \textit{isn't} an option). A newfound resentment, hot and bitter, pools in his stomach. More than anything, he wishes for the clouds to disperse already. By this point, all this sighing and staring at the ceiling has gotten just about as stale as the air in the room.

Silence and raindrops, 2:47 AM.

--

It reaches about 4 when things get interesting. Unfortunately, the rain \textit{still} hasn’t ceased (and he curses it again for its horrible sense of timing), but there's at least a somewhat larger variety of things to observe from his cell. He’s pretty sure he's hallucinating thanks to sleep deprivation, a possible heat stroke, and whatever else there could be to blame for his insanity. But he’ll take what he can get for a little entertainment. After all, the sky never seems to make guarantees.

He thought smoke began to creep in from beneath the bedroom door at first, that it began to slither and coil in tendrils toward the ceiling, then towards him. When he blinked, it was gone, and now a faint orange dances somewhere just beyond his peripheral vision.

Maybe it’s sleep paralysis. Then again, he doesn’t see the illusion of a demon loitering by his bedside. Maybe it isn’t. Whatever it is, it makes his pupils shake.

He spends the next several minutes blinking furiously to expel the burning glow. It doesn’t work, and he decides once and for all that maybe this really is some strange cocktail of all sorts of sleep related issues.

The temperature beneath the blanket grows warmer still, and he wishes that he had a hammock instead of a bed.

(\textit{Who is running around outside his room?})

--

5:58, and everything from his frustrations to his hallucinations is figuratively roaring when a thought crosses his mind. That maybe he's dreamed this same dream before. That a strong sense of deja vu is coming on. That his anxiety is oddly familiar.

Meanwhile, his surroundings die down to a low simmer. His eyelids begin to droop. \textit{This is okay}, he supposes, \textit{but so much for that sunrise}.

He feels himself entering the void, body losing substance.

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They return to the residence as soon as it’s bright enough to. And as soon as the weather lets up. Because at this point, there’s no margin for failure, for any stone to go unturned, for any sort of shadow (whether it be an actual obstruction of light or plain doubt) to sabotage their task.

Maybe this approach works a bit better than attempting to sort everything at dusk. Underneath a charred and surprisingly large plank, someone finds what seem to be the remains of a large collections of candles. A hardened amalgamation of various colors, splinters, and dark flecks of ash. It isn’t much, but it’s something. Very possibly, a clue.

It pushes the search crew harder. A neighborhood fire as large as this couldn’t have been victimless, no matter how many people escaped that night.

Still, they have a long way to go.

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It’s midnight and he’s restless again.
The slowly swirling patterns in my bath
Turn black and deep and heavy on my skin.
I let them paint an undulating path,
I meet them at the surface once again.
The rusted dark of twilight, now it seems,
Has seeped into the water at my chest.
A tiger’s stripes surround me as in dreams
And stir the wild rhythms I’ve suppressed.
Who says that only children ought to play,
To throw their bodies madly to the wind
And court the sun at night, the stars by day,
With free, unfettered eyes and glowing grins?
I beg the inky water “let me drown,”
That growing up might not mean shutting down.
I stood there in my polka-dotted pajamas at midnight, one hand holding a king-sized Kit-Kat bar, the other hand grasping the doorknob. For some reason, I couldn’t help feeling so ashamed by what I had done. What if someone had seen me? How would my parents react? What would my friends say? In order to redeem myself, I resolved to sneak out that night to put the ill-gotten Kit-Kat back. Something stopped me though. Maybe it was fear, or cowardice, or some lingering sense of greed. Whatever the feeling was, it prevented me from going out to return the candy bar to its rightful place. I took my hand off the doorknob and dragged myself back to bed, still wide awake, still feeling waves of revulsion and guilt over what I had done earlier.

Now, almost ten years later, I can still remember how guilty I felt that night, and I was reminded of that feeling when I read Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*. In this book, feelings of guilt and shame are explored and contrasted through two characters, Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale. Hester Prynne is convicted by Puritan authorities in the beginning of the book of committing adultery. She must wear a scarlet letter A on her clothes in perpetuity as a public symbol of shame, and lives her life as an outcast. Arthur Dimmesdale is the man who committed adultery with Hester. Though he is very highly regarded by the townspeople as the epitome of Puritan values, he suffers internally from intense feelings of guilt since he committed adultery but did not face public punishment alongside Hester. These feelings, along with Chillingworth’s nefarious efforts to exacerbate his grief, cause Dimmesdale’s mental and physical health to deteriorate rapidly. Through these two characters, Hawthorne compares and contrasts the two drastically different effects that unpunished guilt has (in the case of Dimmesdale) to those of punished guilt (in the case of Hester).

Though he was not convicted and punished for adultery, Dimmesdale feels acutely the personal consequences of his crime. He feels like a hypocrite in the eyes of the townspeople and in the eyes of God, and that “above all things else, he loathed his miserable self” (96). He whips himself with a “bloody scourge,” “laughing bitterly all the while” due to this self-loathing (96). Even more astonishing is the way Dimmesdale seems to lose his grip on reality. During his nightly vigils, Dimmesdale begins to see “a herd of diabolic shapes, that grinned and mocked,” and “the dead friends of his youth, and his white-bearded father... and his mother” (96). This quote shows how even though no one in the town suspects him of anything, Dimmesdale feels his soul is branded with sin, and he is tortured by his consciousness. Dimmesdale’s guilt forces him to face judgment of some kind, even if it comes from hallucinated figures of his past. The book goes on to state “It is the unspeakable misery of a life so false as his, that it steals the pith and substance out of whatever realities there are around us… To the untrue man, the whole universe is false,—it is impalpable,—it shrinks to nothing within his grasp… he shows himself in a false light,” and “The only truth that continued to give Mr. Dimmesdale a real existence on this earth, was the anguish in his innermost soul and the undissembled expression of it in his aspect” (97). These lines prove the extent to which Dimmesdale feels his guilt. He is distressed to the point where his mind and body waste away, to the point where his guilt completely consumes his every thought. Though it is true that Hester’s life was also deeply impacted by shame and guilt, her punishment was more from without than from within. The book never describes Hester’s emotional or physical health deteriorating like that of
Dimmesdale, and she is able to live with her daughter, who provides her with a sense of purpose and brings her happiness. Hester’s punishment was certainly not insignificant, but Dimmesdale’s punishment by his own consciousness seemed to impact him more heavily, despite it seeming that he “got off easy.”

Dimmesdale’s guilt in *The Scarlet Letter* and my guilt as a six-year-old are strangely similar despite different circumstances, demonstrating how our moral consciousnesses and internal feelings of guilt can affect us deeply no matter the age or transgression. The crime I committed was perhaps a little less grievous than adultery, and the society in which I committed it was perhaps a little less strict than a seventeenth-century Puritan colony. It was October 31st, Halloween. I was dressed in a stealthy black Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle costume and on the prowl for candy. My crime? Taking two pieces of candy, a Butterfinger and a Kit-Kat, when the sign above clearly stated “Please Take Only One”. In the heat of the moment, seeing that there were no adults present, and feeling exuberant and slightly rebellious from a night of trick-or-treating, I took that extra candy bar and broke the sacred covenant between trick-or-treater and candy-giver.

I only began to contemplate the implications of my actions after I got home; Dimmesdale’s guilt in *The Scarlet Letter* reminds me of what I felt that night. The “herd of diabolic shapes, that grinned and mocked” and the disapproving ghosts of his friends, father, and mother reminded me about how I thought my parents and friends would react if they found out about my crime (96). I could almost see them shaking their head disapprovingly, and I could almost hear them saying to me “How could you do this? How could you betray our trust in you?” If anyone found out about what I had done, I was convinced that I would be branded a criminal. My family would cast me out and my friends would never speak to me again. I would be forced to live on the streets, homeless, parentless, and friendless and I would be haunted for the rest of my life by this crime. Dimmesdale’s reaction to his guilt, which “steals the pith and substance out of whatever realities there are around,” is similar to how my guilt consumed me (97). I couldn’t think about anything besides the illicit confection. The fact that I had school the next day or that I had forgotten to practice piano, along with a number of other “realities,” seemed so minor, so trivial, as if they had faded away into nothingness compared to my despicable sin. It didn’t matter if no one else saw me do it; I saw myself pull out two candies instead of one. Like Arthur Dimmesdale, I felt like a fraud and like even more of a criminal for not being punished when I deserved it.

Luckily, my guilt did not affect me to the same degree Dimmesdale’s guilt affected him. Later in *The Scarlet Letter*, Dimmesdale reveals his crime to the town on the pillory, claiming to be marked by a “brand of sin and infamy,” and dies after freeing himself from years of guilt (161). Unlike Dimmesdale, I did not publicly announce what I had done to my community, nor did I die after freeing myself from my guilt. My struggle with guilt as a six-year-old ended less dramatically, for better or worse. Eventually, I was able to survive without feeling repulsed by myself and gradually, I forgave myself for what I had done. Sure, it was a bad decision, but I had punished myself enough with my guilty conscious. I had paid for what I had done with weeks of self-tormenting. Looking back now at that experience, I think it is downright comical that I felt so bad for taking an extra piece of candy. Who really would have cared? Those fears I had about what my family and friends might say were blown way out of proportion. I had exaggerated my small transgression into something akin to a capital offence. My scheme to sneak out of the house at night to return the Kit-Kat is laughable to me now. Upon reflection, this experience is quite silly, but at the time, the situation seemed completely serious.

I remember this experience very vividly, partially due to how terrible I had felt, but also because it impacted the way I felt about morality. As a child, my moral compass was often directed by the adults around me. “Say please,” “say thank you,” “share your toys,” “follow the rules.” Until that fateful Halloween, I had mostly done the moral thing due to fear of a reprimand from adults rather than from a sense of right and wrong. I was only concerned with what others thought of my actions and I never considered how I might have reacted to a misdeed. From this experience, I learned that my morality does
not come from other people. Morality, and the guilt that accompanies immorality, come from within. No one else saw me take the extra candy. No one else knew that I took an extra candy. No one else would have punished me. Despite all of this, I was wracked with guilt, and I hated myself for what I had done. To say that my moral compass was entirely forged after I felt guilty over an extra candy bar would be an overstatement. But, it certainly has helped shape me into the person I am today. If anything, this experience magnetized the needle to my moral compass, compelling me to begin telling the difference between right and wrong for myself.
"In 2011 the CDC (Center for Disease Control) announced that antidepressant use in the USA increased nearly four hundred percent more than twenty years before…” (Levine 49). This is a startling fact that begs the question, is the mental health epidemic realistically increasing at that rate? There are claims that mental health is over diagnosed in our society and yet, some people claim that mental health issues are not over diagnosed but the increase is due to a lack of diagnosis in the past. There have been calls for a reformation in the mental health care system from people whom believe that it is indeed broken. One of these people is Senator Bill Cassidy who said, "It is time to fix our broken mental health care system.” (Liz Szabo) The issues in our system can be blamed for the obvious over diagnosis of mental health issues in today’s society.

Mental illness is a serious disorder that needs to be taken seriously. Many people don’t take mental illness seriously which can be said to lead towards an over diagnosis of many people in America today. People who don’t take mental illness seriously are the cause for the stigma around mental illness. These people consider mental illness a “soft science” due to the subjective nature of diagnosis (“Psychiatry: Is modern psychiatry effective?”). This stigma has caused a lack of respect for people who have mental illness further causing more people to not take it seriously.

The fact that mental illness is so subjective in its diagnosis has also lead to the extreme over diagnosis in America’s modern society. There is no test that you can run on a person and definitively say that a person has a mental illness. A Doctor simply has to talk to a person and decide that they are ill but, a different doctor could have a different opinion. There is not a specific way that you can diagnose mental illness so if a doctor wants to diagnose a person all they have to do is rationalize it. Due to this subjectivity, any doctor could diagnose a person and if the persons doctor does not diagnose them they can just go to a different doctor until they get the prognosis that they want.

People in American society who do not take mental illness seriously are using it as an excuse in daily life. These people are taking normal behaviors and turning them into mental illness to get out of responsibilities. “A June 2013 Gallup Poll revealed that seventy percent of Americans hate their jobs or have checked out” (Levine 47). This hate for their jobs can be solved in their minds by conjuring up a mental illness. Since these people are not actually exhibiting these disorders when they are prescribed the medication they can actually become ill. These medications have real side effects and patients who do not have actual disorders can develop them. In this cycle people who do not have mental illness can develop them leading to a higher number of mentally ill people.

Another reason behind the over diagnosis of mental illness has been argued to be monetary motives. One source says that, “In May 2007, the New York Times published a special report asserting that, in 2005, drug companies paid a combined $1.6 million to psychiatrists in Minnesota…” this correlation is likely not to be a coincidence (“Psychiatry: Is modern psychiatry effective?”). Doctors are being paid big bucks to prescribe these harmful drugs to adults and adolescents. When prescribing these medications doctors know that they are potentially harmful and will cause further damage to the person. With this further damage, the doctors will prescribe more medicine to “fix” the issue. This whole set up leads to further over diagnosis of mental illness and ultimately breaking the mental health care system further.

Other factors contribute to this over diagnosis of mental illness. A huge problem can arise from
the broadness of mental illnesses that are said to exist. Doctors used to rely on, The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders as a reference for the types of mental illnesses. This book began with 106 disorders in 1952 and as the years past, with each new volume of the book more and more were added. By the final publication of the book in 1994 the list of disorders rose to 365 (Levine 49). In doing this, doctors began to pathologize normal behaviors to diagnose more people.

This book was discredited years ago but doctors still recommend the use of it. The book has been said as evidence of this book being used, "Diagnosing Bipolar Disorder in Children." stated, “In February 2010, a group of mental health professionals charged with recommending revisions to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)—a book published by the American Psychiatric Association that defines more than 300 psychological disorders—proposed an alternative diagnosis to bipolar disorder.” This shows that even in 2010 doctors were still promoting the use of this book which clearly names disorders that are nonexistent.

This over diagnosis has caused an influx of patients for doctors to see. Since the doctors are overwhelmed patient care will also be lacking. As "Colleges Grapple with Mental Health Problems." states, “Studies show that mental health on college campuses has been declining since 1985. And as more students seek counseling, some college mental health facilities are being overwhelmed.” This shows the obvious weakness in our health care system.

While all of those problems are evident there are people out there that argue that mental disorders are not over diagnosed. Some people even argue that mental illness is under diagnosed due to a lack of accessibility to the help needed by patients. These people also worry that the treatments being given are insufficient and do not truly help the patient’s health to improve.

The proponents of the fact that healthcare for the mentally ill say that help is inaccessible to the people who truly need help. As "Health Care Reform: Has the Affordable Care Act improved health care in the United States?" says, The Affordable Care Act is a failure that has resulted in higher health costs and fewer choices for Americans. This means that not only is health care from before still bed but it is in fact progressing in a downward direction. These people who have mental illness and need help are not able to find it. Even if these people find help the government is making it hard for them to afford the care that they need.

To answer the question raised by more cases of mental illness in America, mental illness is over diagnosed. Although there are arguments from the other side that have some points the overwhelming amount of evidence points towards the over diagnosis of mentally ill people. From monetary incentives to the broad spectrum of illnesses and disorders all signs point towards doctors using their power to diagnose people who do not actually have problems. Mental health is a real issue that has to be taken seriously and the over diagnosis of people does not contribute to anyone taking mental health seriously.

Works Cited
People carry suitcases and the bags under their eyes.
Curled into the seat, I fold into myself.
My senses are dulled without you.

An adolescent daughter tries to prove alert
all while her mother calls her bluff.
People carry suitcases and the bags under their eyes.

A group of young friends sit, legs splayed,
on the floor, sharing drinks as fatigue seeps into voices.
Curled into the seat, I fold into myself.

I rub the small strip of skin that the silver band once hugged.
When the flight to New York is called, I stand, alone.
My senses are dulled without you.
A Onesie Wonderland

Onesie-pon a time, in a land not so far away.

“Where is it!” I shout as I run throughout the house. “OMG, where could it have gone? I put it here yesterday, so what possibly could have happened?”

“Calm down Meagan” I look up to see Ally, my sister, standing at the top of the stairs.

“I can’t find my cute cupcake onesie that I need to post a picture of myself to Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and most importantly, MySpace. If I don’t find it my life will be ruined.” I stop as I see what my sister is wearing. My cupcake onesie. “What. Are. You. Wearing.” I say as I grab my bow and arrow I use to get likes on YouTube.

“Easy there sis. Is social media really that important?” Ally asks, backing away, clearly afraid for her life.

“YES!!!!!!” I scream as I fire the arrow at her. I narrowly miss her heart as I hit her arm. I then run upstairs, take the cupcake onesie off her and on me, and take a selfie. “OMG, I look toats adorbs!” I really did look cute though, nevermind all the blood.

The Classic Love Story

“Man, gas prices right?” Melissa says to her neighbor Bob. “I mean, like, what am I supposed to do when the price is that high?” She stands there awkwardly, waiting for a response. She holds a bundle of flowers in her hand, preparing to give them to him.

Bob walks in holding a knife in his hand. “Meow!” Bob the cat says as he springs at Melissa, stabbing her in the stomach.

Melissa almost screams, but keeps herself quiet. She does after all want to marry this homicidal cat ever since he moved in yesterday. “I love you too, sweetie!” she yells lovingly.

Bob then proceeds to grab his baseball bat with glee as he swings the bat at her. An eye flies out of her face as hew skull becomes visible. Melissa replies with “Awwwww, really? Me too!” She was then interrupted as she spontaneously combusted.

A Letter From the Beast

I hunt. I hunt you. I am the fiercest creature. With my mighty claws, I strike down any flying enemy. I have hair covering the entire body. You can’t hide from my night vision, or my smell. When I bite you, you... ummm react? I can make you bleed, kinda. But now that I think of it, you aren’t really scared.

Anyway, you don’t hide from me, you hug me. You call me cute names, and try to keep me near you. When I do my duty, you distract me with red dots and food. You... don’t fear me. I roar loud, you call me cute. I pounce at people, but they just stroke me. This is not okay! So people everywhere, for North to South, East to West, if you started to fear me, that would literally be the best.

P.S. Give me more food

Fear me,

Cat
This last story is a blurb from the famous book “Goodbye Arth, Hello Earth” that doesn’t exist!
Enjoy!

**Goodbye Arth, Hello Earth**

“Why do you defend the people?” When Mega-Ultra-Super-Captain-Lemonade-Edward-Severus, or MUSCLES Man, was asked this question by Bill Guy, the villain, he immediately crushed him. But now, as MUSCLES Man is starting to see, people are weak and despicable. So, using his death ray, he destroys them. The whole planet in fact. He leaves the planet he destroyed, called Arth, and visits a strangely similar place. Not knowing what to do, he goes throughout the planet meeting strange new people and stranger, newer objects, including ducks, car salesmen, toilets, the answer to life (42), no death ray, which disappointed him, onesies, schools, and the tastiest food you can imagine. Throughout his journey he gains love, honesty, knowledge, and weight from all those ham-less hamburgers. With the confusing language English and demons incorrectly called platypi (it should be platypodes), the newest installment in the MUSCLES Man franchise, you will not be able to put this book down. And not just from the superglue we put on the cover!

Critics rave:

“We like this book and are not being held against our will. Please don’t save us!”

This my friends, is not the end, but merely the beginning. But also the end.
The old style buildings in a row
Down the new road, the marks of past civilization, its history remains in the whistle of the wind.

With a drive down the path, you learn more with each turn, on one side that old man who knew the truth,
Dried cement of memories, and birds chirping with thoughts of their own.

The place I knew. A long drive in the fall, leaves scraping against the cement road.
The radio exhaling known words.

Beyond my way, the darkened sky settles, a car rumbles with exasperation, while passing familiar territory.

You are thinking of bliss. You think of home awaiting your arrival, thinking of the wood and how it smells, thinking in your mind you feel safe.

Exchanging greetings with your neighbor you knew so well, as you walked down your sidewalk you've walked on for so long.
Instead everything is new, the neighbor, The sidewalk and all.
“Good morning students!” my teacher, Ms. Joane, begins. “Today we are switching seats!”

“Ugh!” I hear people around me groan. I know I’m ready to switch seats. I’ve been sitting by Caroline Joplin for the last 3 months, and she is driving me crazy! I glance around the room, wondering where I’ll be sitting. I see the huge, glass window that looks outside into the school garden. I see the posters and worksheets pinned to the purple wall. All of the walls in our school are purple for some reason. That’s just the way the workers made it; our unique that way. I look up at Ms. Joane’s desk, and I wait patiently for her to give us the seats.

“I’ll put the seating chart up on the board!” Ms. Joane tells us.

I begin to gather my things when I notice who I’m sitting by - Hannah Bergens. She just moved here last week, and she has no friends! Oh, yeah. I almost forgot… she’s got these nerdy glasses that are way too small for her. They are pink and glittery. My sister has glasses like that, and she’s 5. What a baby! I walked up to Ms. Joane’s desk to ask her if I could switch desks.

“You want to switch desks? No!” she yells at me.

I saw it coming, I thought to myself. Although I know I probably shouldn’t, I give her a dirty look. I return to my new desk and plump down into the seat.

“Hi,” the new girl begins, “my name’s Hannah.” I look up at her, and then I look back down at my desk. I groan and ignore her.

“Ok,” Ms. Joane mumbles under her breath as she straightens her papers. “Let’s begin with the lesson.”

“Alert! Alert!” someone blasts over the intercom. I jump and bite my tongue. “There is an intruder in the building! If your classroom is near the library, do not try to escape! Lock your doors, block your windows!”

Kids scream and cry out, but the teacher tells them that they need to be quiet. “Everyone against the wall!” my teacher exclaims. I stand like a stone, glaring out the window. The lights flip off, and I feel someone grab my arm and yank me downwards.

“What the heck?” I shout, realizing its Hannah.

I turn my head and see Hannah sitting right next to me, smashed up against my shoulder. She looks at me, and I roll my eyes at her.

“Scoot over,” I whisper, as I elbow her.

She looks up at me. “Why are you elbowing me?”

“Because you’re in my way.” I glare at her, angrily, and she looks back, right into my eyes, as if she’s trying to see into my soul. I would demand her to stop, but I didn’t want to, for some reason. I look back at the dirty, blue carpet.

I hear the door start to rattle. People whimper, and gasp. Hannah’s fingers fold in between mine. I squeeze her hand, and she squeezes mine back even harder. I hear pounding on the door. I shut my eyes,
and I could feel it echoing through my head; POUND, POUND, POUND. It gets louder, then, it gets faster. I can feel the wall vibrating against my back.

Then, I hear something else. And it’s not coming from our room. It’s coming from the bathroom across the hall. One of the stall doors opens, then slams. I could almost see what was happening outside - the man opening the bathroom door and coming out with a kid. But, it wouldn’t be just any kid, it would be a kid that I see every day in the halls, at recess, and at lunch. It would be a kid just like me.

“Hey!” I hear a deep voice shout. “Hey! Stop right there.”

The police! I thought to myself. But, it wasn’t the police yelling at the man. It was the man yelling at the kid. I start to hear screams. I wanted to go and help the kid. I tried to stand up, but luckily, Hannah held me down.

“Let go of me! Let go of my arm! Somebody help me! Please!” I hear a young voice call out.

“I’m here! I’m here!” shouts a police officer.

Moments later, the intercom comes on again. And this time, it’s not saying Intruder Alert. It says, “Teachers, students. Thank you for following the original plans. You may unlock your doors, and flip on the lights. We have contacted everyone’s parents, and they are coming to pick you up. Teachers, please send your students out to get their backpacks. It is safe to go out in the halls, the intruder is out of the building.”

I expect a roar of cheers, but I get silence. Silence in the halls, silence in the bathrooms, and silence in the classroom. No one says anything. We grab our bags, and Ms. Joane dismisses us to go outside to our parents.

“Mom!” I yell when I got outside.

“Ella! My baby!” my mom cries. “Are you alright?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I looked over and see Hannah talking to her mom and pointing at us. “Let’s go over there,” I tell my mom. “There’s someone who I’d like you to meet.”

My mom and I walk over to Hannah and her mom. They talk for 20 whole minutes once we introduce them to each other. It’s good for us though because we get to hang out on the playground. After it had been what had felt like hours of swinging, sliding, climbing, and running, we get our moms to exchange phone numbers and take us home.

Before we left, me and Hannah talked for a moment. “Thank you for sitting with me during the intruder alert, even though we didn’t really have a choice,” I say, as we both giggle.

“Of course,” she tells me. “I’d do anything for a friend.” She adjusts her glasses and I realize they weren’t too small for her. I shouldn’t have judged her or just assumed she was weird. Her bright smile makes me feel warm inside. I can tell it’s a smile I’m going to remember.

A friend? I think. She just called me her friend. I would never be more proud to be called Hannah’s friend before going through all this. I smile and come in for a hug. She elbows me, and we both laugh.
If Martin Luther King Jr. was around
he'd be sad to see Black men getting gunned to the ground
his heart would beg for mercy and ache
for the nine Black people killed and it wasn't a mistake it was an act of hate
and the cops gave him a vest and a Burger King plate
he'd be confused when he hears the news say Muslims have been banned
they're not the ones shooting up schools, churches, and theaters with their white hand
BANG BANG! Yeah, I know shots fired
it’s like a recurring theme that’s why we as a people are beyond tired
Martin would be choked up and would shed a tear
when Eric Garner looked at the cops with fear
saying, “I can't breathe” and they still wouldn't hear
he'd shake his head when people say “All” instead of “Black lives matter”
cause only condolences for Black lives are being handed out on a platter
after the fact
but during their lives, constantly in attack
because the country we live in is a game and doesn't care about them
they rig it for them to lose because they don’t want to see them win
then when they kill them it's automatically their fault
because they've hated them since their ancestors were on the ship and dealt with assault
Martin would frown when the “N word” leaves people's lips
even when they know they used that word when the rough whips
struck our ancestors hips
and they still think it's funny when blood from a body drips
but little did they know that blood built the cup from which a person sips
Martin would be shocked to see that Donald Trump leads the land of the free
he doesn't know anything about the lives of you and me
let alone how to run a country
this really showcases America's stupidity
Martin please help us in our time of need
Black men don’t think they have a future so they turn to selling weed
in this garden of hate plant a seed
so we as persecuted people can finally be freed.
Roger Pearce was the kind of guy who very easily could have wound up being a successful bulldozer operator. He had a penchant for destruction, but destruction of a crueler sort than most, almost sadistic. Maybe compensatory. It wasn’t sociopathic or psychotic. He was never the kid to shoot at squirrels with BB guns or anything like that, but were he of proper age and proportion, wouldn’t hesitate to bat down a mailbox.

In all fairness to the poor kid, it wasn’t his fault that he leveled everything around him. His parents, both born, raised, and headed toward death in the same one-horse-town of Clear Lake, Iowa, were of a disagreeable disposition. This too, was, in a sense, out of their hands—externally motivated. Mr. Pearce ran a small fleet of charter planes that flew out of the Mason City Airport. It was good money, but not good enough money to leave.

Buddy Holly, the Big Bopper, and Ritchie Valens came through the nearby Surf Ballroom, and performed in a little venue far too small for their musical prowess. The only way out of town to their next gig—their actual gig, was a charter bus, rented out especially for them. The bus, however, much to the chagrin of the trio, was not heated, and in February in Iowa, well that wouldn’t do. No, they stopped the bus and chartered a plane—a plane out of Mason City. Don McLean told the rest of the story. Bye, bye, Ms. American Pie.

I’m sure it wasn’t easy, growing up as the kid whose dad killed the music. Hell, I have to imagine being the guy whose plane killed the music wasn’t much easier. That poor kid was shit out of luck.

We were of the same age, and had art class together. We made palm trees out of clay that year as the final project. Clay: the most malleable of constructive material, able to stretch, wrap, conceal. It was exciting to say the least—I thought it was exciting.

“Hey, Jersey, you know what palm trees are supposed to look like? You got those out there on the coast?”

When Roger made jokes, the rest of the kids laughed so as to avoid falling in the path of the bulldozer. In the second grade, he was an inch or so taller than the rest of us, but you’d’ve thought he was twice our size. He commanded the room. To err on his side was self-preservation.

“Make me a palm tree, Jersey, and make it pretty. Chop chop!”

I rather enjoyed art class. It was the one class that required no prerequisite knowledge, nothing that I’d missed in the months prior would make me look foolish. It was simple. I liked using clay, and jest as he might, I didn’t really mind all that much—but I knew I should. I knew that this was his way of saying, “Listen here, kid, I run this classroom, and you’re gonna make my goddamn palm tree, okay?”

As the new kid, there’s no reason to start fights, but there’s even less practicality in allowing yourself to be pushed around. I made my palm tree, and I was proud of it. The clay leaves at the top fanned out, not unlike hair branching out from the middle of a head. Drooping over the otherwise unadorned trunk of the tree, it wasn’t groundbreaking, but it was something. When it was finished, I grabbed my pencil to scratch my name into the piece, so that, in the firing process, our teacher might maintain the artistic ownership of my piece. The lead broke halfway through. I sharpened it, making sure it was perfectly pointed—they wouldn’t want it breaking again. When I’d finished, I returned to my creation to mark it as my own. In its place, I found Roger Pearce.

“Hey! Jersey, that’s a real pretty palm tree.” Pearce’s eyes glimmered with a lit furnace fire—ignited
by some primal instinct of dominance perhaps, some understanding that the moment I made the palm tree—be it for him or for me, I’d become the beta—I’d lost. Pearce glanced away from me and the palm tree quickly, like a dog who, after marking its territory, checks that it is truly his—that no one is about to ruin his triumph. Eyes still ablaze, he said, “You know, Jersey, that’s not what a palm tree looks like. I’d know. I have a cousin on the coast. The real coast. Cali-forn-i-a. On the real coast, palm trees are a little flatter. Mind if I show you?”

With that, Pearce raised his right hand high towards the fluorescent bulbs above, and with the grace of a hawk swooping down to its prey, dropped it on the clay center of my palm tree, right where the leaves protruded from the trunk. It, of course, being clay not yet fired, was malleable. The tree in one instant became little more than a smooshed cardboard-box-like-shape on the table. “There,” Pearce chuckled, “now it’s a real palm tree. Get it right next time so I won’t have to fix it again, Jersey.”

I figured it was a misstep in the formation of the base. I remembered a trip I’d taken to New York with my father. It was officially a business trip, but he answered all the questions I’d birthed stewing in the hotel room while he was away at meetings. “Why don’t those buildings fall over? The really tall ones. Wouldn’t the wind push them over?”

“It’s structural. It’s all about the base, the support system. If the base is weak, the structure is weak. Not only that, but it’s crucial for the building to have an internal stabilizer.”

“Internal stabilizer?”

“Here, think of it like this,” he said, jumping out of his chair and bounding across the hotel room. Coming back with a paper coffee cup and a few pens, he said, “Look, watch this.” Placing the coffee cup top-down on the nightstand, he challenged me, “Push it over.” I flicked the top, and over it went. Weak. “There, you see that? You know what happened?”

“What does this have to do with the skyscrapers?”

“Think about it. Why’d it just fall over? It has a fairly sturdy base. What gives?” After waiting a few seconds for a response, he finally said, “There’s no internal stabilizer. The base is fine, but there needs to be a second source of support.”

In an attempt to further illustrate his point, he grabbed his pens, four of them, and shoved them through the bottom of the cup, points facing skyward. Now, with the bottoms of the four pens resting in a slightly spread out square on the nightstand, he looked to me and said, “Now try again. Knock it over.” I flicked it, and it just scooted along the table. The problem wasn’t the misformation of my base, it was a lack of internal stabilization. Pearce eyed me from across the room, as if to say, “Build it again, I dare you.” His presence could be felt by the whole of the room. He was like a terrible dictator.

I took great care to stretch out the box-like lump of clay on my desk so as to make it usable. For what seemed like hours, I carefully formed my base, slowly working my way towards the beginnings of the trunk. I still needed internal stabilization. The pencil. Grabbing the recently sharpened Dixon No. 2, I did just what my father had shown me in that hotel room. I flattened out the eraser, then stuck the pencil, point skywards, into the base of the tree. Dad used four, but I only had the one, and I figured it would do. Ever so carefully, I molded the clay around the pencil, giving it little flicks for good measure I as went. It was thick. It was sturdy. I recrafted each of the leaves on top, making sure that it maintained its hairlike appearance, each leaf drooping slightly over the side of the tree. It was structurally sound. Satisfied, I sat back. Who should appear next but Roger Pearce.

“Hey, Jersey, didn’t I tell you that palm trees are supposed to be flat? Are you stupid, or are you just giving me things to do?” Pearce eyed me, almost expecting an answer.

I said nothing.

“Listen,” Pearce said, “I’m gonna let this one slide on account of the fact that the Jersey shore sunshine probably fried your brain. Palm trees are supposed to be flat. That’s how they grow on the coast. Flat as a pancake. Got it? I’ll help you out this time because I’m a nice guy, but next time, I’m not gonna be so nice.”

Pearce threw his hand skyward, this time looking less like a majestic bird of prey, and more like a man falling to his death, having leapt from the top of a building. Bringing it down on the top of my tree—my
internally stabilized masterpiece—he let out a howling whimper.

The pencil entered his hand right where the skin is thinnest, and the muscle thickest—towards the palm in the flap between the thumb and index finger. It came out the other side. My palm tree, once a dreary beige-grey color, now shone a wondrous dark red in the industrial lighting of the room.

The teacher, Mrs. Stone, was horrified, and immediately took me by the arm, leading me into the hallway, before remembering the severely wounded child in her room. “Stay right there,” she barked. I did. She shuffled by with Pearce in tow, tissue wrapped uselessly around his mutilated hand. All in all, it was a pretty clean wound. The pencil had gone straight through, and after the initial spurt, the blood flow had been all but stemmed by the wood.

I guess the principal had been notified, because he was marching toward me wearing an accusatory frown under his thick mustache.

“Well, Williams.” His mustache bounced, danced even, whenever he spoke gruffly. It was hard to contain my laughter.

“No, sir.”

“Well then, how the hell did a pencil just go through his hand?”

“Construction hazard, sir. He didn’t think about internal stability before demolition.”

“What in God’s name are you talking about? Do you think this is some sort of sick joke, Williams?

That poor boy is on his way to the emergency room this moment to get stitches. Now, tell me how the hell a pencil ended up in Roger Pearce’s hand.”

“Sir, he smashed my palm tree.”

“My office. Now.”

Perhaps the joke was poorly timed. I didn’t feel sorry for the kid. Family issues or not, he was a dick. I waited with the secretary, a woman my mother knew well. Mary Frank. They’d worked together briefly in the Mason City school district. She wouldn’t make eye contact with me.

“We’ve called your mother,” the mustache bounced, “she’s on her way.”

Thinking the whole situation rather funny still, and not aided by the fact that my authority’s mustache was doing the tango, I stood up and proclaimed: “Nonsense, I am She.”

“Excuse me?”

“I am She!” I declared again, a touch more histrionic than the first time.

Preparing for a third bellowing proclamation, I saw the principal’s eyes lift upward, away from my antics. Turning around, I found my mother in the doorway. Immediately, the gravity of the situation became clear.

“Good morning, Mary,” she said, entering the room. Her purse sat as still as the skyscrapers in New York, her face expressionless—motionless, body rigid. She was internally stable. Calm. “What’s happened?”

“Well, Mrs. Williams, your son has run a Dixon No. 2 pencil right through another student’s hand, Roger Pearce. He’s been sent to the emergency room for stitching.”

Her face remained deeply calm, almost serenely so. The wind was picking up, quickly turning to gusts. How she maintained her perfect posture in this storm baffled me.

“I see. And when did this happen?”

“In art class, ma’am. Just about twenty minutes ago.”

“Right.” My body shook with anticipation—trepidation. “And what exactly am I expected to do about it?” At this, a glimmer of hope flashed in my eyes. She seemed almost defiant.

Mr. Mullins, though a bit taken aback by her rebellious tone, answered without missing a beat. “We’re sending Mr. Williams home, and seriously considering his expulsion. We’ll need you to take him with you. In my opinion, you ought to be in contact with Mr. Pearce’s parents. I expect they’ll send you the medical bill.”

“May I ask what the terms of this accident were? Was there an adult present in the room at the time?”

“Yes, ma’am, the art teacher, Mrs. Stone. Your son claims Roger smashed his palm tree, and that this
was all a big accident. If you ask me, there’s no reason to put a sharpened pencil in a clay tree trunk unless there’s malicious intent of some sort.”
“In other words, you think my son did this on purpose.”
“Yes, ma’am.”
“All because he put a pencil in a tree trunk?”
The mustache on Mr. Mullins' face fell still.
“Do you know why skyscrapers stand strong in the face of harsh winds, Mr. Mullins?”
“No, ma’am I do not, but I don’t see what relev—”
“Internal stabilization.”
“I don’t follow, Mrs. Williams.”
“My son didn’t have malicious intent, Mr. Mullins, he was building an architecturally sound tree. Now, if you don’t mind, I’m going to take my son, and treat him for his cleverness with some ice cream. Please see to it that his grade in the class is not affected.”
With that, my mother and I simply walked out. I never got to fire my tree.
Perhaps there’s some irony to the fact that he killed himself a week after Easter Sunday. A pious man of the church, finally driven mad by cave bound fumes. Some twisted homage to the Savior of men.

He always was quite the fisherman.

The wife says he had a dream—a nightmare. A nightmare so real that, for all intents and purposes, it was. The 9mm in the steel cage had come out to play in this chimeric tragedy, its tune resonating throughout the bedchamber, making husband and wife dance again. But of course, that wasn’t real. “It was just a dream.” That’s what she said—the wife—just a dream. “Go back to sleep.” He insisted that she hide the key, take those nasty, ridged teeth away from him. Hide them—the keys—now.

6:30. Sunday morning. Church starts in two hours. The man wakes—or perhaps he doesn’t. Perhaps he acted in a sort of somnambulant stupor. That’s what the priest said. A stupor. He didn’t have control. The keys—the ones to be hidden—were left available. An error made in a midnight stupor.

The wife raises her eyes, much like the Virgin Mary did that morning, to witness a miracle. That steely cage had been thrown wide open. The Savior was gone—captured—reclaimed by the Creator—the Destroyer—he who has the power to give life, and take it away in the same breath.

Just as the Romans let flow the blood from the Savior’s side, so too did the Savior return the favor, for He lives in the heart, sometimes as love, sometimes as a bullet, and sometimes, it’s hard to tell the difference.
I was seven when you called Dad and asked to speak with me. Mom waited anxiously around the corner, praying that what a sibling said would lead us to you. You were in Little Rock, but left no trail, no note. The local Greyhound would give us nothing, invoking “passenger confidentiality.” But you called me. I never quite got past that. Of all the people you could have reached out to, why helpless me? I suppose that’s it, isn’t it? I was helpless—powerless to do anything to reach you. You knew I wouldn’t lecture you on the irrationalities associated with escaping an outwardly loving home fraught with internal turmoil. You knew that anything you could say to me would be as important as words of Lords.

We spoke for a few minutes, and then a few minutes more, before you told me you’d run out of change. It took me some time to understand that you were using a payphone so that Dad couldn’t have the call traced. We smiled at the mention of seeing each other, and laughed about the cartoonish caricatures of men you’d seen on your journey, then we hung up.

I promised that our words would live out their days hanging in the phone lines, men left for dead in the gallows. Our secret remained in the air until a non-sibling made a call. “Hello, this is the Little Rock County Coroner, are your parents home?” I didn’t understand, but her tone seemed to suggest a certain gravity not meant for children’s ears. Mom snatched the phone and then it leapt from her hands, smashing on the ground.

Dad made me wear a black suit on a Friday morning. In a backroom of an all-white building, clouds rolling in through the windows, he asked me about the call. Asked me what I knew. I couldn’t bear to tell him, couldn’t bear to let him know what a sibling said.
I still cannot decide who was the canary
and who was the coal mine;
toxicity often enjoys a life of anonymity—
especially in a little nowhere town.
I think that’s what Grace is—
divine toxicity living in small towns.

What I have decided is that sometimes Christ lives
in the heart even if it is as a bullet;
you aren’t religious, so you won’t agree,
but I wonder how a one-legged man doesn’t inspire faith.

In the storms of ‘08,
we all huddled and said the Lord’s Prayer—
but you wouldn’t sing for us after—
when the rains slowed, and we were sure
that the walls wouldn’t scream and cave in.

The pastor told us that zealotry is an
inherently Roman trait,
and that’s when I first realized that you have the nose
of a Greek.

That winter when my hands turned vaguely black,
I began to wonder if maybe I was
the miner stuck between the two of you.
Still, you refused to sing.

On the morning that all of us remember,
and yet none of us speak—
not even to the children, and especially not
to the adults, I remember
that He sang in the shower—Amazing Grace.
He knew every verse—
But you mumbled unsure,
Toxic as the bathroom filled
Out all uncertainties,
As the mine emptied.
Mother says fathers are
An Atheist’s prayer at the foot of
Damnation—
The banter of men—
Everyday Willy Lomans—
The vapors of her sixth cigarette at noon.

Mother says fathers are
Men
With cocaine and blood and years on their sleeves—
Men
Who skulk up stairs and bang on tables—
Men
That carry thermoses of coffee to day jobs.

Mother says fathers are
Whatever she says
They are.
Evan Williams  
Grade 12

Mother, I Am Become  
Poetry

John Burroughs School  
Saint Louis, MO  
Teacher: Megan Zmudczynski

Mother, Giver of worlds—  
I am become Life  
In barns across this prairieland  
Tucked, hidden away behind Dad’s  
Bails of hay stacked six high  
Against walls guarding wood  
From the grimy touch of roaches  
Between breakfast and lunch, lunch and dinner.

Mother, Bearer of all that is good,  
I am become Prayer  
In locked closets with slats  
For foot-watching.  
Sliced red and peeled like Joseph’s  
But these toes are not holy.

Mother, Lover of all that you see,  
I am become Hatred  
In reunion halls coated  
With fluorescent light and boots  
Squeaking in moans on linoleum  
Floors aching from bruises past become bruises present  
Become black—purple—blue—yellow become

Mother, Forgiver of all wrongs,  
I am become Son.
Evan Williams
Grade 12

If Plates Are Shirts Are Milk Jars
Poetry

John Burroughs School
Saint Louis, MO
Teacher: Megan Zmudczynski

It’s dawn or dusk or
Some other time of dark
And you can hear Him on the stairs,
In the hallway, in the kitchen—
Hear Him moving plates around,
Cooking something bitter
To your taste buds like soured milk.

Before five years old alcohol soothes
Fairy-inflicted wounds in the night or day
Or whatever time of dark this is
When He steps out the screen
Grabbing the grass with His boots
Taking hold of the door, slamming it quietly.

You hear Him beneath your window
Walking away and you pray on your knees
In the dark of this time that He’s coming back.

Or you pray on your elbows that He’s leaving,
But you can’t tell at this time of dark
When He walks through the gravel driveway
Towards the cows or the road
And for a split-second you hear Him
Choose the road;
You never heard Him pack a bag in the kitchen
Unless plates are shirts,
But maybe he did and dark sounds fooled
Half-awake brains into smelling bacon as bitter—
Or was it sweet?

Maybe plates that are shirts are milk jars.
Maybe they’re neither and are really just plates. Maybe
It’s just impossible to tell at this time of dark.
Red-rusted eyes half shut—
The bell, a relic of days past
Lies on its deathbed—a small leaf,
Attached to life support in the form of an ever
Withering branch strained from the years of winter
And strenuous gripping.
The bell giggles in giddy glee at the thought
Of a sweet release from this hellish purgatory—
Inches, bit by bit
Down the branch.

It misses the snow—
The ice skating on the pond adjacent to the tree—
Misses the children who visited—
Despises the wooded wasteland it’s come to call
Home.

Bit by bit the bell chimes its way towards the edge
Until at last the branch concedes,
Releasing the red-rusted eyes from its icy embrace—
Like a mother bird watching her baby fly for the first time—
Or rather,
Like a mother bird realizing her baby can’t fly.

With a final ring sounding vaguely like a funeral march,
The bell crashes to the cold earth,
Shattering—
No longer tolling for the creatures of the forest.
Evan Williams
Grade 12

Ferguson: A Story of White Privilege
Poetry

John Burroughs School
Saint Louis, MO
Teacher: Megan Zmudczynski

August 9, 2014:
Six shots are fired today.
Not one—
Not two—
Not three, or four, or even five.
Six.
Fired into the body of an
18-year-old—barely an adult—
Guilty only of petty theft,
If anything at all.

Calls came from
Concerned relatives insisting
I not go to the “bad part”
Of Saint Louis.
They didn’t even know the name
Of the town—of the
Victim.
Ferguson.
Mike Brown.

Today is the first time white privilege
Becomes clear to me.
White privilege is not having to
Fear for your life
At a traffic stop—
White privilege is not being
Discriminated against
In the workplace, education system, federal government—
White privilege is
Being referred to by by your name and not your skin color
In the media—
It’s me watching this horror story unfold at home on t.v.—
A ten minute drive away—
White privilege is safety—unquestioned, a certainty.

August 10, 2014:
Vans from CNN, MSNBC, and Fox crowd our sleepy
Riverside town—infiltrate our community—
Stay at local hotels,
Eat at local restaurants,
Meet kind, hardworking
Saint Louisans of all races, creeds, sexualities—
Then go on television and vilify a community in distress—
Vilify men and women alike standing up for their rights as people
Vilify the man shot in the back.

August 11, 2014:
I wasn’t there.
I watched as frightened people protested—
Watched as they were assaulted with
Rubber bullets and tear gas—
Watched as a city ten minutes from me
Was demonized—depicted as a war zone,
While I sat safely in my brick home in the suburbs.

Tuesday, November 25, 2014:
Darren Wilson is acquitted today.
He fades into oblivion.
Never to be heard from again.
It’s a difference of five miles.
Five miles north, and I’m in the midst of a
Shitshow—
But instead, I’m having dinner with my family—
All of them—
While the Browns protest as a family—
Minus one—
While I watched. Safely.
Evan Williams
Grade 12

Penny Loafer Princeling
Poetry

John Burroughs School
Saint Louis, MO
Teacher: Megan Zmudczynski

Wide-eyed and short-soled,
Dance the feet of the Penny-Loafer Princeling,
Round and round in the ballroom
Of thieves—surrounded by his precious animals—
Stuffed and plump, Bear, Cow, and Horse;
Long into the night they would watch
The young Penny-Loafer Princeling twirl,
Admiring his every twist, his every bow,
For they wished to dance themselves;
The Bear roared softly, and the Cow mooed feverishly, and the Horse neighed brazenly—
Pleading with the Penny-Loafer Princeling
To pick them up, hold them
Close to his heart and never let go,
But their squeals were diluted by the sound of music
Filling the halls.
The Penny-Loafer Princeling jumped and dazzled his audience of three
As the music crescendoed, imitating a grasshopper he flew
So high above the velvet floor,
While the Bear roared, the Cow mooed, and the Horse neighed in jealous approval.

The Moon shone in through the square glass windows,
And heard the pleas of toys that were anything but;
The Moon pitied them because she too
Wished to dance, to dance with the Sun
In a glorious waltz of night and day,
And so the Moon directed her light onto the Bear, the Cow, and the Horse,
Seizing all the light from the velvet floors—
But most importantly, catching the eye of the Penny-Loafer Princeling.

In the preternaturally natural spotlight,
The animals glowed with the energy a million lightning bugs;
The Penny-Loafer Princeling, now ashamed that he had not heard
Their pleas, or seen their outstretched arms
Whisked them up from the wooden floor inches beyond the velvet,
And in his arms they felt safe and satisfied
As they twirled and jumped and twisted
While the night turned to day turned to night again in time to a perfect waltz.
Hope Is A Flightless Bird
Response to “Taking Off Emily Dickinson’s Clothes”

Hope has feathers—
But is flightless
When looking up at a yellow eye—
Tumbled free of pins and yet pinned—
Fly buzzing at the windowpane—
Its wings playing a funeral march for me and mine
While the man of lines waxes poetic
About dividing water like a swimmer,
But Brock Turner taught us all
That certain types of breastroke land you in prison—
Or don’t.

Poet laureates and Stanford students eat steak,
But the fly still buzzes in my ear,
Ringing, ringing, ringing out like a gunshot not yet released—
Cocked, locked, and ready to fire a load—
To ride a swan worried not
about being bitten—
Shielded by title, money, manhood—
The complexity of men’s egos across Amherst on the Sabbath
Believing
I can’t respond,
Either because I’m dead, or
Because I’m a woman,
But one is not better than the other
When hands on buttons are met with resistance—
When a white dress puddles on the floor in an effort to
Escape;

Watch as he raises his mast and sails
Through the years to moor his ship.
Watch him try to paint me
A conquest.
People talk about the elephant in the room like it’s not trying to escape—
like all six tons of worn blue, ivory-ridden, flap-eared
body enjoys being crammed
into a room that’s 20x20x9.

How is it that the elephant’s emotions are not the elephant in the room?
Where are the SeaWorld protesters in coffee shops and deposition tables?
Fellow humans, you’re letting our elephantine brethren die
of intense claustrophobia under fluorescent bulbs—
when will this madness end?

I ask you now, to address the elephant in the room—Esmeralda.
She’s been here for weeks, no one has claimed her;
we have no idea how we’re going to remove her.

The truth about the elephant in the room is unfortunate.
She’ll likely die,
because frankly, it costs more to maintain her appetite
in foodstuffs than it’s worth keeping her for sheer spectacle.

As much as we love Esmeralda, she’s not a sustainable pet.
Sooner or later, the elephant in the room will tear down a wall.
Coming Home

Brief summary:

Brooklyn Johnson was abandoned when she was 14 years old. Her mother died in a freak car accident, and her father left soon after. Brooklyn grew up in her tiny apartment, barely affording to pay rent. One of the fighter gangs on the streets are her family now. After one of her fights, a strange man appears and tells Brooklyn he can take Brooklyn to her mother. She is suspicious but trusting, and goes with the strange man named Andrew Banker, only to have him pass away in the middle of their quest. Brooklyn decides to continue this treacherous journey alone. She makes her way to the town Bisbee, in Arizona. She goes to her mother's supposed address, and finds a lookalike of her mother, fully believing that this was her long lost mother. But, the tables turn whenever her "mother" pulls a gun on her. Brooklyn is shot, and passes away of a shot straight to the heart by her mother's clone.

Excerpt:

What?! Exact address unknown? Impossible. Well, it’s a small town. I started walking toward a general store to ask where block #9 was. A bell chimed as I walked in the door. A smiling, elderly man greeted me.
“Welcome to Bisbee General Store, how may I assist you today?” He asked.
“I was just wondering if you could direct me to block #9? I’m supposed to be visiting family there,” I replied sweetly. The man blanched, but quickly regained his composure.
“Here is a map, have fun visiting!” He said.
“Thanks,” I replied.
“Actually, would you mind coming into the back with me for a minute?” The man said, stopping me.
“Oh, sure,” I said. He steered me into the back. He took out a remote and pressed a button. The security cameras flopped down and turned off.
I tried to back up, but the door closed behind me.
“I’m not going to hurt you, don’t worry,” The man said.
“I don’t believe you,” I replied.
“I need to tell you something about block #9,” The elderly man said urgently.
“Alright, talk,” I said.
“Now, I don’t know what kind of family would want to live in block #9, but there’s an escaped murderer running around in that general area,” He whispered, eyes darting around.
“Wait, seriously?” I said, my stomach twisting into knots.
“Yes, seriously,” The man replied. He pressed a gun into my hand. The weird thing was, the gun felt natural in my hand.
“Listen to me. I need you to forget you ever saw me, forget this store, forget this town,” He pleaded, 
“Take the gun, it will protect you,” 
“Thank you,” I whispered, “I will forget everything. Be safe,” 
“Now hurry! Go before it is too late!” The man begged. 
I sprinted out the door. Before it closed behind me, I heard a gunshot. I whirled around in time to see the 
elderly man sink to the floor, a bloody hole in the back of his head. 
I turned back around and sprinted out of the store. I sprinted in the general direction of block #9, and 
when I couldn’t sprint any longer, slowed to a brisk jog. 
Before long, I entered the territory of the dreaded block #9. My heart was thudding. 
The houses were squat, one-story houses. The shutters were cracked or broken off, and the yards were 
nothing but burnt grass. The road reflected heat, sending heat waves. The sun was so powerful on my 
shoulders, it was painful. The sky was as blue as the ocean. I came along a house with green grass, and 
flowers everywhere. The shutters were still intact, and the house was gorgeous, if small. 
I smiled so wide my face hurt. My mother was always a gardener, coaxing life out of plants even in the 
blazing heat. 
My heart slowed a little. I walked up the unfamiliar porch. I knocked on the door tentatively. 
No answer. I knocked harder. Still nothing. 
Suddenly, it came to me. She loved to garden in our backyard. I walked around the side, and opened the 
gate. There was my beautiful mother, on her knees as always, planting a beautiful hydrangea. 
I let out a choked sound, and she whirled around. Her eyes lingered on me for a few seconds before she 
was on her feet, running toward me. 
She pulled me into a tight hug. I could barely breathe, but it was okay. 
“My baby, my sweet baby came home to me,” She whispered. 
After lots of hugging and crying, she brought me inside. I took a much needed shower and got some new 
clothes. 
Finally, I sat down with her. 
We talked about our lives, how I got here, why she came here. 
She told me that she was an undercover spy, and her cover was blown, causing her to have to fake her 
death in order to move here and stop this escaped murderer. 
Just then, I saw a shadow outside. 
“Mom, don’t look now, but there’s someone outside,” I whispered. She nodded, pulling out a gun from 
the pockets of her jacket. 
“One,” She mouthed. I nodded. 
“One… two…” I mouthed. 
“Three!” We shouted. We whirled around, facing the man who had just come in. We fired in sync. One 
bullet caught him in the head, one in the chest. He sank to the floor. 
“We did it!” I cheered. 
“We sure did,” She said, smiling. 
“So wait,” I asked, “How did you learn all of this?” 
“That’s for me to know, and for you to find out.” She winked. I laughed. 
We were interrupted by a rough knocking at the door. 
“We were interrupted by a rough knocking at the door. 
“Police! Open this door or we will be forced to open it ourselves!” I looked at my mom. She beckoned 
for me to sneak out the back. I followed. 
“Mom?” I questioned. She held her index finger to her lips. 
‘Follow me!’ She mouthed. She sprinted across her yard and opened a gate. I heard the police break 
into the house and explode out the back door. Bullets rained down around us. One grazed my calf. I 
screamed in pain. White spots danced around my vision. I hear my mother’s voice. 
“Run, Brooklyn! Run!” She yelled. I did. 
I sprinted. My calf was red-hot with pain. But I kept running. 
I ran out the back gate, toward the street. I stopped to catch my breath.
I looked around and didn’t see my mom anywhere. Until I heard the click of a gun’s safety coming off. I turned around, slowly.
To see the barrel of a shotgun pointed right between my eyes. The gun was in possession of my mother.
“Mom?” I asked, bewildered.
“I’m no mother.” She laughed evilly.
“T-Then, who a-are you?” I stuttered. She laughed.
“I’m her clone,” She said simply, “and your mother is dead.”
The word floated through my mind.
Dead.
Dead.
Dead.
Dead. Just as I thought her to be.
“Did she die in the car crash?” I asked, barely above a whisper.
“No,” She grinned, “I shot her dead myself.”
That did it. I lost it. I darted forward, snatched the gun from her grasp, and whirled it back around so I had the advantage.
“Oh, honey,” She smiled, but it didn’t reach her eyes. “Did you think I wouldn’t come prepared?” She pulled out a gun from the back pockets of her jeans.
“Go ahead,” I snarled, “shoot me,” I didn’t think she would.
Boy, was I wrong. Everything seemed to go in slow motion. I heard the bang, saw the explosion of gunpowder out the nose of the gun. It was a brilliant shot. She hit me square in the chest, piercing through my heart. I crumpled immediately, and didn’t get up again.
Now, I would go join my mother, wherever she was. Death. Such an ugly word.
Death.
Death.
Death.
The word had become my life.
Death.
Death.
Dead.
I was dead, as were my mother and Andrew, and lots of other people that I loved, and we are never coming back.
Death. Such an ugly word. Death.

Excerpt: See Appendix for Full Novella
Repeated yellow lines blur my vision. I sit in a daze, staring into the abyss, and do not think. I am silent. The air is warm and carries the white noise of the world around us. For hours we remain complacent. Our heads and minds remain distant from each other. Only the differing surroundings break up the constant drive. Snow dusted trees surround us. Barren rock engulfs us. We flow through the mountain and emerge from the frigid temperatures. A place that once connected us, and shared our love now reveals the differences between us. I am no longer the little girl running to you, wrapping my arms around your leg and begging to be held. I do not cry out for you after my nightmares, or ask you to tuck me into bed. You are no longer the father around me, guiding me, and holding my hand. You have not been for years, but those years have passed in a blur like the yellow lines dividing us.

I stare at my clouded reflection in the dirty windows and replay the images over in my mind. I feel a twinge in my heart as I realize I will never be a young girl again, wild with excitement to see you. My pain only lasts for a moment. I return to a deadened state; one learned from you. With time and distance, my connection to you and the outside world diminished. Mother wants more, and sometimes I do too. However, I know that too much time has passed, and the life I live is distant from yours. You have gone and created a new life separate from ours. I have done the same. Though we act similarly, the DNA we share no longer binds us. Mountains, rivers, trust divides us. A box sits in my closet with images of us. Memories held together by scratched glossy images sticking to each other. Our images are not placed in a beautiful scrapbook. We never put in the time in our relationship to scrounge up something that was worth filling an entire book with. There are not enough moments to preserve with the intimacy of a photograph.

For the entirety of the drive, the words spoken between us are few, cold, superfluous. I could not expect different when the years pass in a similar fashion. Soon we arrive at the airport and I exit the car after hours of silence. I struggle with my cumbersome luggage and search for my ticket. You do not help me anymore like when I was a child. I was unable to handle the luggage you gave me then. However, now I am older. Your attention and assistance is not a necessity, only a luxury I tend to desire. For a moment I want to run to you, wrap my arms around you and return to my childhood. Yet, I ignore the weight in my stomach and focus on securing my purse around my body.

We exchange brief smiles before I take a breath, say goodbye, and return to the cycle of abandonment.
You, my favorite jeans, will always be remembered. We have spent quality time together. We have laughed, cried, and done almost everything together. You have been literally and figuratively by my side at almost all times. Your gentle touch remained a constant in my life throughout the mass chaos. I am thankful for our time together, and I know that we will always share a close bond. You gave me something I can never repay. You were a wonderful supportive friend, my partner in crime. Together, we survived high school.

It all started freshman year. You were lonesome, abandoned by someone who once said they loved you. However, you soon learned of the cruel reality that is relationships. Some must come to an end sooner than others. We found each other though. So, we must be thankful for the opportunity to meet. I found you when I was not looking. You were hanging out with all of the other jeans in the second-hand store. You looked sad to be there. I knew you did not deserve to be left for another night in the dark aisles of that depressing stuffy building. I decided then that I would give you a chance. I was hopeful for something new and exciting. I took you into my arms and then fell in love. Your strong character and gorgeous appearance enveloped me and I could not let go. Now, four years later, I am ever grateful for our strong connection and sentiment.

You were by my side through it all. We endured the dark and ominous hallways of imprisoning high school. Your touch reminded me that I had something special, and our relationship helped me gain confidence in myself. Your strong material lifted my spirits and bottom, providing me with a perky attitude, and derriere. Even when I grew, you did not judge me or quit supporting me. With each experience and pound gained, you still remained loyal by my side. The elasticity and unconditionality of your love were incredible. I’ve never had such a supportive friend grow close to me like you. We were two peas in a pod some might say. Cheesy, I know… but we were inseparable. I despised the days when we had to leave each other, and the nights we spent apart. You never complained of seeing me too much, and that secured for me that we were perfect together. Nothing could take away our love.

However, as time goes on, relationships change. We evolve and change ourselves. I knew that we could not last forever. Yet, our love story ended too quickly. We were going to be together in college. I just knew that we would, and I never fathomed that we would be broken apart so unexpectedly. I now miss the memories, possibilities, and compatibilities we had. I know I will ever find what I had with you with any other pair of jeans. What we had was unique. Only something seen in the one movie made about a pair of jeans. You, my sweet blue love, have left me blue and I miss you. I do not want to say goodbye, so instead, I will say, “See you soon dear friend. I love you.”
Boom! Mia’s eyes shoot open, her heart began to beat as fast as a hummingbird's wings. Her pale green eyes quickly scanned the darkness, searching for the source of the deafening noise. Panic consumed her as she sees absolutely nothing in her room. She grasped her teddy bear, its head hanging by a thread, and smiling in attempt to comfort her. Her room, a cold and dark place, fit with the rest of the house’s personal charm.

The house on Black Raven Court was constantly gloomy; the sagging roof tiles mixed with an overgrown lawn and a creaky black gate make all travelers on the sidewalk move to the other side. And the interior of the house was no different, completed with Victorian furnishing and a layer of cobwebs as an added bonus. The paint on the walls peeled with decaying loneliness and a sense of disease. The windows contained a layer of dust as thick as tar.

The appearance of the house was no match for the stories and tales associated with the family of the house. Murder. Betrayal. Jealousy. It was a pool of hatred, a diseased history that took a toll on the house itself.

Mia continued to search the room in desperation. The deafening sound of wood against metal screamed. Another clamor shook the house. Mia reached out for the small and slender black box next to her bed, her dull blonde curls wriggled like snakes. The small lime green and red lights flickered with anticipation. The box felt cool, like ice cubes, in her hand as she pressed the tiny button on top. A static frequency came through the box, as if it were a robot scanning for life. Her breath quickened as she scanned the room with the device. She clutched her hands, sweaty with desperation and shaking with anxiety. “Please, no. Please, no,” she whispered to herself.

A quiet siren erupted from the device. “Oh no!” Mia quietly stood upon the bed. “You need to leave,” she yelled into the darkness. The darkness sneered and glared, withholding its reply. “Please, leave now.” A thin and strained voice escaped from Mia’s lips: terrified. Then all at once, the siren grew to an astounding yell. Mia ran down the stairs like a gazelle, dodging the white sheets on the furniture, passing end tables, seeming to run through them.

She reached downstairs to find her father at the mantle. He wore a suit coat and pants. The room smelled like stale smoke as he gently drew his cigarette from and away from his mouth.

“Dad?” He stared longingly in the mirror, appearing to be in deep thought.

“Dad! They’re back! And near my room! Wha-what do I do-I-I’m scared.” He turned around. The glaring hole in his head was bleeding again. He must be reminiscing, thought Mia.

“Honey, they will leave soon. They will keep looking until they found something, but if we stay quiet, they’ll leave quicker.” His eyes, now black and empty, gazed towards her with a glowing compassion. Mia embraced him, his blood only further staining her white dress.

“Why don’t we go upstairs, baby doll?” Mia hesitated. “Why do they always come in our home?” Mia held her teddy bear tighter.

“Honeybear, it will be alright. Let’s go upstairs, they will go away.” He grasped her hand. Mia went with her father, gliding up the stairs. On top of the stairs stood the definition of Mia’s greatest fears. Mia squealed and grasped tightly to her teddy bear as if she were clinging to life. Two large men loomed over the two, holding cameras, fear flickered in their eyes. One of the men dropped his mouth and
screamed, sprinting down the stairs, the other followed suit. The men ran straight at Mia and her father. She squeezed her eyes shut, ready for the force of an elephant pummeling her. The men ran through them and a chilling blast of cold air hit their spines. Mia opened her eyes one by one, carefully looking for the men.

“See, what did I tell you?” The blood finally stopped dripping from his forehead. Mia shivered, “Yes Daddy, you were right.” She looked at the mirror. The annoying, dripping blood from her nose and ears tickled her neck. Mia turned around, catching a glimpse of the flowered vase through her father.

“How pretty?” she thought. “I miss flowers.”
The Games We Played
He tried to teach me magic. Not with spells, but playing cards.
He shuffled them until warm, but I let my seat cool to blue.
Yet we played other games. I remember
How our fingers leapt and mine would slip from the keyboard,
And the computer would glitch because his silk fingers glided too fast
To a secret music in the machine’s whir.
Some games were played by others around us,
Who guessed his parents found him education’s words and numbers
Then those players must have thrown stones at my heart
Because it was soft and hummed for days after.
Sometimes his eyes were stormy oceans,
And when they made rain, I sat alone with him.
I tried fishing for words in our own game
That we somehow both understood.
I never asked if he heard the stories about him
Or how he heard the binary sing.
But after I left, and after my chair grew cold,
I wonder how long he left our game out.

Our Story
When I am but shadow and memory,
Will my rippling laughter haunt your dreams,
My wild eyes cast stars in your mind?
Will I nest in the caverns of your secret heart,
My name breathless on your lips?
Or will my blood run cold in the streams our time?
Will I grope at the wall between our lonely worlds,
The hollowness of your name reverberating
Throughout my soul?
When our stars fused those years ago, why did they?
To light my yearning and let it die from waiting
For you, your colours, your call, your promise, your story:
The only story we never shared?
Why did I climb you like every mountain I have faced,
Turn deaf to the whirl of your perpetual spin?
Why are we both dusting, lost in the tangle of thoughts
And broken bits of my night garden?
You are morphing and melting like hot wax,
But I will always know your name.
You and I claimed the sky for our own
And lay breathless wondering if we would always belong to each other

**Your Song**
I love the song you’re singing
Though only echoes last
The word lingering on my lips
Are dissipating fast
How do you cup the starlight
If it slips through mortal hands?
Or grasp some gilded mem’ry
When it sinks through gulping sands?
The past is a distant orchard
When the world is barren, gray
Dry mouths do yearn for sweetness
Too ripe, the fruits decay
My cheek is stained with raindrops
For your song is nothing more
My longing is a surging sea
Come crashing on the shore
If I had but a choked up whisper
And music would live in me
It would pluck my every heartstring
With that old, worn melody

**Forget-Me-Not**
No matter how far apart our stars are scattered,
When your dance slows down, think of me.
Think of the laughter that rolled off our tongues.
Think of the promises we made for our futures.
Think of how our threads are tied together
In a fraying tapestry.

Remember me at least when you see those flowers:
Small as our time together,
And blue as the endless sky.
I plotted her death three years, two months, and 15 days ago. I was at the park that day, and fate would have it that she was, too. A bleak day, it was. Her syrupy brown hair blew across her face, eyes glinting as she pushed the shimmering strands behind her right ear. Her cheeks were blushed like ripe raspberries, and the chilled winter air danced across the tree branches and waltzed with the dried leaves being dragged against the sidewalk. In those few moments, life seemed to slow down, like a runner slowing to a jog while turning a corner. The world was blurry, unfocused, but she was clear like a crystal vase, perfectly sculpted, without any cracks. Our gazes met, her hazel eyes stitching through mine like a messy piece of patchwork, sloppily looping through me, poking at my edges, pulling me nearer to her. Sometimes I wonder if she, too, knew in that moment that someday I would be there to witness her last living breath. She and I became instantly inseparable, like the first time someone poured milk in cereal. We were two organisms living and breathing in symbiosis: we benefited from being around each other, and it seemed as if we both needed each other to live. In the beginning, no one was harmed. Really, for the past three years, two months, and 15 days, no one was ever harmed. But slowly, mutualism became predation, as is the natural order of being in love with your best friend.

I knew ever since that winter afternoon that I was in love with her, her creamy skin and seamstress eyes that stitched and wove and knitted themselves through every part of me. She saw I was vulnerable, in love with a girl like snow, cold and eerie and beckoning. It was never going to work between us; the love story of two girls in a winter park is too ominous to end well. So that day I took fate into my own hands and started preparing for the end. This is really all her fault, too, because I never asked to be there in the park that day, I never asked to see her, or for her to see me, or for her to attach herself to me like a parasite. I never asked to be here in this moment, clutching a bottle of poison pills and standing dry-eyed over a dead body. I did not ask to be the one who had to kill her best friend. But what other choice did I have? She was never going to love me. One of us had to die—she had to die.

There must be other options, they say. Move away, forget the girl, live your life with someone who will reciprocate your love. Or better yet, tell her how you feel, you never know, she might feel the same. They are ridiculous, they are ignorant, they are worse than the worst person you can think of. They do not understand my love. When you feel a love like mine, it doesn’t just flow out of you like beads of sweat on your forehead. When you feel a love like mine, even the most extravagant plane ticket can’t erase it. When you feel a love like mine, you know when you feel it back. She does not love me, so she must go. It’s that simple.

No one wants to kill the one she loves. Grief hangs heavy on your heart like the grayest cloud at dusk. No one wants to feel unloved. Rejection ignites a fire, pours gasoline on the wound, let’s the flames grow, and burns until it’s all turned to ash. And if you brush away the ash, you’ll see a sour word burned into the tender skin. Revenge.
As the pungent odor of the lumpy, pale mush known as “oatmeal” invades my nostrils and the daily screech of Tommy, my next door neighbor in Room 4C, pierces my ear drums, I know it’s almost time. My eyes flutter open, and I peel my blue blanket from my body only to be hit by a chilling breeze. My right foot becomes ice as I fail to find my one lost sock between my bed sheets. With no other option, I grab my bowl of slop left by my door and crawl back under my sheets to stay warm until they come. Every morning the big men in white coats come into our rooms and connect these wires to our heads to make us feel like we are being struck by lightning. I call it lightning time because I want to be like Captain Marvel when I grow up. He, too, was a foster child, until the Wizard struck him with a lightning bolt and granted him powers to fight for the good of others. In each shock, I feel more powerful, but Tommy still hates it. The men in white coats say the lightning will free the monsters from our brain, but I think the lightning will just make us stronger to fight the monsters off. I devour my oatmeal as quick as I can so that I can show Dr. Rothenburg my empty bowl; he always gives a lollipop to anyone who finishes their oatmeal by lightning time. Peering around my room, everything’s in place: the cracked white boxes on the floors that I use for hopscotch, the half-written messages in black sharpie on the white walls, and the animal scratches on the thick metal bars of the four-square window. From what I can see, grey fills the air for the tenth cloudy day in a row, so I use my nail to cross a line through my other 4 tally marks on the wall. I start tracing my finger around each letter of my name that I carved into the wall next to my bed; JA K-- until I hear my door knob fiddle. As soon as I hide my name on the wall behind my Captain Marvel action figure, my Wizard, Dr. Rothenberg, comes into my room. I have seen him everyday since coming to this place last year, but I don’t know him very much--I don’t even know what his favorite color is. Suddenly, a woman in a blue floral dress and a short white coat barges in my room with sweat layering on her forehead, and her chest inhaling in and out rapidly.

“It's your first day here at this institution, Ms. Williams, don't make it be your last,” comments Dr. Rothenburg. She swallows a dry breath and nods three times, and then our eyes meet.

“I’m Ms. Williams, the new nurse, it’s a pleasure to meet you.” She reaches out her hand, which gleams from the sliver of light from the window. The sun just came out. A lightning shock invades my whole body as our hands embraced; my hairs on my arms are woken up, and goosebumps cover my skin. I feel my heart thumping against my chest. She might be the one I’ve been waiting for. Dr. Rothenberg looks at her as if she’s knocked an antique vase over and brings her out in the hall. With my hand cupped around my ear and cheek pressing against the door, all I can make out is yelling and apologizing. The thumps of Dr. Rothenberg’s black boots approach my door, so I lunge for my bed and start playing with Captain Marvel to pretend I wasn’t eavesdropping.

“Jake, are you ready to begin?” Dr. Rothenburg asks. I nod furiously which makes Ms. Williams smiles like my mom did on my first day of first grade: wide, welcoming, and perfect. Ms. Williams reaches for the circular red and blue stickers and starts individually placing them around my head, sometimes accidentally touching strands of my black hair with her fingers. Her body is less than a foot away from me. Rosemary perfume, I recognize: the same my dad always bought my mom for Christmas. She's short like of my older sisters, and she has dark brown hair tucked behind her ears that hold up her dark purple glasses. I can tell they are too big because she keeps having to push them up. Dr. Rothenberg notices my empty oatmeal bowl, and tells Ms. Williams to give me a lollipop from the jar.
“Which color one do you want,” she asks. I stay frozen like a deer caught in the headlights. “My favorite color is blue so I always choose the blue one,” she added. She’s the one. My thoughts are interrupted by the beeps of the machine.

“Okay, 3. 2. 1,” counted Dr. Rothenburg. The sharp vibration snakes through my whole body, electrifying each bone. The tears well in my eyes, but I am refusing to release them. One step closer to Captain Marvel. The new woman keeps shifting her weight back from her left foot to her right while looking anxiously around the room. In my delirium, I smile weakly at her, and then drift slowly into a deep sleep.

The children stampeding down the hallway snap me into consciousness again. It must be lunchtime. As I dodge through the swarm of kids, I use the height of my tiptoes to find the blue floral dress. My heart races as I spot her alone with her red tray, an untouched mystery meat, and an blue unopened carton of milk. As I occupy the seat next to her, she says, “Oh, hello, Jake.” She remembers my name; a good lighting feeling strikes through my body again.

Over the next several days, our encounters are short, but the feelings are stronger than ever. Sometimes she sneaks me extra desserts or we play board games during lunch time. From her walking in the building at 6:02 am on average to her leaving at 6:34 pm on average, those minutes we have together are blissful, and she makes me finally feel the power Captain Marvel has.

Already awake and talking with Captain Marvel, I hear the screech of Tommy, and I smell the oatmeal. Lightning time is soon. Be patient, I tell myself. I look over at the new set of tally marks; three for the blue floral dress, two for the red polka dot, and three for the black and white. The door handle fiddles; it feels as if a speaker is attached to my heart as it pounds. Dr. Rothenberg walks in, but no one follows. She must be running late. Car problems most likely. Dr. Rothenberg starts lightning time, but not even that can keep me from looking at the door. Too caught up in wondering where Ms. Williams is, I barely flinch when the lightning strikes. My mom used to let me stay home from school when I got sick; I think Ms. Williams is just having a sick day.

I don’t look for her like usually do at lunch because I know she won’t be there. In line waiting for what looks like green slime with a side of carrots, my heart pops out of my chest when I see a bright yellow floral dress from across the room. After getting out of line, I rush over to talk to her, but she is talking to Tommy. If she was here the whole time, why didn’t she want to see me? She must have forgotten. She would never purposely ignore me. I will just ask her tomorrow when I see her for lightning time.

Awake even before the slope is placed in my room, all I hear is the sound of the ticking from the clock. Tick-tock. Tick-Tock. Staring at the white ceiling above me, I wait for what feels like forever. All of a sudden, Dr. Rothenberg walks in. Waiting to see a brightly colored dress, no one appears and my heart sinks like an anchor.

At lunchtime, I search all around the room for her. A billion knives stabs through my heart when I see her talking to Tommy, yet again. Does she love him over me? What does he have that I don’t? Maybe she’s being forced to talk to him. What if he’s threatening her? Does she need my help? The monsters are back and they don’t want me to be with her. They don’t want me to have any love in my life, which is why they invaded my parents soul three years ago. The monsters that took my parents are back, but now they are in him; I need to save him before he gives the monsters to her.

By 6:30 am, while I wait for lighting time, my oatmeal bowl lies by the door untouched and Captain Marvel tells me a story about him saving his family from the giant robots. Something is missing though, there is no scream coming from 4C. Relief floods my body; Ms. Williams is safe.

It has been three days since she last spoke to me. Why has she stopped being my friend? She stopped talking to me, stopped bring me desserts? She loves me. I know she does. I just know it. Tommy can’t hurt her anymore. She should be thanking me. Oh no, they must be inside her now. I know what I have to do, Captain Marvel says it’s the only way to save her from the monsters.

On Sundays, Ms. Williams works the night shift and often stays in an empty bedroom on floor two where she can rest. Because every minute in crucial, I escape from my room to find her. I knock on 37 doors before I see the purple glasses and round blue eyes. Ms. Williams only opens the door slightly. “What are you doing here, Jake?” asks Ms. Williams cautiously.
I use all my lightning strength to push the door through Ms. Williams until I find myself in her room. “Don’t worry Ms. Williams, I’m here to protect you.” I lock the door.
Anne Shore, Holocaust survivor, says, “The fear was unbearable at times. When the wind was blowing, we heard sounds from all directions. The rustling of branches and bushes and the barking of dogs always frightened us, and we would stop and listen to hear if someone was coming. We were always on the alert” (Greenfeld 10). 6 million Jews dead, in a matter of years between 1933-1945. Not only is this an astounding number, but the causes of these deaths are immoral and inhumane. Fear took over victims’ lives, and it prevented them from ever living a normal life- if they survived. Their fear was not knowing whether they would die that week, the next day, or in a matter of hours. Their fear was not knowing if they had any family left after they were taken from their homes. Their fear was not knowing if anyone would be willing to save them. It got to the point where staying alive was a challenge for them.

One person is the ultimate cause of this movement which took so many people’s lives. Adolph Hitler, chancellor of Germany, is the most imperative person who led the Nazis in an attempt to exterminate all the Jews he could. The United States took little part in this from the start, and many people can’t help but ask why the United States didn’t do more to dampen the effects of the Holocaust. Truth is, the United States could have at least made an effort to help those in need. The United States could have done a lot more to lessen the results of the Holocaust in many ways, such as they could have dropped bombs on the concentration camps, accepted more refugees into America, and destroyed trains or railroad tracks to prevent, or at least slow, the transport of Jews to concentration camps and alleviate the results of the Holocaust.

The potential bombing of the concentration camps has been debated since the Holocaust happened. There has been much controversy if the United States should have bombed the concentration camps or not. However, the United States could have in fact bombed the concentration camps during the Holocaust, or at least tried to, and there is evidence that proves it could have been possible. Several eye witness testimonies have said we had full ability to bomb the death camps, but did not. Some people might say if we did bomb the camps, it would only partially solve the problem. Although this is true, bombing the camps would have been better than doing nothing, and people in the camps would at least know the Allies knew what was going on, and weren’t abandoning them to their fates. Bombing the camps would make it so that the camps would be dysfunctional, and it would make it extremely difficult for the camps to run properly. Therefore, less people would have been exterminated at the hands of Hitler and the Nazis. Although the bombers would have to be incredibly precise, it still would make a big difference even if the Allies only partially disrupted the concentration camps. Yehuda Bauer , Israeli historian and scholar of the Holocaust, says, “The failure to authorize such a bombing was a moral failure of the first degree” (Goodreads 2017). He feels that the United States should have tried significantly harder to make a difference during this time. All in all, this concludes that the United States should have bombed the concentration camps because it would make a difference (even if it was a slight one), and it would have let the victims know that somebody actually cared about their futures and wanted to do something help.

Another thing the United States could have done to help the Holocaust victims could have been accepting more Jewish refugees in to the United States. Instead of helping them, the United States did not accept as many refugees as they should have. Countless numbers of Jewish refugees wanted to come to the United States to escape the Hitler and the Nazis, but they were not able to because the United States
would not let them come in. The 1924 Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) had imposed extremely tight limits to immigration to the U.S., and the limited quota for immigrants from Germany was not loosened in the 1930s, despite growing American awareness of the systematic discrimination, mass imprisonment, and state-sponsored violence against Jews in Nazi Germany. If anything, the U.S. State Department imposed additional bureaucratic hurdles by insisting on documents that refugees could not provide without exposing their plans to German authorities, such as the requirement that they secure certificates of good conduct from the German police. Some people might say that the reason that the United States should not have let refugees in is because there is the possibility that they could be spies. Although this is true, there are ways to determine whether a person is a spy or not. Accounts of there being spies in other countries does not mean that the United States should not accept refugees. This controversy is the same thing that is happening today. The United States is in fear of letting spies into the country, but there are people who do need to be let in because it could save their life. As it can be shown, hundreds of thousands of Jews could have been saved if the United States would have just accepted the refugees into the United States. It would have saved countless lives and it would have helped to dampen the effects of the Holocaust by drastically reducing the number of deaths.

Yet another way United States could have done more to alleviate the effects of the Holocaust is that the United States could have made an effort to bomb the railroad tracks that trains carrying Jews to concentration camps would use. Bombing these tracks would slow the transport of Jews, which would save countless lives. Even though it may not solve the problem completely, it would have been better than not doing anything about the current situation. There has been a historiographical question about the U.S. response to the Holocaust by refusing to take military action to destroy the extermination camps in Eastern Europe and the railroad lines that transported their victims to the camps. The U.S. had solid evidence after 1942 that the Germans had embarked on a massive campaign to exterminate the Jewish population of occupied Europe. Yet destruction of the Nazi machinery of death never became part of American military agenda during the war. This can be connected back to bombing the concentration camps. As with the concentration camps, the railroad tracks were able to be bombed, too, but the United States would not do anything about it although they had the ability. It seemed as if the United States didn’t even care what was going on in Europe at the time. Not caring about this cause is inhumane and it was extremely selfish of the United States to not think about the idea of bombing the railroad tracks leading to the concentration camps. It would have significantly helped to alleviate the effects of the Holocaust, and it would have at least shown that the United States cared enough to take action.

Overall, there has been much controversy on whether the United States could have, or should have done something to dampen the effects of the Holocaust. Some say that it was right of the United States to stay out of it, but others think that the United States should have done more to help the innocent lives of the Jewish people being killed in concentration camps. Truth is, the United States could have at least made an effort to attempt to dampen the effects of the Holocaust, but they didn’t. Some people might question why we need to care about the Holocaust in this day and age. As it turns out, the Holocaust can teach us things today that not a lot of other things can. For example, the Holocaust provides one of the most effective subjects for examining basic moral issues. A structured inquiry into this history yields critical lessons for an investigation into human behavior. It also addresses one of the central mandates of education in the United States, which is to examine what it means to be a responsible citizen. By studying and understanding the Holocaust, people can come to the realization that silence and indifference to the suffering of others, or to the infringement of civil rights in any society, can—however unintentionally—perpetuate these problems. It can make people realize that being a bystander is not going to help a situation and you need to do something about it if something wrong is being done. Being informed about the Holocaust can also make people come to the realization that The Holocaust was not an accident in history; it occurred because individuals, organizations, and governments made choices that not only legalized discrimination but also allowed prejudice, hatred, and ultimately mass murder to occur. Learning about this can help students to understand the roots and ramifications of prejudice, racism, and stereotyping in any society, and also to develop an awareness of the value of pluralism and an acceptance of diversity. These are all valuable life skills that will help people later on in life. The Holocaust has many
things to teach us, and that is why we should all care about this important period in history. The United States should have cared a long time ago, when the Holocaust was actually still going on. The United States could have bombed concentration camps, accepted more refugees into the United States, and they could have also made an attempt to bomb the railroad tracks leading to the concentration camps. All in all, the United States could have done a lot more to alleviate the effects of the Holocaust, and they had the chance to save countless lives of those killed at the hands of Hitler and the Nazis. Although the United States was fully aware what was going on at the time, they only cared enough to be bystanders to it all.
Every reader of *Pride and Prejudice* celebrates the happy endings of Elizabeth and Jane, the two eldest, most beautiful Bennet sisters, but few recognize the struggles of Austen’s less physically fortunate female characters. While Elizabeth and Jane weep and gripe over finding happiness in marriage, Charlotte Lucas and Anne de Bourgh have trouble catching the eye of any man at all. Through Charlotte and Miss de Bourgh’s lack of romantic success, Jane Austen implies that lack of physical beauty impedes a woman’s finding an admirable partner in marriage, particularly because beauty has a disproportionately powerful effect on men’s attraction to women.

Charlotte Lucas’s plain looks undermine her amiable personality, and to the Elizabeth’s dismay, she settles for a man who will not make her happy. At the beginning of the story, Charlotte is introduced for her charms, such as being “a sensible, intelligent, young woman” (11). More importantly, Charlotte is “Elizabeth’s intimate friend”: the two live in neighboring estates (which also suggests that they are of similar wealth), and they have been close for so long that Charlotte calls Elizabeth “Eliza,” as if they were family (11). The one major difference that separates the friends is physical appearance; Elizabeth is “in Hertfordshire… a reputed beauty,” whereas Mrs. Bennet reveals Miss Lucas’s ordinary looks when she discusses with Charles Bingley: “‘It is a pity [the Lucas girls] are not handsome!’ ‘She seems a very pleasant young woman,’ said Bingley. ‘Oh! dear, yes - but you must own she is very plain. Lady Lucas herself has often said so, and envied me Jane’s beauty’” (181, 30). Charlotte’s sensibility and plainness, in combination with the Lucases’ modest social standing, give her a realistic outlook on her romantic prospects, so despite that “Mr. Collins to be sure was neither sensible nor agreeable; his society was irksome, and his attachment to her must be imaginary,” Charlotte accepts his hand in marriage (85). She is grateful to have secured, at least, a financially comfortable position in life: “Marriage had always been her object… This preservative she had now obtained; and at the age of twenty-seven, without having ever been handsome, she felt all the good luck of it” (85). However, when Charlotte relays the news of her engagement to Elizabeth, she bursts out, “Engaged to Mr. Collins! my dear Charlotte—impossible!” (86). Expectedly, Elizabeth cannot empathize with Charlotte’s desperation, having earlier rejected Mr. Collins herself, even though it meant losing Longbourn after her father’s death. Elizabeth’s criticism of Charlotte’s decision stems from her high moral standards, as disclosed when she later rants privately to Jane, “The woman who marries him, cannot have a proper way of thinking. You shall not defend her, though it is Charlotte Lucas. You shall not, for the sake of one individual, change the meaning of principle and integrity, nor endeavoring to persuade yourself or me, that selfishness is prudence, and insensibility of danger, security for happiness” (93). Now, Elizabeth feels “persuaded that no real confidence could ever subsist between [Charlotte and herself] again” (89). Their friendship falls apart because while Elizabeth’s beauty will attract more men to come, Charlotte realizes that marrying Mr. Collins is her only option, regardless of whether or not it is morally pleasing.

Not only do looks take priority over Charlotte Lucas’ personality, but also over Anne de Bourgh’s great wealth and social standing, and even the man to whom she has been engaged since childhood does not want to marry her. The first introduction of Anne de Bourgh’s admirable socioeconomic situation is given by Mr. Wickham, who also relays her arranged marriage with Mr. Darcy: “[Lady Catherine de Bourgh’s] daughter, Miss de Bourgh, will have a very large fortune, and it is believed that she and her
cousin [Darcy] will unite the two estates” (57). However, Miss de Bourgh’s fortune is later superseded by several observations on her poor appearance, such as when Maria exclaims upon seeing her for the first time, “Only look at her. She is quite a little creature. Who would have thought she could be so thin and so small?”, and when Austen objectively confirms that “Miss de Bourgh was pale and sickly, her features; though not plain, were insignificant” (108, 111). Accordingly, Elizabeth develops a mindset that Miss de Bourgh’s lack of beauty renders her an equally disagreeable partner as Elizabeth’s first impression of Mr. Darcy: The first time that Elizabeth sees Miss de Bourgh, Elizabeth remarks to Maria, “She looks very sickly and cross. —Yes, she will do for [Darcy] very well” (108-109). Only one man, Mr. Collins, can overlook Miss de Bourgh’s physical shortcomings, and he boasts that “Lady Catherine herself says that, in point of true beauty, Miss de Bourgh is far superior to the handsomest of her sex, because there is that in her features which marks the young lady of distinguished birth,” which suggests that hereditary distinction overpowers plainness—the opposite of Elizabeth’s thinking (46). However, Mr. Collins’ judgment is far from reliable, since his incessant praise of Lady Catherine de Bourgh proves to be extremely exaggerated, if not false altogether. Otherwise, no man displays any interest in Miss de Bourgh, not even Darcy; during Elizabeth’s stay at the Parsonage, she carefully watches Darcy to gauge his level of interest in his cousin, and to her satisfaction, “Neither at that moment nor at any other could she discern any symptom of [Darcy’s] love, and from the whole of his behaviour to Miss de Bourgh she derived this comfort for Miss Bingley, that he might have been just as likely to marry her” (120). At the end of the story, amidst Lady Catherine’s vicious protests, Darcy marries Elizabeth, whom he declares “one of the handsomest women of [his] acquaintance” (181). In spite of Miss de Bourgh’s riches and connections—and Elizabeth’s lack thereof—Miss de Bourgh, for the sake of beauty, is deprived of her fairytale ending.

By contrast, Jane Bennet has an easier time finding a suitable husband since she is beautiful, even though in many aspects, she is a significantly less qualified partner compared to Miss de Bourgh. Austen informs us repeatedly of Jane’s beauty, such as when Mrs. Bennet tells the story of Jane’s very first admirer: “When she was only fifteen, there was a gentleman at my brother Gardiner’s in town, so much in love with her, that my sister-in-law was sure he would make her an offer before we came away” (30). The aforementioned man does not end up marrying Jane, which makes a later, more important courtship possible—Charles Bingley, a “good looking and gentlemanlike” “single man of large fortune; four or five thousand a year,” is instantly attracted to Jane (6, 1). Before he has had the chance to talk with Miss Bennet, Bingley dances with her—twice!—at the ball he is hosting, and even Darcy admits that she is a “handsome girl,” to which Bingley elaborates, “Oh! she is the most beautiful creature I have ever beheld!” (7). Bingley and Jane’s blossoming romance is received without surprise by the townspeople—as demonstrated when Mrs. Bennet brags to Lady Lucas “freely, openly, and of nothing else but her expectation that Jane would soon be married,” and the news travels without much fanfare to Sir William Lucas, who lets slip in front of Darcy that “Bingley’s attentions to [Jane] had given rise to a general expectation of their marriage… as a certain event”—despite that Jane’s fashionability is tarnished by working-class relations on her mother’s side, and her dowry, like any other Bennet daughter’s, is only five thousand pounds (68, 134, 206). Even when Lydia Bennet brings shame to her sisters through her “infamous elopement” and “patched-up” marriage with Mr. Wickham (“Every thing must sink under such a proof of family weakness, such an assurance of the deepest disgrace,” Elizabeth agonizes), Bingley’s attraction to Jane is undeterred; as soon as the two rediscover each other’s company, Elizabeth notices “how much the beauty of her sister re-kindled the admiration of her former lover… He found her as handsome as she had been last year” (240, 226). Soon after, Bingley proposes to Jane, and she declares herself the “happiest creature in the world” and exclaims, “Oh! why is not every body as happy?” (232). The reader is reminded yet again of Miss Bennet’s defining trait of beauty when Austen pairs it with joy: “The satisfaction of Miss Bennet’s mind gave a glow of such sweet animation to her face, as made her look handsomer than ever” (233). Ultimately, Jane’s impressive looks overcome her meager dowry and inferior relations, securing her a happy marriage with Mr. Bingley.

For women in Austen’s world, being beautiful or plain can secure or ruin one’s chances of happiness, but since society expects men—and not women—to lead relationships, looks have a smaller impact on
Colonel Fitzwilliam’s romantic endeavors. Firstly, throughout the entire story, only men are given the power to propose, as shown by both Elizabeth and Jane’s anxious anticipation about when their respective romantic interests will finally make their move. Additionally, women are expected to accept and gently encourage men’s affections; for example, Charlotte lectures Elizabeth that “In nine cases out of ten, a woman had better shew more affection than she feels. Bingley likes your sister undoubtedly; but he may never do more than like her, if she does not help him on” (13-14). The only female character in the entire book to consciously fend off a man’s interests is Elizabeth, who declines two proposals of marriage. Mr. Collins’ and Darcy’s reactions to Elizabeth’s respective refusals suggest the absurdity of marriage being a woman’s decision: When Elizabeth refuses Mr. Collins, he does not believe her to be serious, declaring, “It is usual with young ladies to reject the addresses of the man whom they secretly mean to accept, when he first applies for their favor… I am therefore by no means discouraged… and hope to lead you to the altar ere long,” and when Elizabeth refuses Darcy, he “seemed to catch her words with no less resentment than surprise. His complexion became pale with anger, and the disturbance of his mind was visible in every feature” (74, 129). On the other hand, society has no qualms about men turning down women. When Darcy breaks off his lifetime engagement with Miss de Bourgh, no one except Lady Catherine protests (out of her own selfish interests). Furthermore, Colonel Fitzwilliam is “about thirty, not handsome,” yet for a while, he and Elizabeth admire each other (116). Colonel Fitzwilliam makes the first move by sitting down next to Elizabeth, referred to as “Mrs. Collins's pretty friend [who] had caught his fancy very much,” and the two “conversed with so much spirit and flow, as to draw the attention... of Mr. Darcy,” who watches their interactions very closely, perhaps out of jealousy (117). However, the sparks are stamped out when the Colonel brushes off Elizabeth’s affections by dropping a hint that “Younger sons cannot marry where they like… there are not many in my rank who can afford to marry without some attention to money,” which also implies that he hopes to attract another, wealthier woman in the future (125). Colonel Fitzwilliam’s confidence in his ability to charm women despite his average looks, in addition to the fact that he has a reasonable opportunity to court Elizabeth in the first place, exemplifies how compared to women, men—homely or handsome—have more control over who they will marry, according to their wishes.

Jane Austen is not the only author who offers little happiness for the plain-looking women in her stories. Still in the 21st century, books and movies almost always feature gorgeous protagonists and love interests (perhaps in an attempt to woo the audience), whereas less attractive sidekicks and rivals—think Amber from Clueless, or The Perks of Being a Wallflower’s Mary Elizabeth—end up alone, dissatisfied, or worse, forgotten. The real world houses a wide variety of Jane Bennets, Charlotte Lucases, and Anne de Bourghs; due in part to storytellers’ skewed preference for Janes, fewer women really love their appearance compared to those who wish they could change. Today, rather than allowing attractive female characters to monopolize the limelight, writing that strives to represent life as it is should recognize that no matter a woman’s physical appearance, she can—and hopefully will—find her happy ending.

Works Cited
Carrie Zhang  
Grade 10  

Forgetting Hadley  
Poetry  

John Burroughs School  
Saint Louis, MO  
Teacher: Eleanor DesPrez  

It pulls me down,  
like a weight tied to my ankles.  
I am sinking,  
day by day,  
watching the light slowly dim.  
I am drowning,  
holding my breath as long as I can,  
escaping into the nothingness.  

There are people that smother me.  
They keep telling me that they pray for me,  
that my husband still loves me,  
that my daughter still calls out for me at night.  

But I cannot remember them.  
I cannot remember where or when I was born.  
I cannot remember who my parents are.  
I cannot remember anything.  

I try to show my mother the photos  
that I keep on my nightstand.  

I try to tell her that without her  
there is a gaping hole in my heart.  

I try to thank her  
for being my mother, my protector.  

I try to say  
You taught me how to make the boogeyman go away.  
Close your eyes.  
Count. One… two… three…  
and he will disappear.  

You taught me how to face mean girls  
who tugged at my choppy black hair  
who called me four eyes, slanting their eyes into slits,  
who asked if I knew karate and then shoved me to the floor.
You taught me how to be kind
to the ones that weren’t so lucky
to the ones that needed a shield
to the ones that let their lights flicker.

I try to say it all.
I shout
Remember me!
Hold my hand!
Tell me what to do!
But I have no one left to protect me.
I am alone.

The girl with the black hair cries,
her sobs rupture a hole in my heart,
her tears hit my skin,
cascading down her sweet face, like a river.

I am sorry.
I am sorry.

Before I drown, I want to breathe.
I want to feel the fresh crisp air of life.
But I can only inhale a breath of air
right before
I lose
the
light.

Please.
Remember.
I am your daughter.

I am Hadley.
I am Hadley.
Metal and Pain Pills

She stares at herself in the mirror. It's still her, she tells herself. A chunk of metal on her left side isn't going to change that. She's still the same General Mantha, conqueror of the Lost Sector, feared of enemies.

Her hair is short again, the formerly long bits sitting in the sink in front of her. It's a bright splash of color against the dull metal. She feels numb. A formerly lit cigarette that's burned down to just warm grey ashes in the bottom of a cold metal ashtray.

She has a meeting in one quarter-hour. She can hear the soft whine of the electricity humming through her metal arm. It drones through her mind and wipes out thoughts like a boot crushes out the last wisps of smoke on the pavement. She leaves the hair sitting in the sink and moves to get dressed.

There's something wrong with her, she knows. They did something to her mind when she was under and they were making her flesh into metal. She can feel something foreign swirling where her spine meets her skull.

The pain medicines kill more than the ache of surgery, if she takes enough of them. Two is what the doctor recommended, but she's never been good at following orders, only giving them. Four's a number she likes better anyway. She takes her pills with a shot of alcohol, something she shouldn't have but does anyway. She does a lot of things that she shouldn’t, these days.

She taps out a message to her commander that says something that she thinks means she won't make the meeting. It's the third one she's missed since the explosion that took half of her away. She has more important meetings to attend, like the one happening between her and the chair.

It's worn and soft, and the misplaced fabric staple that once dug into her left shoulder doesn't bother her anymore. She closes her eyes and drowns "Sir, we need to retreat," and "General, look out!" and "You're going to be alright, sir, you're going to be alright" beneath a layer of drug-induced sleep.

In the dark of her bunk, Lestin Mantha finds her own brand of peace.

When the lights come back up, and he comes to check on her, Captain Firrel finds his own worst nightmare. Needless to say, it is not a pleasant surprise.

At some point, she has fallen out of the chair and onto the floor. She doesn’t even stir when he says her
name. Her eyes are closed, and she doesn’t seem to be breathing. For a minute, all he can do is stare and feel the panic wash over him.

Then, he’s kneeling beside her, screaming into his comms for Stitches to come, to hurry. He’s rolling her onto her back and shaking her shoulders and shouting at her to wake up, to get up, and he’s checking for breathing and not feeling any air past his fingers and then Stitches is pushing him back and all he can do is watch as he carries her away. Even after they’re gone, he remains, sitting on the cold metal floor, staring at the spot where she used to be.

He’s not entirely sure when Six comes in. All he knows is that one moment, he’s alone, and the next there is a warm arm wrapped around him and a warm cup of something caffeinated in his hands.

“She’s gonna be okay, Firrel. Stitches has her. She’ll be alright.”

“What’s wrong with her?” His own voice sounds so small in the empty room.

“I don’t know. Stitches won’t say anything. I’m pretty sure he knows, though. He seems…”

He trails off, leaving the sentence to hang in the air.

“She scared me, Six. I thought,” he swallows hard, “I thought she was dead.”

“Nah, don’t worry.” Six nudges him playfully. “It’ll take a lot more than some sickness to get our general down. She’s too tough. I bet she’s telling off whatever it is as we speak for even daring to afflict her.”

Firrel smiles at the mental image of Mantha yelling at some oversized germ while it cowers in a corner. It’s stupid and comedic, but at that moment it’s exactly what he needs.

Together, sitting on the cold bunk floor, they find some strange brand of relief.

The peace fades slowly, and Mantha comes to by degrees. The dryness of her mouth, the ache in her skull, the dull chill of pain where metal meets flesh. Next is the sharp, quiet beep of a vitals monitor as it counts out her heartbeats and blinding lights that stab at her pupils. She squeezes her eyes shut again with a tiny moan. Her tired mind struggles to figure out why she’s in the medbay.

“Sir.”

She pries her eyes open again to see Stitches holding a cup for her. She reaches for it, but he shakes his head, pressing the straw against her lips instead.

“All of it.”

She drains the cup, and the water helps a little with the headache. There’s some strange aftertaste, undoubtedly some sort of medication. It’s bitter, and she frowns a little. He turns away to refill the cup, then sets it on the table next to her. His movements are stiff. She knows him well enough to see that he’s aggravated.

She would say something, if she had something to say, but her brain is still trying to work out why she’s here.
After a moment, he speaks, tone sharp.

“As of 0730 hours, you will be placed on a 6 week medication ban. This means you will not be allowed use of painkillers, muscle relaxants, or any other form of medication until the designated period of time is completed. Do you understand?”

She nods. It hurts her head.

“If you are found with any sort of medication or recreational drug in your quarters, or anything else that may affect your mental state, you will be subjected to immediate disciplinary action from the highest officer rank available. Do you understand?”

“Yes.” Her throat burns, and her voice is hoarse.

“At 0730 hours, your quarters will be subjected to a substance search. This is following orders from a commanding officer. You may not take any action following this should any personal items be missing or damaged. Do you understand?”

“Yes.” Her brain reels to understand, and she feels like a new recruit again, being berated by her captain for the first time. Only this time, she doesn’t know what she’s being punished for.

“By agreeing to this statement, you acknowledge that you have behaved in a manner that is deemed unseemly or criminal. You also acknowledge that you will receive punishment for this behavior, and will be unable to be assigned to any other post or mission until your punishment has been completed. Once disciplinary action has been taken, you will be allowed to return to your previous post or be reassigned. Do you understand?”

“No.”

Stitches blinks. “State your misunderstanding.”

“I misunderstand the causation of my punishment.”

He frowns, and his fingers tighten around the folder in his hands. “You have been found guilty of deliberate misuse of medical substances. You have been found guilty of possession of forbidden substances on a government vessel. You have been found guilty of use of forbidden substances on a government vessel. Do you understand?”

The world becomes crystal clear around her, and her chest tightens. “Yes.”

“Do you now understand the previous statement on disciplinary action?”

All too well. “Yes.”

“At 0730 hours, your medicinal substances ban begins. You are to stay in this room, on this bed until that time. That is an order. You will not be allowed visitors until that time. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“If there is a visitor inside this room before 0730 hours, you and the visitor will receive immediate
disciplinary action, no matter the intent of the visit. The disciplinary action will be taken by the highest ranking officer available. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“Good.”

With that, Stitches marches out of the room, leaving her alone to realize what it is exactly that she’s done. Her fingers grip the sheets tightly, and she closes her eyes and presses her head into the pillow. She can feel the choke beginning in her throat. The headache is slowly getting worse, and she turns to the window. The stars shine on, regardless of her crimes. She watches space go by.

Stitches comes back at 0730 to tell her the search of her quarters has begun. All she can do is nod. She knows what they’ll find. Two bottles of alcohol, bright pink hair lying in the bottom of the sink, and a half-empty bottle of pills that was supposed to last her another month and likely wouldn’t have made it a week. She wonders if her hair is as faded as she feels, now.

He sits with her when the report comes back. He doesn’t hold her hand, doesn’t even look at her, but he’s sitting in the room in a chair at her bedside as they expand the list of charges. She’s not sure if it’s forgiveness, solidarity, or simply a required presence. She can’t decide which one she’s hoping for.

They read the list of items of concern in a monotone voice. The two bottles are greeted by the three empty ones in the trash. Her prescribed pills shake hands with her own brand of medicine, which was too many cigarettes and not enough space. The hair isn’t a concern, but she knows that it’ll be brought up when she sits down for her psychiatric exam. She’s not looking forward to that, but then again she’s not looking forward to much of anything right now.

When they leave, Stitches stands to hand her the cup of water. There’s no taste this time. The ban is officially in effect.

“You didn’t do Firrel’s mental health any favors.”

“In my own defense, Firrel wasn’t supposed to find out.”

“No one was, I’m sure. You thought you’d pull the wool over our eyes and get away with it, didn’t you? You underestimated us, just like always. You just couldn’t think beyond yourself.”

There’s nothing to say to that. There’s nothing to say in general. She was wrong. They both know it. He’ll yell if he wants, but she knows that he doesn’t. Stitches has never been the type to yell.

At her lack of response, he sighs and stands up. “As of now, you are allowed visitors again. If any come for you, I’ll send them back.”

“What if I don’t want them?”

He looks at her, eyes flat and cold. “As a criminal, you are officially the lowest-ranking person on this ship. The recruit that’s scrubbing the entire ship with a toothbrush ranks higher than you. What you want is irrelevant.”

The word “criminal” hits her like a truck. She watches Stitches leave, watches the door close behind him, but the true seeing is obscured by that word, hanging low and large and heavy over the room. It hadn’t felt
criminal. It hadn’t felt wrong. But to them, it was, and so now she and the word are one.

For the first time in a while, she’s sure how she feels. It’s disgust and shock and shame and horror and fear. The fear is a strange taste in her mouth, and one she was not expecting, but it fits right in among the others and so she lets it stay. The fear of what they’ll do to her, the fear of never going back, the fear of the withdrawals and what her men are thinking and who is going to run the ship while she’s out hits slams into her to pin her to the bed. All she can do is stare at the ceiling and try not to hyperventilate as the tears stream down her face.

She hasn’t cried in years, and she can feel her carefully created bottles of emotions exploding inside her. Corks fly and the spray leaps upward like champagne that was shaken before opening. Everything streaks down her face at once, and she sobs to herself and finds the words “I’m sorry” on her lips. She’s got so much to apologize for, and she’s not sure if she’s apologizing to herself or her men or the universe but she doesn’t think it matters.

Then, she’s screaming, long and twisted with pain and sorrow and one million apologies that will never be enough. She grips bright pink hair that’s reminiscent of a happier time and screams out all the words that she can never say. The pain along her scalp is nothing compared to what she’s pouring into the room.

The screaming stops eventually, choked off by a need for air and a need to regain her sanity. This isn’t right, and it’s not how she should act. General Mantha does not behave like this.

But in the moment, before her ban has had a chance to affect her, she doesn’t feel like General Mantha. Her world is dissolving around her, and she doesn’t feel even human. All she is is metal and pain pills, and she’s coming apart at the rivets.
Nickels and Dimes

She spends her days picking up extra shifts at the five and dime by Schwan's. She sells stale bags of chips and overpriced water to "just passing through," and glares at the flickering fluorescent bulbs in the ceiling that management refuses to replace.

She spends her days dragging herself home, exhausted by the day's work. She hangs her coat and bag and drops a handful of "keep the change" into a bowl by the door. She sits on the couch with a beer and a cigarette and begins getting ready for the night.

She spends her days putting on cheap lip gloss and clumped face powder that would look terrible under natural lighting. It doesn't matter, no one can tell under the neon lights of bars and nightlife, and it's all going to get messed up anyway. Besides, she knows the colors will look good surrounded by red. She puts on clothes that are nice enough and goes to meet her client.

She spends her nights being murdered for extra cash.

It's not that she actually dies, no, that would be ridiculous. Death only happens once, and you don't come back. No, she just gets murdered by "I want to see if I have it in me" and comes back every time. It's just like falling asleep, and then a few minutes later she wakes up and walks back home to clean up. There's not even any pain anymore. The first few times she thought she felt something, but now there's just a strange emptiness and then nothing at all.

Her little business started innocently enough. She got mugged on her way home from work and "give me all your money" got a bit antsy with his gun and shot her on accident. She bled out in a back alley, gasping for breath and hoping that it wasn't the end. It wasn't, but not by the help of any good samaritan or passing aid. She just woke up with a bullet sitting beside her and blood all over her clothes.

The second time was a drowning. Some drunk hit her with his car and knocked her over the bridge. She wasn't even sure what had happened when she woke up, all she knew was that she was soaking wet and "oh my God are you okay" was far too in her face for her liking.

Since then, she's monopolized on her little talent, and made herself quite the sum doing it, too. Not just anyone offers to let you murder them. She didn't even mind being killed so much; she just knew that she could charge them more for her time than she could charge her boss.

Tonight, she's got an appointment with one James Stroth. Her heels click along the pavement, and she ignores "where you goin', baby?" and "damn, sugar, you lookin’ fine" and the wolf eyes and whistles that follow her up the street. It’s all about the picture when the murder’s said and done, and it’s satisfying to know that they will not be whistling when she walks back.

She takes her seat on a sticky bar stool and orders a drink purely out of formality. She carefully watches it being made, then lets it rest in front of her when the bartender slides it across the counter. A man sits down a few stools away a few moments later and orders a White Russian. That’s the code drink. She slides down the bar to take the seat next to him.

“Are you James?” She doesn’t believe it’s his real name, but she doesn’t care. She didn’t give him her real name, either.
“I am. Are you Rosemary?”

She nods. “I am.”

He takes a sip of his drink. The movement is fluid and beautifully even. She wonders how this one is going to see her die. She wonders what his reaction will be. Some of them are shocked, others horrified, and still, others will try to save her. Those are her favorites, because she always knows it’s a futile exercise.

“Shall we go? I’ll get your drink.”

He slaps some money on the counter and they both stand. Her heels click on the barroom floor as they make their way outside.

“Let’s walk for a while. I’d like to gather myself.”

She nods in agreement, and they turn left down the street. The wind tosses her hair behind her, and she pulls her coat a little tighter around her.

“I’ve heard of a lot of people like you. People who have abilities that they can’t explain. They’re all over the internet.”

She stays quiet.

“It’s so strange, what people will do once they’ve had a taste of the supernatural. Some check into hospitals or mental wards, some go out and commit crimes or try to stop them, and then there are the people like you, who use their little ability for monetary gain. It’s so interesting to watch, to see where they end up. For you, my dear, it seems like you’re going to end up dead in a back alley.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time.”

He smiles at her a little. “Do you mind if I smoke?”

“Not at all.”

“James” lights up, and the smell wafting by reminds her of work and her usual “pack of menthols” customers.

“Rosemary, if that’s your real name, I have a proposal for you.”

They turn a corner. “I’m listening.”

“Clearly, you’re desperate for money. You work a terrible job that doesn’t make a living. The only thing that’s allowing you to scrape by is a small community of psychopaths looking to try their hand at murder. That’s not much of a life.”

“It’s what I’ve got, and it’s done me just fine so far.”

“You could do a little more than ‘just fine,’ Rosemary, if you’ll hear me out.”

He takes another drag on the cigarette, and she watches the smoldering end eat the tobacco backward.
toward his lips.  "Nobody knows what’s going on with the people like you. Where did your abilities come from? Will they go away? How long have you had them? There’s a lot of people asking questions and a lot of people who’d like to answer them. I represent the latter.

“We’re asking for your help, Rosemary. We’d like to investigate a little further into your abilities, and in return you will be handsomely rewarded. You’ll be able to live nice and cushy for the rest of your life.”

“You’re going to pay me to be a lab rat.” Her words are as flat and cold as the concrete under her shoes.

“That’s a very undesirable way of putting it.” They make another left and walk between two buildings.

“But accurate. I’m going to pass.”

He sighs then and puts his cigarette between his teeth. “I was afraid you’d say that.”

Then, he’s swinging out at her. She leaps back. He follows, punches shooting toward her. Her steps are quick and hurried as she tries to dodge. Running is her best option.

She’s not quite sure what happens next. She remembers pulling the pepper spray from her bag. She remembers the glint of a knife in the moonlight. Suddenly, she’s standing over a dead body. There’s blood everywhere. She’s not wearing her shoes. Nausea hits her like a truck. She grabs her heels and runs.

She spends her days calling her boss and cancelling her shifts at the five and dime by Schwan’s. She sells stale lies to “your ass needs to be at work on Monday,” and empties her apartment of everything that she’s too poor to replace.

She spends her days running from her home, exhausted by the night’s events. She grabs her coat and bag and drops her collection of “keep the change” into a plastic bag as she walks out the door. She sits at the train station with her suitcase and a cigarette and begins crafting up her next life.

She spends her days putting in discount hair dye and fake earrings that she knows look cheap under natural lighting. It doesn’t matter, no one will be looking at her, and it’s all going to get changed later anyway. Besides, she knows the colors look plain compared to the people around her. She puts on clothes that are different enough and runs to the other side of the country.

She spends her nights trying to wash the blood off of her hands and lives with the knowledge that this time, it’s not hers.
Blessed

They were bones. No, not even bones. They were no more than paint smeared on an alley wall, lifeless shapes. They had no movement, no spirit, no soul. Just like everything else these days.

The paints mean something here in this dirty city, she was sure. Some direction finder to drugs or fights or whatever else you might have been looking for. She was only looking for the fish, and she had found them.

They could only be seen under a black light, but once she shone her homemade flashlight on them, they leaped out at her in bright blue hues. It is with hesitance that she reached for them. She didn't know if she could do it again. It was an accident last time.

With the tiniest of touches, the paint leaped off the wall, forming bones which swam by her face as if alive. She laughed as the thing swirled around her head. She was among the Blessed after all. The gods had answered her prayers.

She walked, heart high, spirits soaring. She could not wait to tell Diane.

"You did what?"

Diane did not take it as well as she had hoped.

"No. You absolutely did not bring it to life. You are not Blessed. You are lying."

She was baffled by her reaction, eyebrows furrowing in confusion. "Diane, I'm not lying to you. I brought it to life. Why does this bother you?"

"Shut up. Listen to me. Did anyone see you? Tell me no one saw you. We have to keep this a secret."

Diane ran a hand through her dark hair and paced across the kitchen floor.

"Sweetheart, calm down." She reached out a hand as if to forcibly settle her. "I'm going to the Chapel tomorrow, and they'll sort this out."

"No." Diane whirled on her. "You will do no such thing. I won't let you. I won't let-" She swallowed hard and turned away again, leaning against the counter.

"Diane." She stood from the table and made her way over to her girlfriend, taking her gently by the shoulders. "What's wrong? Why does this bother you so much?"

There was silence in the room for a long time. Finally, Diane spoke, voice growing louder as she continued, "I don't want them to take you away from me. They will take you and make you go to the war once you're trained. Then you'll die, and it'll all be over and-" She stopped herself mid-sentence once again, staring at her with shining eyes.

"Sweetheart, listen to yourself. You and I both know that hiding a Blessing is to insult the gods, not to mention illegal. I have to go."

"I know," she whispered. "I just wish you didn't."
When she stood in front of the Chapel the next morning, she remembered Diane's words. Part of her wanted to flee town, hide her gift, her Blessing. She was afraid. She did not want to go to war and die over a few fish. She wanted to take Diane and run as far as she could.

She did not. She stood her ground and knocked three times.

Looking back later, she would wish she had chosen otherwise.

A monk opened the door with an open smile. "Welcome, Blessed sister. Please, accept the shelter of the Chapel."

She stepped into the warmth of the building. Someone appeared to take her coat, and before she knew it, she was kneeling on a cushion at a low table, a small cup of tea in her hands. It smelled of cinnamon and clove, with a hint of orange.

A woman came to join her at the table, kneeling on the opposite cushion. Her hair fell around her in soft pink curls when she entered the room, but when she knelt, it flickered and became cascading green waves. Shape shifting. A fairly common Blessing.

"Greetings, sister. Welcome to the Chapel of the Blessed."

"Thank you." Uncomfortable, she flexed her fingers around the cup in her hand. It was plain white porcelain. Nicer than anything she'd owned in her lifetime.

"Please, drink some tea."

The other woman did not reach for a cup herself, instead opting to stare at her expectantly. Hesitantly, she took a sip. Flavor burst across her tongue, quickly accompanied by a strange, woozy feeling. It felt like her body had melted and was spreading across the floor. Dimly, she was aware of the cup falling from her hands, her back hitting the ground as she fell backward. The room was hot and cold and overwhelming, and the floor was pushing up at her while the ceiling came down to say hello.

Then, hands were on her, pulling her to her feet. A woman's voice bounced through her liquid skull, asking her about gifts and blessings and which ones were hers. It was too much all at once, and she reached out for a wall to steady herself. Instantly, she was met with a searing pain, and she cried out and peeled her hand away from the heat of the fire.

"Incredible," she heard the woman say, and the word rang through her skull like a church bell. It hurt and shook and she fell to the ground, clutching her head as if to stop her from speaking. She did not rise for a long time.

When she finally did, hours later, she was resting on a soft cotton bed. She rolled over and sat on the edge, bare feet brushing the cold stone. Someone had undressed her, placing her in linens instead of her usual wear. She wondered where her boots were.

Hesitantly, she opened the door and padded down the hall, looking for some food. The moon came in through stained-glass windows. It was absolutely beautiful, and she couldn't help but think that Diane would have loved this. The art, the architecture, everything about it.

She paused outside a cracked door. Light shone from inside, and she pushed it open to ask whoever was
still working where the kitchen was.

She found, instead, around a hundred people laying flat on cots, with needles stuck into their arms and suction cups covering their bodies. A colored smoke drifted up the tubes, settling into containers labeled things like “shape-shifting,” “healing,” and “hydrokinetics.”

They were draining people's Blessings. They were stealing them.

She screamed.

She could hear feet pounding down the hallway toward her, and panic filled her mind. They were going to do the same to her. Tie her down, stick her full of needles and take her blessing and maybe she'd die and then she'd never see Diane again and-

She cut off her panicked train of thought, and forced the heavy door closed, sliding the deadbolt to seal it. Safe for the moment, she surveyed the room again, trying to keep her breathing even. Some of the people's eyes were open, staring at her as though they were dead. It was unsettling.

She pushed one of the cots in front of the door as the people outside began to pound on it. She could hear muffled shouts, orders being given. Then, she heard a woman's voice. The same woman from before.

"Sister? Are you well?"

She froze, feeling something strange and cold in her chest. Something foreign and unwanted and entirely unfamiliar. Something wrong.

A voice whispered something about being able to wipe her if they could touch. Somehow, the words seemed to be both in her head and outside the door.

"Please, open the door, Sister. Let us talk as rational beings, and not resort to panic and instinct."

She could feel her feet begin to move toward the door of their own accord. She tried to fight, to stop herself, but it was not good. They had a manipulator controlling her actions from the other side.

Shaking fingers reached out to undo the deadbolt. Her heart hammered in her chest, fearing what she would happen to her. Her hand found the knob, turned, and pulled.

The door didn't budge.

She could feel the confusion and frustration through the connection, and she pulled on the door again. It kept smacking something and refusing to open like it was stuck.

She felt the unfamiliar presence recede, and a voice outside the door said, "It's no use. She's got something barricading the door from the inside, and I can't see through her eyes to move it."

"Very well." The woman did not sound particularly worried. "If she wishes to force our hand, then so be it. She has someone she cares about, does she not?"

A strange warm feeling, like smoke, spread through her mind. She could hear the telepath affirm the woman's statement, as well as rattle off an address.
Diane's address.

"Sister, I know you can hear me. We are going to go get your girlfriend. I hope, for her sake, you decide to be more cooperative."

A cold, pressing feeling settled in her chest. They were going to hurt Diane. They were going to manipulate her.
"Of course, what happens to her is up to you."

So, it was have her memory wiped of everything, or let them hurt Diane. The choice to make was apparent if she would have the guts to take it.

She just didn't know if she did.

She walked over to the shelves, where the jars sat, swirling with the Blessings of all these people. Her hand reached out to brush against the glass jars, feeling the variance in temperatures from blessing to blessing. Telepathy was slightly warm, pyrokinesis almost too hot to touch, emotional manipulation icy cold. Her heart hammered in her chest as she reached to pull one off the shelf.

"Ilya? Ilya what's happening? What are you doing?"

Her heart felt like it had stopped. Her body froze, hand outstretched, fingers just touching the glass. Diane was here.
"Honey, what's going on? Why am I here? It's late."

"Listen to me well, Sister." The woman's voice was hard and cold, and it sent a shiver down her spine. "You have a choice now. You may protect the person you love more than anything, the person you have cared for for many years now. Or, you can do something foolish and try to defend people who are not only strangers but beyond your help. It is your decision."

She stared at the jar in her hands, then looked around the room. She could see Diane's panicked face in her mind, dark blue hair hanging loose and messy, dark eyes wide with fear. Anger hit her in the chest. She couldn't let them hurt her, but she couldn't allow them to keep doing this to people. It was wrong.

Blessings were given to an individual, by the gods. Mortal men had no place deciding who was worthy of them. They had no place in decisions about Blessings at all. She had to save everyone, somehow.

She ran her fingers across the smooth glass of the jar. The label marked it as telekinesis, and it had a heavy, albeit comforting warmth. It seemed so inconsequential, just still purple smoke in a jar, but it represented everything that she was against. These people were not holy, as they claimed to be.

She wanted to wipe out their sin. She had to absolutely destroy it. It was wrong and inhumane and she could not allow it to stand.

Her eyes fell on a large cart of medical tools nearby.

"It takes sin to wipe out sin," Diane had told her once.

She knew what kind of sin she needed to become.
She pulled a needle and a hose off of the cart of tools. Her heart was pounding in her chest, and the woman outside was saying something unheard, trapped behind the roaring of blood in her ears. It sounds to her like the angry roar of the gods themselves.

The hose was attached to the needle, and with a deep breath, she pushed it into her arm. She uncorked the bottle and fitted the hose over the top opening. Slowly, the purple smoke began to filter up the tube. She watched it with trepidation, wondering if it would hurt if it would work if she was going to receive eternal punishment for this.

The smoke disappeared into the needle, and she could feel warmth spread through her veins. It's not so bad, she thought. She could handle this.

Pain slammed into her body. With a sharp cry, she toppled to the ground, clawing at the needle in her arm. It burned with the heat of a thousand suns, with the blaze of a thousand fires. It was a kind of pain she had never known before. Her mind went blank of everything except the pain. Dimly, she could hear Diane's voice at the edge of her consciousness.

"It takes sin to wipe out sin."

It wasn't what Diane was saying, but it was all she could hear. She whispered it to herself as the pain faded, and she became aware of herself. Someone was pounding on the door and crying, asking over and over if she was alright. At the moment, she really didn't know.

With a groan, she pushed herself up off the cold stone. Her head felt strange as if it had been stuffed with cotton. She pulled herself to sit on a nearby cot and waited for the last of the pain to fade.

"Ilya! Ilya, tell me you're okay! Ilya!"

"Which one of you did that? Someone needs to tell me what is going on in there!"

She pushed the voices away and focused instead on a quill sitting in front of her. She had to know if it had worked. She had to know if it was all for nothing.

The feather floated off the ground, and her face split into a grin. It had worked. She had become sin.

She stood, and made her way over to the door. The voices were still shouting on the other side, but she paid them no mind. They didn't matter right now. All that mattered was moving the cot, sliding the deadbolt, and turning the handle of the door.

The voices quieted on seeing her. For a moment, all anyone did was stare. Then, Diane had her arms wrapped around her and was sobbing into her shoulder, something about being scared and wanting to know what was going on. Gently, she rubbed her back and glared at the now pink-haired woman.

"Sister, I am glad you have seen reason. All of this will be explained. But first, if you would allow our telepath to assess your mental state, I would be very appreciative."

A red-haired man took a step toward her.

A voice whispered something about being able to wipe her, if they could touch.

She sent the telepath flying backward with but a thought. His head slammed against the wall with a
sickening crack, and he slid down and was still. Blood trickled down his neck.

"I'm not keen on having my memory wiped, but thanks anyway."

The woman's eyes flashed. "You dare to attack a Brother? It is a sin to attack the Blessed."

Her voice was even when she spoke again. "It is a sin to meddle in the affairs of the gods, Sister. Blessings are not for mortals to take or give at their will."

"I will see you exiled," the woman spat. "You will be an outcast, welcome nowhere. I will have you ripped from your home and tossed into the street, where you and your girlfriend will live the rest of your miserable lives like the filth that you are."

She blinked calmly. "I think you will have some difficulty with that."

With a thought, she sent the woman flying through a stained-glass window. Shards of glass went flying, and she covered Diane as much as she could manage. All was still for a long moment.

"I think you killed her." Diane's voice was small.

"I hope so."

"Where do we go now? We can't stay here. We'll be arrested, likely executed."

"We're going to run. Far, far away from this place."

"I think someone told you to do that from the beginning."

"She was right."

They walked, passing a mural of fish. It is with hesitance she reached for them. She didn't know if she could do it again. She had changed since the last time.

With the tiniest of touches, the paint leapt off the wall, forming a fish which swam by her face as if alive. Diane laughed as the thing swirled around her head. She was Blessed twice over now. The gods' wrath would be swift and harsh.

Walking with the woman she loved, she couldn't bring herself to care.
**Buried**

The first time she saw this sort of thing was on television. Some psycho started the “kidnap a loved one and bury them alive” trend, and now it felt like every other month she was praying for some friend to make it back alive. It had practically become mundane.

She realizes perspective depends on the side of the situation you’re in.

Right now she’s on the uglier side. The side that involves you in a coffin, with no memory of how you got there or where you are. All you know is that your captor likes to mock you, and there’s barely any room to move.

“How do you feel?”

The voice is back. She grits her teeth and hates the speaker.

“Fuck off.” The words come before she can stop them, and she’s broken her promise to herself in the first five minutes.

The voice laughs as if it knows this. It’s cold and hard.

“Trust me; this is much more entertaining.”

Her fists clench. The voice needs to shut up. Loathing joins rage and panic.

“Were you claustrophobic before?” It chuckles. “If not, you certainly will be by the time that this is over. That is, assuming you’re not dead. If all goes well, of course, you will be.”

She can feel the box around her. She hates it. She hates everything. All she wanted was those damn gummy bears. Now, she’s stuck in a box and buried alive.

“I’m going to give them the first hint, now.”

She refuses to respond.

Far away, a cell phone rings. It’s grabbed quickly, by rough hands that belong to a certain Casey Blatt, and answered.

“Ollie?”

“Not quite. Miss Green is…” The dark voice chuckles. “Buried in other matters.”

Brown eyes narrow in suspicion and budding anger.

“If you would be so kind, put me on speaker phone, please.”

“Is it good news?” Casey meets Mike’s eyes and shakes his head.

A button clicks. The voice filters out of the speakers to permeate the room.
“I’m sure you know the drill by now. I almost wanted to do something unique for my debut, but ‘buried alive’ is such a classic.”

“You son of a-”

“I’d pipe down if you want your riddle.”

Leo’s hand slaps over Jason’s mouth. “Go ahead. We’re listening.”

The voice chuckles a little. “I can run, but cannot walk. I have a mouth, but cannot talk. I have a head but never weep. I have a bed but never sleep. What am I?”

The call ends from the other side. The red icon is still flashing when Donna breathes, “A river. A classic riddle for a classic crime.”

They share a look. “The Hudson.”

They run for the car.

She can’t see anything. It’s dark in her coffin and too cold. She wonders where she is. She doesn’t think she’s too far outside of the city; not enough time has passed for her to have been transported, by her internal clock.

She wishes she could roll over. There’s a trapped feeling spreading through her limbs. There’s just enough room to cover her face with her hands, and she does as if it will make her feel safer. It doesn’t, but she pretends.

“Feeling claustrophobic yet?”

She presses her fingers against her eyes and watches the sparkles spray across her eyelids. Thoughts should be kept at bay. They’ll only make her panic. Panic wastes oxygen.

“Maybe you were already claustrophobic, though.”

It’s hard with that voice always in her ear.

She’d sworn not to talk to it. Talking takes up too much air. She needs to conserve every bit. She has to have faith and give her friends as much time as she possibly can.

Her hands are beginning to shake. She hates this.

“Your breathing is sounding a little uneven. I’m going to go out on a limb and say you were claustrophobic before I stuck you in the box. I wonder why? What made you so scared, hmm?”

The voice is pressing all the wrong buttons. If only she could find that damn speaker. She wants it to shut up. She wants it to shut up so badly she can feel the anger trembling in her gut.

“I had a friend who was claustrophobic. She got trapped in an elevator, and it took them too long to get her out. But what about you?”
She curls her hands into balls at her eyes and tries to block the world.

They pull up to the Hudson River. Internally, Casey groans. The clue could be along the banks; it could be in the water, it could be anywhere. They’re never going to find it in time.

“We should split up. We’ll cover more ground that way.”

The other four nod together, popping the doors and climbing out of the vehicle. Casey pulls out his phone and turns on the flashlight. The wind is cold coming off of the water, and he shivers from the eeriness and the chill.

He almost jumps out of his skin when his phone rings in his hand, then scrambles to answer and press it to his ear.

“So, you figured out my first riddle. I’ll give you the second, but there’s a catch.”

He grits his teeth. “What?”

“Before I give it to you, you have to cut someone from your search. They won’t be allowed to participate or help in any way. If they do, Miss Green dies instantly. Take as much time to decide as you like.”

Casey growls, then shouts after his friends. Within seconds, they’ve regrouped, and he’s laid out the terms.

“I’ll do it.”

“Are you sure, Mike? There’s no going back.”

“I know. I’m the best choice. Not too quick with clues or riddles.”

Casey sighs. “Is there anyone opposed?”

No response. He presses the phone to his ear again. “We’re cutting Mike.”

The voice chuckles. “As predicted. Speakerphone again, please.”

He presses the button.

“I have weight in my belly, and trees on my back. I have nails in my ribs, and feet do I lack. What am I?”

There’s silence for a moment. The red “call ended” flashes on the screen. They rack their brains, looking around for a hint. It’s Leo that breathes the first understanding.

“A ship.”

They turn to see the Intrepid Museum before them.

“Does it ever occur to you to ask me how they’re doing?”
She’s pulled from her sleep by the goddamn voice again. She wishes to all things holy that it would shut up and let her sleep through this.

“How fast they’re making it through the clues? How many clues there are? If they’re on track to find you in time?”

She stares up at her coffin and tries to ignore him. She’s decided the voice is a him. The one thing that scares her about him is how well he seems to know what she’s thinking.

“You’re quiet, aren’t you? I suppose you’re trying to conserve energy and air. It’s smart. Just in case you’re curious, you’ve got about two hours left before you start to suffocate.”

She does her best not to let that panic her. They’re coming for you. They’re coming for you. They’re coming for you. She tells herself. They’re coming for you. They’re coming for you. They’re coming for you.

In the cold darkness, she tries to make herself believe it.

Of course, it’s locked. The museum closed at 5 pm, and it’s nearing midnight. Donna works on disabling security, fingers flying over computer keys. Casey bounces on his toes anxiously. He feels like he might scream.

“Got it.”

He and Jason are off like a shot. Leo is hot on their tail, and Donna’s laptop slams shut before she follows. Their feet pound across the pavement. They dive through the door, ready to go, and promptly slam their backs against the wall as a guard strolls by.

“Ya didn’t tell us there were guards,” Jason hisses beside him.

“I thought you would use your brain for once and assume that there were guards. Why wouldn’t there be guards? It’s still a museum.”

“And a big one at that,” Casey whispers. “We should split up to cover more ground. You guys take the plane deck, the space shuttle, and the other main areas. I’ll search through the living quarters and stuff.”

They split. His heart is hammering in his chest as he maneuvers through the halls. He’s been to this museum more times than he can count. He loved it as a kid. He loves it now, though he suspects that it will be ever so slightly tainted with fear after this.

His cell phone buzzes twice in his pocket. The first is a text from Leo, and he makes his way back to the others with a tiny fist pump. The second is an unknown number he recognizes instantly.

“Two hours left.”

He slides out of the museum. Donna reactivates the security system, and it’s like they were never there. Leo’s got a pale blue envelope in his hand. They rip into it.

A tiny Eiffel Tower charm falls out, along with a slip of paper with a picture of New York City on it. On the back, it only reads, “What am I?”
They stare at it for a moment.

“There’s no way we make it to Paris in time. He wouldn’ have had the time to even get her there, right?”

“Right,” Donna confirms. “She’s going to be in the city. It explains the picture.”

Casey can practically feel the seconds ticking away. “Two hours left.”

“Is that what he told you?”

Casey nods, and there’s an added tension. They stare at the tiny charm. Donna picks it up, turns it over, then sets it down again.


They scramble to get their thoughts in the air, words like “Paris,” “France,” and “NYC.” It’s all a jumble, and nothing makes sense until a memory hits Casey like a brick.

“What do you mean you’ve ‘never been’?” Her voice is incredulous and her eyes wide. “It’s a classic! A symbol of the friendship between the U.S. and France that was promptly crushed in the French Revolution!”

“The Statue of Liberty.”

The vehicle kicks up snow as it drives away.

It’s cold. She rubs her arms as best she can to keep the blood flowing.

“Chilly in there?”

She ignores him, keeping her breathing even and shallow, allowing herself to slip in and out of sleep. With her eyes closed, she can almost pretend that she’s laying on the floor of the dojo. She can practically hear her sensei’s voice in her ears, smooth and even. She’s not trapped. She’s here by choice.

“What’s it like, to be trapped? Entirely at the whim of someone else? Is it freeing to have no worries about your future? To know that your entire fate is in someone else’s hands?”

She grits her teeth.

“If it’s any consolation, they’re on the right track. They’ve already gotten through the first two clues and have the third in their hands. Of course, they’re only getting harder, so I wouldn’t expect them to keep this pace up.”

Her eyes stay closed. She does her best to ignore him again. He’s not saying anything of use, anyway. He’s just trying to rile her up and talk her into wasting air on hyperventilation.

“I really can see why nobody ever kidnaps you. You’re woefully boring. It’s a wonder there’s no panic. I mean, it’s dark, small, cold. Where the walls are pressing in on you and the dirt is inches from your nose and every time you breathe you get closer to death. Someone who wants to hurt you has put you here, and.”
“Shut. Up.” Her patience snaps. Her hands curl into fists at her sides as her carefully constructed illusion of control disappears around her. She’s not in the dojo. She’s going to die.

“There she is.” He chuckles. “And here I was beginning to worry you’d died prematurely. That would be very, very awkward for everyone involved.”

He sighs, and she can almost see him propping his head on his hand. “It’s such a shame you have to die at the end of all this. I’d love to be able to interview you afterward, to figure out the damage on your psyche. Oh, you’d be fantastic as a patient. We’re giving some psychologist the case of their lives.”

She closes her eyes again. It’s fine. Everything is under control. They’re going to get here in time.

The words are harder to believe.

He sits on the boat while the others work. He hates that. He hates it, but he can’t swim in such cold water without panicking. They’re keeping him updated every so often, but it’s still not enough.

For the first time, his mind has time to wander. Is she scared? Is she remembering to breathe slowly, to conserve her air? Is she keeping faith that they’ll get to her in time? He remembers his time underground, remembers the mind-numbing silence and solitude. He thought he’d go insane at the beginning, thought he’d drive himself to it in the end.

His fingers curl tighter around the phone. It buzzes in his palm, and Leo’s number says they’ve got it.

“Where are we headed?” he asks as the boat heads back to shore.

Donna holds up a pale purple envelope, seal unbroken. “Not sure yet.”

The phone rings. He automatically puts it on speaker.

“Next cut.”

They look at each other. There’s no obvious choice, not now. None of them want to go.

“I’ll do it,” Leo whispers. “I don’t like it, but I will.”

Jason punches his shoulder in silent thanks while Casey relays the message. The line goes dead, and they tear the envelope open.

Donna reads off the card. “It belongs to her, and yet others use it more than she does.” Her eyes narrow. “It’s her name, but what does that have to do with anything?”

He taps his foot, turning her name over in his mind. “Oliver Green, Oliver Green, what does that have anything to do with anything? It’s not a place. It’s not a time. The only thing it even sounds like is Olive Garden.”

“Maybe… Central Park?” Jason suggests. “There’s lots of green there.”

They share a look.
“It’s worth a try.”

“Not too much longer, now.”


“They’re getting into the final clues. I don’t think they’re going to make it in time, I’m afraid.”

Keep faith. Stay strong. It’s just meditation. It’s just a test.

“You haven’t talked to me in a while. Don’t tell me that you died prematurely.”

“I haven’t.”

Shallow breaths. Think of nothing. Think of nothing at all.

“Getting close to an hour now.”

They’re going to make it.

“This place is too damn big,” Jason growls beside him. “No chance we find a clue.”

Central Park sprawls before them, the grass looking slightly brown and the trees leafless. The wind whips through the top branches and makes them sway.

The phone rings. Cold fingers pull it out of his pocket and tap green to take the call.

“I really thought about making you search through this whole park; I want you to know that. In the end, I decided to be merciful. You should be thankful.”

“Just give us the riddle.”

“Cut another person first.”

Donna meets Jason’s eyes. “It’s down to you or me.”

He punches a nearby tree with a quiet snarl. “Jus’ make it me. Ya need Donna for the riddles.”

Casey looks Donna in the eyes, and she slowly shakes her head. “We won’t be able to get her out of the ground if necessary. You’re smart enough to figure out the riddles.”

He puts the phone back to his ear. “Donna.”

“Really? For the first time, you’ve managed to surprise me. Alright, here’s the riddle.”

He puts the phone on speaker.

“With a halo of water and tongue of wood, I have stone for skin, and long I stood. What am I?”
Damn.
He can see Donna’s eyes widen, see the answer practically burning her tongue. Her fingers grip the bottom of her shirt.

“You shoulda kept Donna,” Jason growls.

“Shut up and think. Halo of water, stone skin, wooden tongue. What’s made of stone?”

“Buildings.”

“Okay. Buildings that have a wood tongue and a water halo. That’s a ring of water, right?”

“Yeah. So buildings with water rings.”

Donna bounces on her toes as they look at each other and say, “Castle.”

“They’re getting close now. 45 minutes to go.”

They sprint across the grass, breath turning into white puffs in the air. The castle in Central Park is famous as a tourist destination. It’s small enough, but she could be anywhere. They run up to it and find the doors locked, but there’s a small flag stuck in the ground. They see another one a way off and run for it.

“30 minutes. Things don’t look so good for you, do they?”

The flag trail ends at a spot of freshly turned dirt, and they collapse to their knees and scratch at it with their hands. The earth collects under their fingernails as they claw it away and a pile forms behind them. Words are slipping from his mouth, and he thinks it’s “come on, come on, come on.” Jason is saying something similar beside him.

He hits wood. His arms are burning, and his shoulders ache, but he has to keep digging. They dust the last of the dirt off the top and, on three, lift it from the ground.

“Five. This has been fun, but I’m afraid all good things must come to an end.”

The lid is tight, and they wedge their fingers underneath it to pry it upward. Their muscles strain to separate it from the rest of the coffin.

“One left. Are you panicking now?”

They make it. The lid pops free.

The coffin is empty.

“Goodbye, Miss Green.”
Betrayal is a Two-Way Street

He sat on a hotel chair, staring across the room at her form sleeping on the bed. His hands rested on his knees, and he watched her chest rise and fall as she breathed. He knew he would have to leave soon, so he tried to take in everything he could. It wasn’t sure when he’d get to see her again.

A small chirp from his phone alerted him that it was time to go. He stood, tall and straight, grabbing his helmet off the table. His leave was over. It was time to get back to work. As he reached the door, he turned to catch one last glimpse of her sleeping form. She rolled over, sighing a little, and he smiled softly before turning away.

He slipped out the door, shutting it quietly behind him so as not to disturb her. Quickly, he walked out of the hotel, pulling his helmet on as he stepped onto the transport ship that would take him back. His chest felt heavy, but he pushed all thoughts of her away. He had a job to do.

The transport docked, and he stepped onto the Command. She needed to be the last thing on his mind. He couldn’t afford any distractions during wartime. He took the tablet he was offered and began catching up on what he’d missed.

She woke with a yawn and a stretch, disappointed, but not surprised, to find him missing from the room. In one fluid motion, she rolled off the bed and pulled the sheet around her, deciding on a shower first. She needed it.

As she set about preparing for the day, she decided to open a window for a bit of fresh air. An irritating bird call made its way inside the hotel room, and she made a face and glared at the roof across the street. Crows. The harbingers of misfortune. Shaking her head, she closed the window again. She was close to sealing this deal. No need to invite trouble in.

She padded over to the desk, finding a message from her buyer on her screen. Opening it, she found he had agreed to the terms. One undamaged government-issue handgun for 2,000 dollars. Enough to feed her for a while.

“Poor guy,” she mused aloud, thinking of the man who undoubtedly thought that this was love as she pulled on her shoes. She’d actually liked this one, and he had been an excellent target. But, of course, nothing gold could stay. Like every target so far, she’d had her fun with him. Now it was time to steal what she wanted and run. Polish up that armor of his, say it was undamaged, and she’d have another deal on her hands.

She bode her time, waiting for him to go on leave again. At some point, she heard that the hotel the two of them had stayed at had been shut down. Apparently, the entire staff had gotten arrested, for what crime she didn’t know. She thought nothing of it. It wasn’t that important.

Three months later, she heard a knock on the door and smiled, knowing it was him. As she invited him in, she couldn’t help but feel a small twinge of sadness. She really had felt something for him, she supposed. Well, it was far too late for sentimentality now. She had a job to do.

He heard the click of a gun, then feel the cold metal pressed to the back of his neck. His heart sank as she spoke, instructing him on what to do. It was a shame. He had really felt something for her.
He followed through, piling his armor on the couch, doing as he was told. She smiled. This was all going according to plan. In just a few moments, she would vanish like a shadow under a light and be a richer woman for it.

He clenched his fists at his sides as he watched her gather up the armor. He really did not want to do this. Why couldn’t she have chosen a different target? One that wasn’t bugged, with the Command listening to every word?

Having gotten what she wanted, she darted out onto the street, leaving the man behind. The cries of a crow above were of no concern to her. She was home free.

Then, she felt someone slam into her from behind, tackling her to the ground. The bag went flying, armor scattering across the street. A familiar voice breathed words in her ear, telling her not to get up. Being a wanted woman, she wasn’t particularly keen on that.

She rolled, trying to shake him off. Slamming a shoulder into his throat did the trick, and she stood to sprint away. His hand shot out to catch her leg, and soon she found herself sprawling in the dirt again. Her fist reared back to slam into his nose. The two of them tangled in the street, pedestrians screaming and fleeing the scene.

They heard the wail of police sirens approaching at the same time, and she cursed internally. She was a wanted criminal in 13 countries. She needed to get out of here. Her knee sank into his stomach, and the air left him in a rush. Shoving him off, she grabbed the bag and darted into the nearby market to run.

Behind her, civilians directed the police as to where she’d run. That was irritating. Good Samaritans were always annoying. She vaulted a stall selling fruits to evade both the citizens and her pursuers.

A hand shot out for hers, but she yanked it away and kept running. She couldn’t go back to jail. She wouldn’t go back to jail.

Then, there was a light in her eyes and a booming voice in her ears declaring that she was under arrest. She darted right, then promptly backed off upon finding a police car in her path. She looked left and found at least ten guns trained on her. She turned around and saw the target himself, surrounded by officers.

“You dick,” she hissed. “You set me up.”

“No. I wasn’t going to do anything to you until you turned on me.” He shook his head. “I’m sorry, sweetheart, but this is how it has to be.”

She knew it, too. She was surrounded. There was nowhere left to run, nowhere left to hide. They dragged her away, and he watched her go with a sinking feeling in his chest.

He’d stopped a criminal. He should have felt happy. He should have been celebrating his perfect execution and that he had caught her when no one else could.

So why did he feel like he was the one committing a crime?
The drums are the fire in my veins, and the guitar riff is its icy cure. Pulsing lights threaten to distort my vision and demons dance with angels in the corner of my eye. It's been too long since my last dose of pills.

The bass drops into a rippling bucket of neon pink water. The vocalist's voice slides in like sandpaper ice cream, and the crowd around me goes insane. The anger in the words does little to soothe the raging heat that is my blood, and I know I'll regret this in the morning.

"I told you you'd like it!" The words of the black beanie that I call my friend are lost in the screams. My ears are ringing with music and a higher plane.

I’m captured in the way fingers carefully wrap around the neck of the guitar. It's calculated precision and the heat of the moment and loathing golden eyes that sweep the crowd as her fingers sweep the frets. A demon whispers in my ear in a language I can't understand. I lost your pills to the fountain when the beanie pushed me in.

The guitarist's lips move fractionally, and though I’m practically years away, I can hear her voice as if it was my own.

"Hello, again."

The drummer has a solo part, and my heart counts the beats in double time. My mental to-do list gains item number 32: make a stop at a pharmacy on the way home.

"Backstage," the voice whispers in shades of hot sauce on the cut side of aluminum foil, "after the show."

A fairy settles on my hoop earring, and the guitarist turns back to their instrument. I am left to wonder what plane of existence I have a date with today. By any calculations, it’s not looking like a friendly one.

The shows rages on for hours, and the other planes only become more visible. There’s an angel singing opera at the bar while stealing shots of the heavy cream. A bird skeleton makes a nest of the lead singer’s hair. I tell the beanie I’m going to get some fresh air.

The cool air is a welcome relief to the fire that seems about to burst from my skin. A wood nymph pair glares at me a moment, then resumes their chattering. I take deep breaths to try to banish the drums from my mind.

“What’s up?” the Tobasco voice asks, settling beside me on the bench.

“Is the show over already?”

“Sure is. Remember, time goes weird if you start merging with other planes of existence.” The guitarist lights a cigarette and presses my gray questions between her teeth. “Long time no see, Alex. I take it the meds work?”

“Quite well, when I’m taking them.”
“So why aren’t you taking them?” One breath of the cigarette is apparently enough, and she crushes it out on the bench.

“I ran out. Who are you?”

She chuckles a little. “A friend of a friend, if you will. An old friend of yours asked me to say hi to you while we were in the same place. Xe also asked me to do a couple of other things, but we’ll get to those later.”

My blood is suddenly far too cold, and I long for the drums to heat it again. “I thought that Montres was exiled.”

“Not as exiled as you thought, apparently.” She lights another cigarette but lets this one smolder. The thoughts in my head do the same. “Xe still wants that deal fulfilled.”

“I was a kid. I can’t fulfill that deal. Xe took advantage of innocence and too much trust.”

She shrugs. “Xe’s a demon, and demons don’t care about age. I might not agree with it, but Montres does. Xe’s got your signature on the document, illegible and written in crayon though it may be.”

“Being a demon is a lot less appealing once you think it through.”

“Trust me, I understand that, and so does everyone else in my crew. We’re all victims of bad deals and misleading information.”

My fingers drum on my knees. The fairy on my earring breathes evenly. I think she’s asleep. A baby crow lands on the other and caws softly. Its feathers tickle my jaw a little.

“Montres is going to fulfill that deal tonight, while xe has the chance. Once you go back on the meds, xe’ll be blocked from talking to you.”

“I assumed as much.”

“There’s a way out, though, if you’re interested. I don’t know if it’s a better option, but it’s an option for you to have.”

She takes a drag on the cigarette. Her eyes cloud with gray for an instant before the smoke seeps between her teeth. The crow on my earring caws again, though softer this time.

“If you make a deal with me, and I fulfill my deal first, there’s no soul for Montres to take. You wind up a demon either way, but you may as well trade your soul in for something meaningful instead of whatever you agreed to as a kid.”

“I wind up a demon either way, though.”

She shrugs. “That’s true but inevitable.”

I let out a long sigh. The air is cool and far colder than it was when I first walked out. I wonder if the black beanie is looking for me.
“I want the people I care about to live long and happy lives,” I say carefully. “All of them.”

“That’s very noble,” the guitarist says, and when I look over I can see the black wings sprouting from her back. Either her glamor is fading, or I’m going down the demonic plane rabbit hole. A piece of paper manifests in her hand, along with an elegant fountain pen. “Sign, please.”

A glance over the contract reveals no tricks no lies. Silently, I thank this demon for at least being honest and pull the pen from the ink pot. My signature appears on the line, elegant and smooth and gorgeous. I feel the weight of it all on my skin. It looks nothing like the first signature I signed. This is black and clean, a new signature for a new person.

The contract is tucked into the inner pocket of her suit, which manifests around her. “Do you want me to take your soul now?”

“Might as well.”

She leans over to capture my lips with hers. Her dark purple lipstick is sticky and tastes slightly sweet. Her hand gently cups my jaw, and I can feel something rising through me. In just a few seconds she’s pulling away, and my soul is sitting on her tongue.

“There are other ways of doing that,” she says, “but I like that one the best.”

I feel different as she presses my soul through the air and into another dimension. I’m only vaguely aware of the forming wings and crisp black suit that sink onto my body. My mind feels dazed and like no knowledge is left. For the first time in a long time, the other planes of existence do not attempt to seduce me into visiting.

A black beanie walks past the bench. There’s worry on her face, and her hands are cupped around her mouth. “Alex!” she calls, in a strange tone. “Alex, where are you? We need to go if we’re going to stop by the pharmacy on the way home.”

Mentally, I cross number 32 off of my to-do list. Then, I destroy the list entirely. Lists and necessities are for humanity. My former family, friends, teachers, all of them need to do lists.

“Sorry,” the demon beside me whispers.

“Yeah,” I murmur in reply, watching the beanie disappear into the darkness and out of my life. “Me, too.”
Past, Present, Future

“Sir, Darren’s still in there.”

“He’s what?”

Kay turned toward the battlefield. Their enemy had practically overrun them. They needed to leave and to evacuate back to the ship. She caught a glimpse of a figure returning fire at the other soldiers. A long sigh escaped her.

Michael spoke up as if reading her mind. “Sir, I advise we leave him. It’s too dangerous.”

Still, he knew that she didn’t hear the words, and if she did she certainly wasn’t listening. All he could do is shout at her as she charged back into the battle. She dodged around the hail of punishing fire that sank into the ground around her and fired off some shots of her own as she made her way over to the last man.

“Come on, Darren! Let’s go!”

“It’s alright, sir!” He shouted over the gunfire. “I’ll cover you.”

“Like hell, you will!”

“I’m already injured, sir. It’s alright.”

She glared. “Like hell it is.”

In one even motion, she hauled him up over her shoulders. He aimed his gun around her head and provided some cover fire as she began making her way back. Up on the ridge, Michael faintly cursed.

“Cover fire!”

Darren gave them a weak thumbs-up. That was the last thing they saw before the artillery shell landed right beside them and they disappeared in smoke and fire.

Her fingers tighten around her glass, and she takes a sip of her drink. The girl keeps singing on the stage, dancing and laughing. Her friends cheer her on, clapping and singing along and dancing in their chairs. They are young and carefree. And why shouldn’t they be?

She takes another swallow to force down the bitter taste in her mouth. Now is not the time. Let them be young while they still can. Let them forget about the rest of the galaxy and its troubles, if only for a night. Isn’t that what she’s trying to do, too?

“I thought I’d find you someplace like this.”

She glances up to see Sam sliding onto a stool next to her, his own drink in hand. It’s a clear liquid swirled through with some sort of colored syrup, undoubtedly sweet and fruity. Sam never did like the taste of alcohol much, just the effects.

He glances toward the stage, where the girl is just getting down, wobbling on her heels. She is giddy and
laughing, and he smiles a little, unknowingly.

“I wonder what they’re celebrating.”

She flexes her fingers around her glass, which is nearly empty again. She wishes she could get drunk a little faster. She wants to not have to think of death anymore.

“Michael is looking for you, you know.”

“When is Michael ever not looking for me?” She takes a swallow, enjoys the burn of alcohol on her raw throat. “He probably has paperwork I need to sign.”

Sam hums noncommittally, taking a sip of his drink. The syrup swirls into a new pattern as he does so.

“We should head back to the ship. Sarah is looking for you, too. You need your bandages to be changed again.”

She already knows. The burn has been creeping back into her wound all night, as the numbing cream slowly loses effect. It’s uncomfortable by this point, but she just can’t bring herself to actually go back.

Without saying a word, Sam lets his knuckles brush over the back of her hand. It’s a small, comforting gesture, meant to help her. But all her mind sees is blood on those knuckles, blood everywhere, coating her arms up to the elbow as she tries to help, tries to stop the bleeding, screams for a medic-

A gentle tug at her elbow snaps her out of it. Sam is trying to get her attention. His warm amber eyes are filled with concern when she catches them, but he quickly shifts into a disarming grin.

“Come on, Kay. I’ve already paid. Let’s go back.”

With a sigh, she takes the last swallow of her drink and slides off the stool. Booted feet make their way across the bar floor, the sounds drowned out by another girl singing karaoke.

They step outside and into the rain. It feels good, cool and cleansing, and she turns her head up to meet it. Some last remnant of her desert childhood is telling her to savor water when it comes. Six ducks his head, undoubtedly some instinct left over from his childhood on a planet full of rain. She would laugh to see him like this if it were a different day.

They pick through the muddy streets, heading back to the ship. She’ll have to clean the reddish muck off her boots later. At the moment, she can’t bring herself to care.

The ramp is down, and they climb into the belly of the ship, leaving footprints behind that some misbehaving recruit will have to clean up in the morning. Together, they make their way to the med bay, where Sarah is waiting.

Sarah says nothing, and Kay rolls up her sleeve so she can treat her. There’s blaster burn almost entirely covering her right arm from the earlier mission. A reward for charging into enemy fire to try to save one man.

Sam rests a hand on her shoulder, a silent question. Can I go? She nods, knowing how much he hates the medbay, and he is gone in an instant. Sarah begins to work as soon as he leaves, peeling the old bandages
away away.

There is silence for a long moment.

“One time, when we were on leave, Barrack 14 and Rex all went to see this fortune teller.”

Sarah jumps a little, not having expected her to speak, but says nothing. She wouldn’t say something if she didn’t think it was important. Even if she’s talking to herself more than her.

“It was Muna that really wanted to do it, you know. I didn’t believe much in it, and neither did Rex, but he got Hevis hooked on the idea, so we went ahead and went with them. It would be fun, at least, to laugh as some crazy old bat told us whatever she thought we wanted to hear.”

She nods, not understanding, but working away. Gently, she rubs a soft cloth over the area to remove the last clinging bits of the cream. Kay flinches but otherwise remains unaffected, continuing to stare at her wound and talk.

“Rex went first. Out of the two of us, I mean. Muna and Hevis and Sam all wanted to get in first, so we let them go ahead. It was crap anyway, so we weren’t in any hurry. Anyway, Rex went first and came out looking spooked. He wouldn’t say anything about it. I was getting a weird vibe off the place anyway, so it unsettled me, you know?

“I’ll spare you the details, but she told me a bunch of crap about finding love and great changes in my life, revelations, all very vague stuff. But the last thing she told me was that I had a fatal flaw, like all people. That my loyalty would get me killed.”

She glances up, catching the medic’s eyes as she applies the last bandage to the burn. She tries to keep her expression neutral.

“I didn’t think too much of it. I’d forgotten about that whole thing until today.”

Her eyes flit back to her scorched arm again, staring at the white swaths of cloth as if they hold the answers to the universe. Sarah begins peeling off her gloves and disinfecting her hands. She thinks Kay’s done, so when she speaks again, it catches her off guard.

“Now I’m starting to wonder if that old bat was right all along. And, if she was, what that means.”

Sarah frowns a little. “It means exactly what it sounds like, I think. We all die at some point. She thought you’d go out trying to save someone. There’s nothing wrong with that, sir.”

Kay keeps staring at where her wound should be. “I suppose you’re right. If we’ve all got to die, we might as well die bravely.” Her face clearly says she doesn’t believe the words. Still, she’s saying them, and so Sarah will take that as a victory.

“She Died Bravely” the tombstone read. Sam turned those words over in his head as he sipped his drink. It was sweet and fruity and should have been perfect but, he couldn’t bring himself to appreciate it. It felt like there was something missing here, like he wasn’t playing the role he was supposed to be playing.

“Sam.”
He glanced up to find Michael with a whiskey in his hand, sliding onto the stool beside him.

“Sarah is looking for you.”

He laughed then, realizing exactly what had happened. “We switched, Michael. Kay’s dead, so I’m Kay, you’re me, Sarah is you and herself at the same time. It’s the same old patterns.”


“What the hell is the point, Michael? She doesn’t care that she died bravely. She’s dead. She saved my life and now she’s dead.”

“The words are for the living, Sam. You’ve been to enough memorial services for that.”

“It still hurts, though.”

“You’ve been to enough services to know that, too. You also knew her well enough to know that she wouldn’t want this for you.”

“She doesn’t get to want anything, Michael. She’s dead.”

“Come on, let’s go back. I got your drink.”

They stepped out into the rain, and he ducked his head to avoid as much as he could. For a moment, he could have sworn that Kay was beside him, eyes closed and head tipped back to savor the water on her skin. There was a smile on her face and all he could feel was the pain of his broken arm and the scorched skin along his back.

“She died bravely,” he whispered into the night, tears streaming down his face.

“That she did,” the night whispered back.
Highlights

Some people just weren’t made for Utopia. Leslie Harris was one of those people.

Utopia is nice, for a while. You can’t feel pain, can’t feel sadness or anger or anything negative of the sort. In the beginning, it’s freeing. Then, it becomes a norm. There’s no darkness to help highlight the light. There’s nothing to fuel the appreciation of it. She wanted to find that darkness, find that highlight to give her the specialness of Utopia back.

That’s how she ended up staring at the place that was going to cause her a lot of pain.

She was standing in the back, facing row upon row of chairs. In the center, a round pit was set into the ground, the bottom covered in sand.

It was a fight ring.

She maneuvered through the chairs, making her way down into the pit. There were two ladders leading in, and she swung herself onto the sand. She found it surprisingly clean, all things considered.

Her boots scuffed through the loose flooring, and she hissed. This stuff would be slick and hard to get a grip in. But at least she’d have a bit of cushion when she got knocked down.

The door opened again, and she looked up to see Bones, the one who’d introduced her to this mess, approaching her.

“Well, darlin’, looks like you’ve got yourself into quite a mess, huh?” He laughed. “You look like you’re going to be sick.”

She shook her head. “Don’t tempt me.”

He settled himself on the edge of the pit. “Aw, come on. Don’t psych yourself out. Here, gimme your jacket.”

She shrugged her coat off her shoulders and handed it up to him.

“Good. Now, this ain’t so much different than the boxing you see on TV sometimes. Only difference is that here, you ain’t makin’ any money, and you’re always in the ring.”

Fear shot straight through her, and her eyes went wide.

“What?”

“Now, darlin’, no need to panic. But’cha must’ve known it wasn’t gonna be pretty. It’s the dark part of Utopia, not fairy tale princess land.

“Now, the good news is there are some rules. No weapons, we ain’t tryin’ to kill nobody. No kickin’ a man while he’s down, ‘cause that’s just cheap. And finally, no backin’ out. Ya go ‘til somebody gets KO’d.”

She swallowed hard. Adrenaline was pumping through her system, which she knew would do her no
good. Her hands were already starting to shake, and she sat down at the edge of the ring.

“Oh, will ya stop freakin’ out. Ya knew full well what you were gettin’ into, so suck it up, buttercup, and deal. Now get your ass outta the sand, ‘cause they’re gonna be here in just a minute.”

She stood up, and Bones began to talk slightly faster.

“More good news is that you’ve got me, and I’m your coach. ‘Tween rounds, I can give you a bit of a heads up on who yer fightin’ and what you gotta improve. Do the best ya can, and try to knock a couple people down before ya go out, ai’ght?”

“Alright.”

Then, the door opened, and the people came flooding in. Their voices filled the room, loud talk and laughter crushed the space, making it seem far smaller than it actually was. Yara came in last and came to stand in the center of the pit.

“Alright, everyone, you know how this works.” Her voice carried over all the others, making most of the conversation cease. “This one here thinks she’s got what it takes to be a part of us. And tonight, we’re gonna find out.”

Loud cheering shook the walls.

“Now, you know the rules. Break ‘em, and you let this girl out of the ring for a round so that you can fight it out with me. Do we want that?”

A loud chorus of “No” rattled her, and she swore she could feel every single voice smack against her face. Her eyes strayed to Bones, who gave her a small nod of encouragement. He had a least a little bit of faith in her.

“Alright.” Yara looked around the room. “Who’s first?”

“Me!” A man she didn’t recognize jumped to his feet. “I’ll fight her first.”

Yara grinned and hauled herself out of the ring, and the other man ignored the ladder altogether and just jumped in. Bones began to talk to her as the stranger started showing off for the crowd.

“Ai’ght, that’s Lizard. He’s big, mean, and hits hard, so try to avoid gettin’ tagged. He ain’t real fast, though, so you just gotta float. Stick with body shots; you’ll hurt your yer hand on that thick skull of his.”

Lizard turned to her and grinned. “Ready to go, girlie?”

She jerked her chin at him. “If you’re not too scared.” It was false bravado, but it made her feel better.

“If both sides are ready…” Yara’s voice boomed, “Fight!”

Her hands popped up immediately, but she saw that her opponent hadn’t even put up a defense. Obviously, he didn’t take her seriously. Well, she decided that had to change right there and then.

She darted forward, using speed to her advantage. Pulling back, she slammed her fist into the man’s solar plexus as hard as she could. The crowd roared.
He doubled over, gasping for air, then sunk to the ground. She stepped away from him, giving him some room to breathe. He’d need it.

Eventually, he got his breath back and stood, anger in his eyes. She put her hands back up. This time, he did the same.

He charged, trying to get within hitting distance. She ducked under the first swing to hit him with a hook to the ribs, then danced away from the second. The third nicked her, mostly bouncing off, and she returned with a well-placed fist to his gut. He backed away, trying to get some distance, but she was having none of that. She followed his steps and popped him in the stomach again. Angered, he swung at her and caught, tagging her in the ribs. Pain flared through her, and she backed off this time.

The two circled each other, sweat making their skin shine. She knew he would outlast her with his endurance, simply being able to take more hits. She had to end this and fast.

Again, she darted forward. She faked a punch to his face, and he raised his arms to compensate. While he was off guard, she hit him in the stomach hard enough to make him double over, then brought her knee up to slam into his chin. He reared back and went down.

The crowd exploded. Someone climbed into the pit to drag Lizard out as Leslie walked back over to Bones.

“Ai’ght, ya got the big guy.” He tossed her a towel and a water bottle. “Let’s see who comes next.”

She wiped her forehead and swished some water around in her mouth, spitting onto the sand. The next challenger to come forward was another big guy, hard and mean. He hit her in the ribs, close enough to the same spot that she could really feel it. The next was a woman, quick but unable to take a hit. She actually managed to get one onto the face, and Leslie’s eye was swollen when the next came forward. And the next.

It was just after the fourth round that she really started to feel it. She was tired, her arms hurt, her wrists hurt, everything hurt really. Blood was trickling down her face and congealing in her nose, making it hard to breathe. The sixth challenger had really taken it out of her. She’d taken a lot of hits that time, and she could feel every one of them. As she made her way back to Bones, the world sounded fuzzy and far away. This time, he handed her the towel and bottle.

“Ya okay, kid?”

Reluctantly, she spit out the water. Damn, she was thirsty. “I’m- I’m okay. Still standin’.”

He looked at her strangely. “If ya say so. Now, pay attention, next challenger is comin’ up.”

The roar of the crowd was still deafening, and she could see a figure making his way down into the pit. Bones was faintly cursing behind her. Dimly, she knew it had to be someone that she knew. Probably Panther, her other tie into this and Bones’s boyfriend, if she had to guess. That would be ugly.

“Ai’ght, kid. It’s Panther. You know him. He’s fast. Deadly fast. He don’t hit too hard, but he’ll hit ya enough times that ya go down. Ya need to try to dodge and get a couple good hits in. Got it?”
She nodded. “Got it.”

She turned and put her hands up, and Bones gave the signal that she was good. Yara had barely given the word before Panther was across the pit and swinging.

The first hit took her by surprise, and she took it right to her already broken nose. Her eyes watered, but she managed to dodge the second one. She tried to hit him in the ribs, but he danced away and came back with another sharp jab. It caught her on the cheek, and she spun away to try to get some distance. Her body felt heavy and slow. Another jab caught her, followed by a cross that snapped her head to the side. She tried to get her arms up, but they were not cooperating. The uppercut came flying in, and she was powerless to stop it. Her jaw snapped upward, and she was faintly aware of her body hitting the sand.

She could hear Bones screaming at her to get up. That she was making an idiot of herself. That this was embarrassing. That there was no way she was going to make it like this.

She rolled onto her side, then onto her hands and knees. She could see Panther shaking his head at her as if he was trying to tell her something. She didn’t know what it was. She didn’t care.

She hauled herself to her feet with great difficulty, swaying a little. Her arms went up, trying to protect her face on instinct. Panther was on her in seconds, a hail of punches slamming into her arms and dropping them bit by bit. She tried her best to shuffle away, but he just followed her, keeping the punishment coming. Eventually, her arms dropped enough that he popped her in the nose again. She stumbled back, slipping on the sand, arms falling to try to catch her, and found her head snapping back again with that same uppercut. Her eyes watered with pain as she slammed into a wall, then slid down to the floor. Bones was yelling again, but she couldn’t understand a word. All she knew was the pain and the sand pressed against her face, worming into her mouth as she tried to breathe.

This time, she did not get up.
Sing Sweet Melodies

Please sing to me?
Sweet, sweet melodies!
Of days long past,
As we lay in the soft, soft green grass

Remind my soul times of life,
When our minds bore no strife-
Like a kiss from a first love
Before they tore down the stars from above.

Darkness begins descending around us,
As love abandons without anger or fuss.
Reaching, I promise I’m reaching!!
But where are your hands? Are you still living?

A voice! Your voice, calling to me!
My goodness, you’re still singing melodies.
Tears rush forth in an excited flow,
As your hands reach me, sweet and slow.

Orange leaves crackle beneath our feet,
I never thought kisses could taste so sweet!
Leaving me in such a breathless state;
Of sweet, wondrous, and serene fate.

Death may come knocking on the door,
But hopefully not until we’ve made it to ninety-four.
For this love can conquer all things,
Even the deathly mortal sting.
Moonlit Waters

“And gone my heart with shards of hope
To be spread around this Earth,
So that the world may one day know
The love I wished to show.”

Copper hair sways low, wrapping around
The neck like a noose.
Blue eyes water like fountains of pearls,
Life had always been too hard on her-
That beautiful, and dreary porcelain girl.

The lake shone brightly in the moon
Washed night, a cold delicate breeze
Cooling sweat drenched brows.
Feet whisper upon the edge of
Nothingness with heart’s desire gone to
Rest. Her life too shortly lived, her love too
Poorly shown-

Yet though she inches towards the edge,
Praying to God for swift death,
A tight feeling Grips her heart,
Begging her not to go into the dark.

The soul screams in her ears
“Come back dear child! Abandon your
Fears!-
There is one who protects and loves
Even the most tarnished of doves.”

A cry burst forth from her blue, chapped lips
As she steps back from the black watery abyss.
Feet crunch upon sun roasted leaves as she
Stumbles, struggles, and heaves to escape.

The nightgown upon her flesh can not
Protect her from the loneliness,
But she grasps the Rope in which her soul has thrown,
Running quickly to get back home.
Where the cottage windows shine golden and bright,
Home sweet home- offering protection and light.

Her mother weeps silently for she knows,
Her daughter’s gone to throw away her soul
Deep into the recesses of dark lake water;
Oh how surprised to see the open door holding her daughter!
The embrace is warm upon cool skin
As she holds her mother- her most favorite of kin.

Her incessant apologies are brushed to the floor,
For mothers forgive every single woe--

“You came back to this abundant assurance,
That whenever you feel low there, you must have resistance.
For life is small and quiet in scale,
To the great big eternity that is entailed
Ahead of our earthly woes.”

Off to bed the red haired girl goes
Thanking God while lying on her pillows.
For her life did not begin the day she was born.
But instead on that moonlit night-
she decided to abandon Life’s scorn.
They Assume

They assume that I am happy,
So I carry an abundance of smiles wherever I go,
Leaving me with smiles that aren’t always true though—
Because sometimes my smiles just really show how
Broken a heart, and how sullen a soul.

They assume that I am fidgety,
Because I always bounce my leg—
Because I always braid and unbraid my hair—
Because I can’t stop moving—
Because my anxiety just won’t leave me alone.

They assume that I am a bible thumper,
Because I’ve expressed belief in a higher being—
Because I’ve shared scriptures—
Because I’ve prayed over lunch—
Because I believe, so I am different; so unlike them.

They assume that I am perfect,
So I keep my grades pristine and stress over B’s,
Protecting my GPA as if it were a lifeline
Because how will I pay for college if I don’t get good test scores—
Or a four point zero GPA to show.

They assume things about me that I can’t say,
Perhaps they think I’m a goody two shoes
Since I follow rules, or that I’m a kiss ass because I
Compliment my teachers. Or even that I don’t belong
Since I came from a home school teacher; but no matter what they assume—
I am who I am, and I don’t really give a damn.
Triggered

My body is a weapons arsenal full of destructive toys
That nobody knows how to handle.
Its walls are covered in cruddy metal;
With dingy lights swinging
From side to side to briefly illuminate
The dangers within the room.

There are bullets made of fingernails
Which I dig into my arms when I say the wrong thing;
You don’t understand my heart is a grenade
Ready to explode

Because the minute the pin is pulled is the minute you look at me-
Because you take my breath away
And not in any good way.
You see your actions found the gun,
The gun being my mind,
And you pulled the trigger and now
I am triggered.

Triggered, it’s one of the most negative words in our day in age;
When I tell someone I am triggered,
They take my anxiety as a joke.

They see my shaking as a call for attention.
They hear my sobbing, not as the siren it should be,
But as the laughter coming from their throats
as they point and call me a worthless or weak.

Do they not know that my mind is a gun and they are shooting bullets off like an AK-47?

No.

They don’t.

Because the bullets have already hit their mark
Forcing me to push the tears back,
And to push out the smile full of mustard gas and rusted metal.

Anxiety is the gunpowder in my glock,
It packs a punch that no one wishes to feel
And if you think it hurts hitting you,
You should try living with it inside of you.
The smell of iron mixed with destruction.

Simplicity of someone’s tone is enough to push me over the edge,
For the safety to be switched off and
If it isn’t the anxiety attack that pulls the trigger
Then it’s the awful smell of depression filled gas
That destroys all masks.

It takes me down to the ground;
Wheezing, crushing my chest like
Stones made of regret and embarrassment
Because you know what?

Anxiety is a forest fire and my depression is like a fire alarm;
Screaming loudly to remind me of my own destructive emotions
And how if I don’t escape them now,
Then I’ll turn to ash like embers in a fire-

Don’t you dare say that these triggers don’t make sense
Because damn it if they don’t to you but they do to me!
I feel them on a daily basis even the smallest
Little thing lights me up like a firecracker in an enclosed fist
And leaves me wounded and broken like a bloodied hand on the fourth of July.

HOWEVER… that doesn’t mean you should treat me like a collapsible paper doll.

Because I am just a human being working through this mess we call life.
I am turning this weapons arsenal into a delightful coffee shop.
I’m breaking down the walls in the form of my little yellow pills and
I’m growing coffee beans with every appointment I have with my therapist.
I decorate using the encouragements from those dear to me
and I furnish the room with the actions of the good around me.
And when every bullet has been plucked from my body-

When the grenade has been disarmed and returned to being a functioning heart;
When I can look at you without losing it and hyperventilating;
When the gun powder is clear, the mustard gas is gone,
the metal replaced with warm and inviting windows…

Then the gun switches back to safety, the glock unloads,
and my mind can go back to the place it was before the trigger was pulled.
And I can brew the perfect cup of coffee with the clarity given to me
Through the still small voice inside saying ‘You are. You will. You can.’
Because being triggered doesn’t mean being brought to destruction.

My life is infinitely better with every trigger I work through because damn,
we’ve all got our issues,
and just because mine are in the form of triggers doesn’t mean I’m worthless or weak.
That I have to live with these bullet holes forever.
That strength and courage is too far away for me, no-

No, it means I’ve seen everything there is to be seen,
And If I can get through the day with a smile on my face,
Maybe, just maybe,
The girl whose heart is still a grenade can
Be encouraged to disarm her own weapons arsenal,
And open,
A coffee shop.
A Day Without Meds

A day without meds is like jumping into a pool expecting it to be full, but hitting empty concrete.

A day without meds is like taking a walk at midnight, and getting a sunburn.

A day without meds is like walking onto a stage fully prepared to perform, only to have no audience.

There is a girl looking into a mirror;

She is tall with long hair and fairly bright eyes.
Her skin is dotted in a constellation of stars and she’s staring at herself.

You’d think that she was looking for something she had been staring so long.
It was early evening and she was preparing for a shower,
but something was up.
Her eyes were watery as she turned her body towards different angles,
trying to find an image pretty enough for her liking;
but failing miserably.

She had curves in all the wrong places,
hips far too wide for her own good,
and so much cellulite...
God she couldn’t stand how much there was.
But it was no use,
nothing would be good enough;
not for her, not for her friends, her crush, her parents, her family;
her monsters….

Usually she wasn’t like this.
Usually she really didn’t care about what others thought...
But she’d forgotten to take her medication the night before
and was going through an entire day without it.
The medication that helped her combat her anxiety
and depression from over taking her was not in her system;
and that orange beacon was too far from her grasp at the moment,
because the monster had already been unleashed
and currently loomed over her like a shroud.

These are just a few favorite words I like to use.
You see I am the monster that haunts those who fight mental illness.
And as the monster, I have one job;
rip everyone apart from the inside out.
Cause someone to implode and your job is finished,
time to move on to the next victim.

Usually I’m staved off and fought back pretty well,
but it is days of weakness like this that I like to strike.  
The side effects of abruptly stopping your medicine can hit earliest,  
2 hours.  
You begin to shake, your palms get clammy, your stomach turns,  
your mind begins to race and you cannot stop it.  

You may even throw up.  
But most importantly you will begin to spiral;  
seeds of doubt will sprout forth in your mind,  
heart ache will hold you ransom,  
and even your own thoughts will betray you.  
Because while I may not physically manifest as a black monster,  
holding you by the throat; I do manifest in your own thoughts.  

Because I have one simple task for your life;  

death.  

A day without meds is getting t-boned in an empty intersection  

A day without meds is losing your keys in your pocket.  

A day without meds is crying without tears.  

She spends minute after minute leaning her head  
against the cool tile of the shower walls,  
letting the water run down her back and into the tub.  
The only comfort she finds in this day is being underneath it’s  
cool waterfall where she can cleanse not only her body, but her mind as well.  

She knows how stupid of a decision she’s made  
and wishes that she had taken her medication the night before.  
But it had been too late, hadn’t it?  
All she wanted to do was go to sleep,  
and her mother had encouraged her to rest up!  

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.  
The words taunted her mercilessly as the monster hung to her skin,  
refusing to let her go.  

Tears began to brim in her eyes once more,  
and she punched her hand against the tile and kept punching.  

Bam.  
Bam.  
Bam.  
BAM!  
Her hand was red and covered in a giant purple bruise.  

She stopped and tried to steady her breathing.  
It was time to get out of the shower;  
she couldn’t stay in here too long or her mother
would come and ask if she was alright.
Turning off the water,
the cold air hit her like a ton of bricks,
leaving goosebumps covering her skin.
Covering herself in a towel she stole one more glance in the fog-covered mirror,
before rushing off to her bedroom.

How stupid could you be not to have taken your meds?
You know I am always lurking around the corner and yet...
still you stumble.
Haven’t you learned your lesson already?
God you can be such an idiot sometimes, you know that?

How anybody loves you I will never understand.
Please stop.
You whisper for me to stop but you know I won’t.
I’m apart of you darling. You can’t escape.

Shut up.
Anger, is that anger I hear?
Wow, I must be really pissing you off today aren’t I?
I’ve been waiting for this day for months!
The day you would eventually forget your meds.
Your parents pay so much for them and you always forget.
How ungrateful.

Stop.
So very ungrateful.
Shut up.
Ungrateful little-

STOP!!!

A day without meds is like arguing with yourself, and losing.

A day without meds is like screaming at the mirror, and your reflection screaming back.

A day without meds is like drowning on land.

She sits on her bed,
still wrapped in her towel,
gripping her knees to her chest.
God, she hated it all.
The anxiety, the depression, the medicine,
the therapy; every single thing that makes up her entire life.

The anger is suffocating her,
the anxiety is eating her alive;
and her depression is crushing her into
an empty void of nothingness.
God, what did she do to deserve this?

Closing her eyes tightly,
she presses her hands together and fervent prayer,
And slowly She begins to dress in pajamas,
before crawling into her bed,
popping open that orange beacon of hope,
and swallowing a tiny little pill.
Turning out the lights,

she closes her eyes,
and quietly escapes the monster within-
as it claws desperately to stay-
but to no avail.

A day with medication is when my tears turn into laughter.

A day with medication is when it storms, but you still dance in the rain

A day with medication is when you smile despite hardships.

The sun’s warm rays shone upon her face,
waking her naturally from her sleep.
After yesterday’s whirlwind,
she’s quite surprised she isn’t as exhausted as she expected to be.

Getting out of bed,
she dresses into her normal day clothes
and goes about her normal routine;
the one where her monsters are all back in their cages.

In the bathroom she brushes out
her long red hair before pulling it back into a ponytail.
Before leaving the bathroom she looks into the mirror once more,
and reaches for her lipstick.
Pulling the top off,
she draws a heart on the mirror and writes a message on it
before stepping back and smiling at her work.

Today she doesn’t turn and contort her body into any angles,
nor does she stare hard
and begrudgingly at her reflection.
No, now that she’s back on her medication,
she can finally see what she was missing yesterday.
What she sees is a girl dressed in armor made out of strength,
love, kindness, confidence,
and joy.

What she sees is herself.
What she sees is me.

Me Too

Me too

When you stand alone in the rain, the drops feeling like bullets against your skin
I will stand with you and hold your hand, I will whisper in your ear

Me too

When they say you deserved it, that your outfit was too provocative and you should’ve covered up more-
I will gladly bare all right along with you and say

Me too

When the devil whispers in your ear that you cannot withstand the storm; that you will never bounce back from this; I will hold you close and defiantly reply

Me too

When they ask me why I hang out with sluts, calling you every name in the book while holding me to a pedestal- I will stare into their eyes and shout the words that horrify

Me too

When the storm hits hard, when everyone you love turn their backs on you, when the damn patriarchy and matriarchy come crashing on your head-

When life seems to be giving you shit instead of lemons,

When you’ve become so numb that pain seems like the best option…

I will be there.

I will grip your hand, I will share the warmth of the sun with you- I will shield you against the storm, I will lead you away from those who shame you.

I will gladly say

Me too.

Because we are family, we are connected through the fact that we are survivors. And don’t you dare let anyone tell you otherwise.

Like so many others, we were quiet,

Small,
Weak,

Lost.

But we found the light at the end of the tunnel. We came back swinging like Muhammed Ali- swift as a butterfly, stinging like a bee.

We will defy all standards, we will look into every face that ever said we deserved it and we will gently say

*Me too.*

Because we know, we know in our minds, our hearts, and our souls- that nobody deserves this; but thank goodness we're a part of the lucky ones who come out of the other side.

Somebody once said “The most damaged people are the wisest.”

We may seem like damaged goods to you, but to each other...we are precious golden treasure

Forged in agony and refined in the fire

We shine as bright as the sun because we are **stars**.

And nobody can tell us otherwise.

*Me too,* will be our anthem song; and our armor will be courage, compassion, and solidarity.

Because *me too* mean so much more than a twitter hashtag, more than a Facebook post…

Me too is so much more than just words.
When we say these things, we’re not simply saying it to get attention-
We survived the assault on our hearts and our bodies;

And we will shine more than those who try to tear us down

Ever

Will.
My First Kiss

When I have my first kiss,
I hope it’s gentle and passionate all at once.
I pray that the one I give my first kiss to is kind and bold-
I hope that when they kiss me,
They take my face into their hands and
Hold me like they might lose me.

I hope they care for me deeply,
As deep as the sea;
That their love for me is enduring,
Enduring as a forest fire,
And that their actions are pure,
As pure as the first snowfall of winter.

When I have my first kiss,
I hope they understand that this isn’t easy for me.
I pray that they see how nervous I am,
How I’m utterly terrified of bumping our noses together
And screwing up the ambience.

I hope they know that what I’m giving is a gift;
That this is the most romantic moment of my life;
That this isn’t just some kiss from some girl they think they love.
I want them to know that I wouldn’t give my first kiss to anyone that
I didn’t love as deeply as I love them.

When I have my first kiss,
I hope they look into my eyes-
Not just to ask for permission, but to search me;
Someone once said that the eyes are the window to the soul-
And I want them to see my soul.

I hope they see the darkness inside,
The darkness that even the night sky is jealous of;
That they see the bright hope within,
As bright as the summer sun;
And when they look into my eyes,
I hope they see the balance between good and bad inside my heart.

When I have my first kiss,
I hope they see me for me,
That they aren’t afraid of the bad parts,
Nor apprehensive towards the goodness.
I pray that they see the ying and yang of my soul
And that they don’t care.
I hope that no matter my past transgressions or good deeds-
They love me.
That when they look into the window of my soul,
They acknowledge my past;
But love me for my present, and my future.

When I have my first kiss,
I hope that they don’t mind it if I wrap my arms around their neck;
Because when this happens I’m going to need something to hold me steady,
And that something is going to be them.

I hope that they caress my cheek,
That they don’t mind how flushed I’ll be or how hot my cheeks will feel,
That they chuckle at how my leg bounces when I’m nervous or anxious,
And that makes me even more beautiful in their eyes.

When I have my first kiss,
I hope that they kiss me softly, but with passion.
I pray that if our noses bump each other,
We’ll simply giggle and try again.
I hope that my first kiss isn’t perfect-

When I have my first kiss,
I hope it fills us with that warm,
Fuzzy feeling you eat when you’re surrounded by love.
Like a warm fireplace on Christmas Eve,
Or hugging a family member you haven’t seen in so long.

When I have my first kiss,
I hope that it’s with someone who’ll love me.

We may not stay together,
But I hope that for my first kiss,
And for the time we spend together
They’ll cherish it the same way I will;

With fondness,
Maybe a little bit of Bittersweetness;
But with no regrets
What so ever.
Southern Skies

Sometimes I miss
Those bright southern skies.
The way the sun and ocean would kiss,
Making the wise
Old moon jealous.

The temperatures never fell below forty degrees,
And summer often droned on into october.
Gentle winds often brushed through the trees,
Bringing an utter feeling of ease
With every rustle of every leaf.

Although white christmases were never thorough,
Seeing as how the grass was too warm
And melted the off chance of snow-
A warm, sandy beach was a welcome change
To the midwest’s frozen winter wonderland.

Autumn usually occurred in the middle of November,
Leaving me excited to finally plunder
All of my hoodies, scarves, and boots-
To show off to my neighbors,
My midwestern roots.

However, my heart
Didn’t always belong
To those midwestern roots.
In fact it grew, and grew,
In a hot Carolina stew.

Here, in a Midwestern winter,
Snow flurries fly across
Robin egg skies
Reminding me of the days,
Where I felt nothing but the southern
Sun rays.

Yet I do not regret,
Leaving the southern nest.
If I’d never have fled,
And made myself a Missouri bed-
Who knows if I’d be as happy
As I am today?

So even though I miss,
Those tempting southern skies-
Where the ocean and sun kiss,
Amidst the long summer dusks;
I do not regret fleeing,
And experiencing my Midwestern roots.

But one day I know,
I’ll come back to that southern home.
And until then I pray,
For my southern roots to stay.
Because one day I’ll be back,
To make a home and unpack.
Sophia Southard  
Grade 12

*the enduring words of a night owl writer*
Writing Portfolio

Missouri Academy Science Math & Comp  
Maryville, MO  
Teacher: Stancy Bond

2+2

This is me writing to tell you that  
I have no idea how to write a poem.

Two plus two equals four  
but two words plus two words  
opens up a breath of complications.

Those four words are  
layered cake upon layered cake  
a riotous explosion of colorful words.

So two plus two does  
in fact equal four  
and two words plus two words equals four words.

Yet there is a wealth of hidden depth  
that could never be quantified  
that is why this is a poem and two plus two still equals four.
Moreness

you remember the first time you failed
f-bombs rained f-bombs rained f-bombs
no, not that kind of f-bomb
in this high-octane environment the f-bomb means failed
as in failed an exam, multiple exams

people would look at you differently
if they knew your dirty little secret
in fact, you see yourself differently
no longer first in class but at the very bottom
your mind is a sea of storms

so after the raging waves have settled
what do you do? you do more and more
more than you have ever in your entire life
you simply do more and keep on doing it
and if that fails, you just keep on doing more
The Day Donald Trump Won the Presidency

Unlike the color of my skin, my Vietnamese heritage is not embedded in me. My birth country’s history and culture goes far deeper than that—it is not skin-deep. Sometimes, being an adopted Vietnamese-American leaves me feeling at a disadvantage because often, I feel more American than Vietnamese and growing up in a predominantly white community has only magnified this. As ludicrous as it may sound, I did not meet another Vietnamese person until I was sixteen.

The day Donald Trump won the Presidential Election is the first time I saw myself as something other than American. The ground shifted under my feet: I was no longer in a country that embraced its patchwork heritage. When the President-elect’s followers told people of color to go home or back where we came from, I took a hard look at myself because America is my home, yet I was not born here. I was born in Vietnam, but that is not home. My siblings and I, along with other adopted Asian-American children, stand somewhere between immigrant and natural citizen. I do not know how to speak Vietnamese nor do I retain any memories of my birth country, but I am Vietnamese so people will treat me that way. The election results threw my identity into question, into chaos, as I struggled to find out who I was and where I stood in a country that seemingly rejected its diversity. I might be Vietnamese and look it, but I am through and through an American.

Some months after the Presidential Election, I finally saw myself for who I was: an adopted Vietnamese-American who did not have to be one or the other. I could embrace both halves of me and know that every time I looked in the mirror, I was Vietnamese and American and I am infinitely proud to be both. I have been many things for the past seventeen years of my life: daughter, friend, student, writer, and reader, but seventeen years after my parents adopted me from Vietnam and brought me to America as a baby, I have finally accepted that I am not simply one culture or the other but a daughter of two nations.

By questioning my identity as an adopted Vietnamese-American, I realized the power of identity and how it has shaped my voice and I have learned the power of choice.

My birth mother grew up homeless on the streets in the Ben Tre Province, caught and cooked creatures she found on the beach, and sold them for a living. She gave me up for adoption because she wanted, imagined a better life for me; I think of her sacrifice every single day. She sacrificed everything for me and my parents ended up giving me everything in return. It took two choices, one by my birth mother and my adoptive parents, to get me here. Without those two choices, I would not be writing this essay nor would I be applying to the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards program today.
By, Buy, Bye, Bi

I would have been willing to stay by your side forever if you had been willing to lay down first. I didn't realize I loved you then and I wished I didn't now because we said bye without ever actually uttering one.

Sparks flew when we first met. They were not of the romantic kind and they were not meant to last. We weren't meant to last. Uno, dos, tres do you remember? Perhaps you don't. My love for you is like a bur on the heart multiplied by ten thousand. You are a bur. You are a love bur.

We held hands–your hand clutched onto mine when we watched that episode of Sherlock together, remember? You probably don't. You have a thousand of these memories with other people; I only had this with you. And I hate people touching me. You wouldn't know since I let you touch me and didn't mind. I loved you, you know, but of course, you didn't because we said bye before it ever needed to be said.

My name is three syllables long but for you, it was always just two. You stretched the two syllables into infinity. I never knew what infinity sounded like until I met you. I never knew what my name could sound like until it was delivered from your mouth. Your name is ash on my tongue, a curse forming on my lips. Who knew your name, inspired by a flower, could become both an ash and a curse? Your name tastes like regret and perhaps that's why I try to convince myself I'm no longer in love with you. But it's not true. The heart is funny that way. It doesn't know regret; just the endless possibility of love. You're not the girl of my dreams but you're the only girl I want.

I've found that I'm the kind of person who doesn't warrant a goodbye; it just happens. Silently, quietly, without passage of words… There are a million ways to describe the way you made me feel but only one to describe how this ended: by, buy, bye, bi.

I learned that love is fluid. I never thought I'd fall in love with a girl until I did. I found out in hindsight and it's probably a good thing because my kind of unrequited love goes unspoken. It wasn't rejected. I still have the question of what could have been.

There is this song called Crowded Places. Every day I'd try not to think of you and every day I failed. I'm not ashamed to admit that. I'm the worst kind of addict. The kind that doesn't feel guilty for the high in the moment but pays in emotional burnouts and hangovers. Anyways, the song. I was over you, done obsessing over what went wrong when and where but I played the song on repeat and I thought of you. Did you ever obsess about when and where we went wrong? I doubt it. I used to think you were the kindest person I knew and I probably still would if I wasn't so biased but you've always had people. You were my first. Now when I listen to sad songs I think of you. Think of your radiant smile and your chocolate puppy dog eyes.

I avoided seeing you like you were the plague. Avoided you when I heard your laugh that sounds like a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Your laugh is everything and nothing to me. That's how I see you now: you are everything and yet nothing to me at the same time.

I have facts and memories I no longer need because we don't talk anymore. I know you love Shakespeare even though I hate it and you watched Howl’s Moving Castle a second time without me because you just loved it that much. You also cried. But there was a moment when I couldn't remember if you wore glasses or not and for a good half hour I vacillated between thinking you did and thinking you didn't. You did, you do but I forgot because your face is becoming as insubstantial as a ghost. I only have these useless
memories to plague me late at night.

I don't need you. That's the thing. I can and do live without you. If love means not being able to breathe without the person you love talking to you then perhaps I am wrong. Perhaps I don't love you or perhaps I do. It doesn't really matter, does it? Because you're half a world away, forgetting me while I'm writing a whole damned poem about you and it hurts it hurts it hurts. Not enough to cry. Not anymore.

My mom said the way I described us was like we were soulmates. I scoffed but it's somewhat true, at least for me. You were this shooting star I wished upon without knowing it but I should've known better than to think I could hold you down. All at once I think you're the single greatest thing to happen to me and the worst because I realized I'm bi, that I can love both girls and boys but I loved you first and you aren't here anymore. The knowledge sticks out like a sore thumb. You'll never read this, never share in the heartbreak of us that I feel. And I don't want you to. Because somehow knowing that I loved you without you actually knowing is enough. It is enough for now.

I know the moment things changed between us. I left you in the moment you needed me most because I had to, I was going home but you leaned on someone else's shoulder so when the time came for you to leave me you did. You left as I had. You left in the moment I needed you most. Karma is such a bitch, isn't it? But that's the thing: a person doesn't leave someone. People leave each other.

The thought just occurred to me that how ironic is it that I am bi and your last name is Bi. How ironic that this is titled by, buy, bye, bi. Even without thinking of you I'm still thinking of you. I'm cursed, while you're living free. I felt more than you, I know I did. I don't say this to invalidate your feelings; I just know because you've had best friends before. You were my first true best friend. When I was sad you lifted me higher than Icarus flew but unlike him, I didn't crash and burn… I take that back. I did but it was much later on.

But if things had to end this way I'm glad I'm using pieces of my pain to create art. Is that the ultimate way to say I love you - by creating art in their name? Well, there you go. You got your answer. Yes, I am still in love with you. I probably always will be but I've moved on. You're just a faint memory, you're like one of those impressionist paintings. I can only get a clearer picture of you, of us by standing back. I'll never get another chance to see you up close and that's okay.

I'm also sorry for the time you kept on saying can't like it was the C-word because you had been taught the “British" way. I saw the hurt in your eyes or rather, the tears but I laughed when I should have comforted. You didn't know better. I'm also sorry I was the one to leave first; I didn't know any better. You went up the elevator without me, to a field of unknowns while I went home to the same old thing. The moment I met you I should have known I'd fall deeply and irrevocably in love with you because you are perfect in your own way.

I invited you home for Thanksgiving. You came and I hoped that the time together, away from your other best friend would be enough to mend the fractures of our relationship I wasn't yet willing to own up to. It seemed that way until we went back and you went right back to her. It's okay, it truly is but I thought we were stronger than that. Turns out all it took to break us was another girl.

I was jealous of your other best friend. You weren't best friends before I left you, at least, not to the extent you are now. I was the one you invited to have donuts with you when you went to the bakery. I. Not her. But when I passed you in the hall, a few months after we had left each other you didn't utter more than two syllables, didn't utter my name in that joyous cry of yours that's part salvation part comedy. No, you just uttered one: hi. Like nothing had passed between us. Like we didn't hold hands or spend a hundred
meals together while I talked history and you listened. But before that, on Valentine's Day, you broke my 
heart when you sent me a card so am I really just a hi person to you now. Or am I still my two-syllable 
nickname deep within your heart? I don't know and I wish I could say I didn't care but all I can say is I 
don't need an answer. I've said my share so now where is yours? Or did I really mean so little to you that I 
only warrant a hi? I loved you as more than a best friend and never asked for more because I didn't know 
at the time but now I'm asking. By, buy, bye, bi, Bi did you love me back, could you have?
Perfect Specimen for Love Part 1

You are a lovesick girl, trash for other people’s trash. Love emboldens most people but even the thought of it terrifies you. Because people are tempest-tossed storms and you are afraid of getting lost.

You know the definition of love but not the meaning of it. People glide past you, through you never seeing, never knowing you. Because you are air—existing solely for everyone else’s survival.

There are a thousand poems dedicated to love, here, I will write one. You do not have to be human to love or do you? Because sometimes all you feel you are is muscles and age, flesh and bone.

No feelings to bottle, no conscious to unleash, no lust to cage. You are a perfect specimen for love but you are not human, or so they tell you so no love for you.
The Ballerina's Last Dance

The ballerina stood, staring at the congested New York City streets below her, thankful she had trapped herself inside her ballet studio’s glass cage.

She was young blood, fresh out of high school, and her ambition flew above even the city’s tallest skyscrapers. She turned to the mirror that stretched to the ceiling and to the floor and curtsied at her reflection.

She was pale, she was cool, and she was cold: the only striking thing about her were the glittering emerald eyes that surveyed the room.

Everything about her was slim and sleek—from her hair to her calves.

However, the ballerina ended up sneering at her reflection in the mirror. For Charlene’s ghostly form seemed to follow her every step and Charlene’s twin sister should have gotten back to her.

In the corner of a bar, with darkness and silence cloaking them with the threat of disguise, the ballerina and Charlene’s twin had plotted sabotage. But of what kind? The ballerina had meant to ask but Charlene’s sister was already waltzing away on the tips of her toes before she could utter those words.

The ballerina had done her part. She had gotten the older ballerina out of the studio with a well-planned catfight, which they had blamed on Charlene. She nodded at her reflection with satisfaction and shrugged her shoulders, loosening them.

Total silence was an eerie thing to behold in the city that never slept and the ballerina thought it something to be feared, especially when all you felt like doing was screaming your head off and ripping your hair out.

The silence started at her ears and traveled throughout her body, though it wasn’t usual for a ballerina to dance without music, she flexed and pointed her toes and traveled across the room with the grace of a lightning strike. She was stealthy and silent and there was not a sound to be heard in the room. Her footsteps were light and they touched the floor as a single feather would.

Silence was the goal. If she could achieve silence, then she would get the position of prima ballerina in the upcoming production. She would get it. Not Charlene, whose steps resembled that of a horse’s.

Her cell phone buzzed and buzzed and buzzed against the ballet studio’s wooden floor and she stumbled at the sudden sound. Halfway through a twirl, her legs got tangled up with her other leg and she fell to the wood of the hard floor. The buzzing stopped just as the ballerina got ahold of her cell phone and it gave a final buzz before the room fell silent once again.

She didn’t need to type in her password to get the gist of the message. It was from the President of the Ballet Company and she was to be the prima ballerina in the upcoming performance of Swan Lake.

Two moments collided: one good, one bad and she didn’t know whether to scream or laugh or cry at the irony of it. Her biggest dream and her greatest fear converged together: her dream of becoming the prima ballerina and her fear of making a noise while performing the dance of silence.
The silence that enveloped her now stopped her scream and her laugh and her cry. It might have been silent in the world but inside, her thoughts were a jumble, at once, screaming and laughing and crying. She would regret making a squeak much less a scream in that moment because when silence was attained, it felt holy, something to be treated with both fear and respect alike.

Maybe her decision not to speak out, showed just how frightened the ballerina was of hearing her own voice rise above everyone else’s and everything else besides that. Maybe it showed her insecurity of speaking in front of an audience even if that audience was just herself.

The ballerina had encountered total silence and she knew she should preserve that silence.

She padded out of the dancing room quietly and only once she broke free of the confines of the all too quiet space she screamed. She screamed because in a city full of chaotic noise, a scream would be lost; a scream shouted in the silence, however, would echo on and on and on. The silence would not forgive or forget her scream but the city that never slept could, so she screamed and she laughed and she cried because no one could hear her. While silence can only breed silence, chaotic noise feeds upon chaotic noise and the city swallowed her sounds up.

The noise of the city was murder on her ears. Even worse, was the sense of being invaded by a foreign presence.

She ran to her car, too aware of the city noise that seemed to feed on itself and jimmed open her car’s door.

The vinyl leather of the seat scorched her bare flesh and she swore she could hear the sizzle of it when she sat down.

The air was stifling and seemed to shimmer in waves as she tried to breathe. She coughed and turned the key in the ignition. She blasted the air conditioner on, ridding the space of the suffocating air.

Sweat coated her skin and she wiped it away with her soaked tank top. For the first time in hours, she was able to breathe without a stuffy feeling clogging her lungs.

Summer was here and it was here with a vengeance.

Besides the pressing heat of the summer day, was the smell that accompanied it. It was a bottled up sewer system inside of the ballerina’s car. She turned around in her seat and she forgot everything—the summer weather, her fevered flesh in an instant.

A distracting sight—a dead body in the backseat—met her gaze and it was much worse off than her. The body wore the perfume of a sewer system.

A scream tore its way through her throat and she scrambled away from the body.

The dead woman looked almost peaceful. Her eyelids were closed and her mouth was open just a hair. The only thing that was wrong with the picture was the fact that blood dribbled down her cheek.

It was so wrong… Death was not peaceful and murder was even less so.
She leaned forward in her seat and peered at the dead woman. Now that the aftershocks of fear had left her, only pity and a vague worry for herself remained.

A trickle of dread began to overwhelm her as she got a closer look at the corpse.

Purple and red streaks striped her forehead and her matted hair was the color of deep red stage curtains.

_Sabotage_ Charlene’s twin sister had whispered to her in the empty corner of that dark little bar room. The plan had already gone wrong when the ballerina had failed to ask Charlene’s twin sister and even more wrong when she had failed to ask _of what kind_?

The woman tossed against her back seat was her main competition and she would have been declared the loser in the race for prima ballerina had she lived to see the end of the day.

She glanced out the car window and to the street beyond.

It was as dead outside as it was inside the car. Smart people, or rather, people smarter than her stayed indoors while the heat flashed with the viciousness of a lightning strike. Worry became more crippling than the fear she felt upon first seeing the dead woman and she took out her phone to dial 9-1-1.

_What was Charlene doing in her car? What would the police think?_

There was no one else out on the streets right now but that didn’t mean there hadn’t been any around before. While the woman was still alive.

She pressed the green call button and such a small act had never felt so monumental before. Death can do that to people. Make the small things seem big and the big things seem small. When a woman picked up on the other end, asking the ballerina what her emergency was, she found she couldn’t say. It wasn’t _her_ emergency per se, but Charlene’s. She stayed silent on her end while her mind buzzed and the city screamed its discontent at Charlene’s rotting corpse. The contradiction of noise pulled her out of that peculiar transition state, between daydreaming and reality, and she cleared her throat to speak.

Just at that moment, a police car cruised down the street and she threw a linen blanket over the woman’s face right as the car pulled up to her.

She rolled down her window politely as the policewoman eyed her and bit back a curse as the heat enveloped her.

“Ma’am,” she said politely and tipped her head at her.

The woman on the phone was beginning to panic, wary of the danger the ballerina might face, not suspecting a policewoman was there and she considered _her_ to be the true danger.

She nodded at her but the ballerina knew she was lost the moment her gaze wandered to the back seat.

“Ma’am,” she said back but a steely note had entered her note and she flashed on her sirens before she could say anything, even something as trivial as _Stop_.

“It’s not what you think,” she said but this didn’t ease the police officer’s suspicion.

The police officer cut the car’s engine and stepped out into the street.
The NYC street was silent as a tomb in the moments the policewoman walked toward the ballerina’s window. It seemed to honor Charlene’s passing, just as it was condemning the ballerina to a guilty fate. The murderous sun disappeared from the sky, in a game of hide and seek with the clouds, casting the ballerina’s face in shadow. The city, the light had abandoned her and the ballerina shifted in the seat, fiddling with her car keys.

“If you would please step out, ma’am.” Ma’am took on another meaning when ma’am meant you and there was a dead body sitting in the car.

She sighed and shut off the car’s engine. She glanced back at the dead woman and sighed once again before stepping out of her car. The dead ballerina would be the unraveling of her and her death was not the crime she was guilty of.

#

Gone was the ambition, the passion, the grit in the ballerina’s eyes. In place of it, was guilt, horror, and death. Charlene, prima ballerina of the New York City ballet company for many years had lost her position to the more youthful ballerina.

Charlene was dead and the ballerina’s career was just as dead.

“I confess to tampering with the crime scene on accident but I do not confess to murder, Detective Rhine.”

Detective Rhine sat in a seat across from the ballerina, and Rhine’s partner stood in the corner with her arms crossed.

The Detective and the ballerina had more in common than one would have thought just by looking at the two, they both had lean muscle and dazzling grace. While the ballerina had trained in the art of dance, the Detective had trained in the art of deception so, when the ballerina “confessed” it came as no surprise that the Detective simply lifted her eyebrows and waited for the ballerina to say more.

It was murder inside this plastic box, the ballerina thought. She supposed NYC was a little like a matryoshka doll. The police’s interrogation room was housed inside the police station, which was housed within the precinct, which was housed within Manhattan, which was housed within NYC itself…

The silence enveloped her just as easily as the heat did and she ran a sleeve across her forehead to brush lingering sweat away.

“Tampering?” the Detective asked when the ballerina didn’t bother to elaborate. “Some people would probably say that murder is sabotage.”

“I’ll admit I wanted Charlene’s job. I’ll even admit that I went so far as to try and sabotage her career but never her life.” The ballerina scoffed and threw her hands up into the air. Her green eyes settled on the phone cupped in the Detective’s hand and she scowled.

The ballerina leaned forward in her seat and the cuffs chaining her to the desk rattled.

“I’ll tell you a story, Detective, but it’s not one you’ll want to hear. In fact, it’ll just be a waste of your damn time.”
The Detective leaned forward in her seat and beckoned with her fingers.

“Tell me anyways. I’ve got all the time in the world. Your rival, however, did not.”

Outside the precinct, as the clouds darkened with the first hint of rain in weeks, Charlene’s twin sister twirled around as the first fat raindrops hit her cheeks from above.

She carried her dead sister’s pointe shoes in her hand; the shoe’s ribbon circled around her wrist like a bracelet. Her sister would never lace the ribbons up again but it was something of a memento, a trophy perhaps.

After all, her sister wouldn’t need it; she was dead and the rival prima ballerina was dancing her last dance. She however, was dancing her very first.

She turned on her phone, ignoring the flashing missed call notifications from her parents. She didn’t need their grief, their pity, not when she herself was just starting her celebration. However, she did text the Prima Ballerina one word.

GONE.

The police could interpret it in a thousand different ways; the puzzle pieces would never add up to reveal another word: MURDER.

Charlene was gone.

She stepped out into the busy streets of New York City, too preoccupied with herself to notice the police car heading straight towards her.

The Detective was too preoccupied with the ballerina in the backseat of her car and so it happened that the guilty, the sabotaged, and the righteous collided paths with one another and all died on that same day because of a fateful car crash.

All were guilty in their own way.

The Detective for her ignorance in arresting the wrong person.

The Ballerina for her role in playing bystander, watching as Charlene’s twin sabotaged her career in a permanent way.
And Charlene’s sister, for perpetrating the murder of her twin.

Charlene’s death was only the first of four that day, and only after the four were long on their way past dead, was the murderous heat washed away.

With a body count of four, the city cleansed itself. Though, the impact of car hitting human body had made quite the racket, when afternoon turned to night, it was silent on the corner by the police station. Just the way the ballerina would have liked it.
Perfect Specimen for Love Part 2

The rub of being the perfect specimen for love is that you are too good, too pure to endure the messiness of it.
As a result, you are the loneliest girl in the world even with your books, history, music, cats, and dreams composing your night owl world, your castle of solitude.
It never felt like a curse before but now you know you might die alone.

You thought you wanted volatile reds and blues and purples–shades of bruises–but all the gods have given you is grays.
The world is shrouded in it but you would much rather return to a black and white world.
At least then you knew what love was, at least then you did not know that love resembles hate and vice versa.
At least then you were a perfect specimen for love and not a perfect candidate for the bitterness that the absence of love reaps.

Perhaps they were wrong, perhaps you are the perfect specimen for bitterness.
Perhaps they underestimated your emotions, your yearning to be loved.
Perhaps they did not understand that a girl’s heart is made of glass–shatter it once and it is broken forever.
Perhaps love is the true bully of this imperfect world and bitterness is the mask we will shed when our souls finally desert this earth.
The Echoes of a War I Still Hear

the pain i feel for my people is nothing compared to the pain of vietnam's past

i think of those who fought against the empires who occupied vietnam
the trung sisters, lady trieu, and king le loi
who are the heroes and the villains of the vietnam war in my peoples’ eyes?

the vietnam war raged for more than twenty years
ho chi minh wanted nothing more than a freed, independent vietnam
but he was a communist and his political affiliations
mattered more than his want, no, his need to see vietnam freed from the wrathful ghost of occupation
and terrified of the possibility of communists painting the world red
america jumped into a war not its own

i am an adopted vietnamese-american so i know nothing of my birth family's history
but i was born in the province of ben tre, which is in south vietnam
so i can only imagine what my mother went through as a child during the vietnam war
and what her siblings, parents and grandparents
had to live through
which side was her family on—north or south?

i watch the vietnam war documentary
and i cry for parents of dead american soldiers
and i cry for the millions of south vietnamese people
who were made homeless from countless search and destroy missions,
imagining my birth mother's family fleeing from their burning villages
and i cry for the american pilots who were taken prisoner of war
and i cry for the countless millions of men and women who died fighting
for the three countries involved in one brutal civil war

i cry for americans and i cry for south vietnamese and i cry for north vietnamese
and i am conflicted inside because there is supposed to be a bad guy in war, right?
i picture my adoptive father, who was days away from being deployed to vietnam
taking the place of american soldiers who have been interviewed

i cannot stay neutral, no matter how hard i might try
i am american and i am vietnamese
and i am adopted and i cannot, will not stay neutral

bombs and chemicals and fires and corpses dotted the landscape of vietnam
but the land recovered, and i wonder
did the vietnamese people ever recover?

the people who escaped after the fall of saigon are known as boat refugees
i didn't escape on a boat, i wasn't even born then
my adoptive father carried me out in his arms,
an american soldier who wasn't sent to fight in the war
how different things might have been had he been
they call the children who are the product of a union
between an american soldier and a vietnamese woman
the “children of dust”
what blood might I have in me that is not vietnamese?
after all, china occupied vietnam for over a thousand years
and france occupied vietnam for almost a hundred
and then japan occupied my country during WW2
and lastly, america occupied vietnam
my people are resilient
and I am infinitely proud to be vietnamese
just as I am infinitely proud to be an american and adopted
my people endured, they survived, and they lasted
they might not have had the first word or the third or the thousandth
but they will have the last
i didn't expect to feel pain and anger of such magnitude
i have an ocean of sadness stored within me
and i wade deeper into it every time
i watch another episode
i'm afraid i might drown in it and if not, that the volcano of anger stored inside me will burn me alive
but i owe my birth mother, my birth family, and my birth country more than my anger and sadness
i owe them the honor of remembering their legacy,
even if i don't know their own legacy
i’m struck by the unknowns of my birth family’s past
the pain of the past lives on in the tears that trickle down my face
but the honor of remembering the legacy they left behind lives on in my heart
they have the most gorgeous names for the most atrocious acts
bony lunar dust and gorge of lost souls
these are words for death,
death has many names
or at least, in this war it did
often in war and in life, actions speak louder than words
but i remember ho chi minh’s words “who’s above whom?”
better than any single action of the war
words and actions have the power to change millions of lives
and words can propel a movement forward
while bombs and chemicals, fires and bullets
can only maim and kill
Beloved: A Defense of Craig Thompson’s Habibi

In the Arabic language, the composition of stories, scripture, or any sort of creative writing involves a duality of arts: art in complex and moral narratives, and art in the very visual aspects of the letters and words with which the narratives are built. In fact, sometimes even a single word can tell a story, give a moral lesson, and glorify nature in the span of a few letters.

One magnificent example is the Arabic word *habibi*, meaning roughly “my beloved” in English. The word as a function of language alone already contains the passion of lovers, the unconditional devotion of a mother for her child. The physical word, as written in Arabic calligraphy, displays within its curves, rises, falls, marks, and sweeps a glimpse into the very feeling of love which it describes.

It is surely no wonder, then, that author Craig Thompson – a rather highly-skilled artist and storyteller already – chose this word as the centerpiece for his graphic novel detailing the beauty, agony, and sacrifice in the unconditional love of one human for another. *Habibi* is a vivid and wonderful story of desperation and salvation, of generosity and sacrifice, of hate and forgiveness, of loss and redemption. The book is a radical literary gift to English speakers everywhere, on behalf of Arabic speakers everywhere.

Like any good deed, however, *Habibi* of course does not go unpunished. Of 275 challenges recorded by the Office for Intellectual Freedom of the American Library Association, the book is ranked eighth in number of recorded challenges in the year 2015 (OIFALA). Thompson’s novel deserves attention, that much is true. Censorship, however, is only ever appropriate for the unnecessarily vulgar and base – and even then, these have their merits in starkness and honesty. *Habibi* merits admiration of its immensely complex and gorgeous design, enjoyment of its heartbreaking storyline, and respect for its brutal criticism of the institutions of business, racism, and classism. Nowhere does the book present material worthy of censorship.

Readers of *Habibi* find themselves intimately involved in the sexual encounters of main character Dodola within the first thirteen pages. In fact, sexuality is the primary reason that *Habibi* is challenged in libraries – the only other reason for challenge is listed as “unsuited for age group” (ALA). Truly, if any over-protective parent were to thumb through the pages of *Habibi*, they would find for themselves fairly graphic depictions of sex, rape, and even the naked bodies of both genders (including transgender women). To take the novel simply as a pornographic promotion of sin to impressionable children, though, not only ignores the book’s complexity but actually misses the author’s purpose by a full doctrinal shift. Between the pages of *Habibi*, sex poisons the brains of the careless and ruins the emotional health of the exploited. In fact, the love between Zam and Dodola, the two main characters, is the purest example of “love that excludes sex” (Hahne). This exclusion is at first a product of inability, then a product of constraint, then a potent mixture of both. Any reasonable adult reading *Habibi* would see that the folly and harm of sex is one of its central themes. Sexual lust is actually repulsed by main character Zam as a disgusting act of degradation, unworthy of the woman he loves. Why, then is *Habibi* challenged on grounds of nudity and sexual explicitness? Surely, this is like banning a documentary on the horrors of
the Holocaust for showing pictures of starved and murdered victims of concentration camps; it is like banning the bible for its depictions of Satan’s deceptions. Not only is this censorship of material morally incorrect, but entirely and willfully ignorant.

The oppression of any discussion of sexuality is unhealthy for society as a whole. To treat the act of sex as some taboo in which only a minority percentage of people partake is to criminalize the act. Proliferation of this particular mindset has produced generations upon generations of sexually repressed Americans, culminating finally now in the movement for the civil rights of non-heterosexual and transgender citizens. It is simply foolish, however, to think that the censorship of sexual explicitness in American culture has affected only those uncomfortable adults who see their children exploring something unfamiliar to them. The futures of those very children are at stake when education is curated to the liking of the status quo. Ignorance is not a lack of knowledge. Ignorance is the lack of an open mind. No person on Earth, however well- or poorly-educated, can be ignorant if he/she regards the world with an open mind. In order to have a society in which intolerance, hatred, and evil are absent, the ignorance of citizens must first be abolished. The single best way to steer a populace towards understanding is through children and young adults, those still learning about the world around them. To ensure that a child is open-minded and understanding of his/her peers, the viewpoints presented to him/her must be limitless, for the viewpoints of people in this world are limitless. These viewpoints must include discussions of sex and sexuality, as these two things are of great consequence in adult life. Thus, it is the responsibility of American leaders and educators to enforce the principles of the First Amendment to the Constitution in ensuring the widest possible collection of viewpoints available to students.

Any challenge made of Thompson’s *Habibi* are hereby seen as not only misguided in their understanding of the work, but actually dangerous in their propagation of ignorance. Literature is humanity’s greatest weapon against ignorance, and in literature there are two kinds of subjects: old or new. Old subjects get tired quickly, and new subjects are often controversial and only belatedly. If Craig Thompson were to write a western cowboy novel in 2017, it probably would be far less successful than *Habibi* is. Were he to write *Habibi* in the eighteenth century, he would certainly be persecuted and legally prosecuted for his controversy. Here lies the author’s dilemma: To push society forward any amount requires at least that much public backlash. It takes authors with courage, authors like Craig Thompson, to postulate that maybe – just maybe – society’s standards need to be adjusted. Challenges to books like *Habibi* are challenges to the progress of society, and should be treated like the reactionary ignorance they represent. They should be resisted and rejected by anyone who values or desires an understanding society.

**Bibliography**


The Worst of Times

Congressman Yoder:

A few months ago, you sent me a letter congratulating me on my newly-announced ACT score, and said to contact you if you could “be of assistance” to me. Here is that request for assistance.

I am a United States citizen, and have been from birth. I have been granted this status by my ancestors: from Ireland, from Scotland, and those more recent immigrant ancestors of mine from Germany. Nothing in my identity has not been molded by immigration to America.

That is why, even as a natural-born citizen with no real direct ties to the current immigration debate (as I cannot even vote on any issues at my age, nor did I play any hand in electing our new president or yourself) I have very deep concerns that I know are reflected by many of my fellow Americans.

President Donald Trump has, in the ten days since his inauguration, violated numerous aspects of the ideals of our democratic government. A few of the many are listed below:

- The purpose of Congress to serve as the most direct governmental representation of the American people; he has continued and even expanded on the tradition of circumventing Congress with executive orders (a tradition that GOP politicians strongly opposed from the years of 2009-2016).
- The creation, expansion, and enrichment of our country through immigration, where America serves – as she always has – as the safe haven of the dejected; he has not only gone against previous constitutionally-upheld immigration laws by banning Muslim immigrants but also has begun a national campaign to persecute and discriminate against Latino and Hispanic immigrants.
- The valuing of merit in American politics over wealth or influence; he has appointed huge benefactors of his campaign rather than candidates with the desired competency for the job.
- The public dignity of politicians; he has degraded his own image through vile sexual comments, obscenities, and hateful slurs and insults all hurled at political or personal enemies – this has, in the eyes of many Americans, desecrated the image of the GOP itself.
- The sovereignty of the United States; he has exposed unhealthy ties with Russian leader Vladimir Putin who has expressed strong interest in influencing and controlling American elections.
- The role of the American citizen in his/her government; he has refused to recognize the millions of participants worldwide in the January 21 Women’s March as legitimate, instead only sponsoring those protesters who support his agenda as legitimate.
- The preservation of the natural environment as a crowning jewel of the American continent; he has attempted to entirely reverse the attempts of his predecessor to preserve the great landscapes and oceans of our country.

This letter, Congressman Yoder, is not meant to accuse you of anything. It is simply a response to your offer of assistance. You have been elected as my Congressman and the Congressman of thousands around me. It is thus your responsibility as representative of the citizens of your constituency to ensure that our rights are upheld, our interests are pursued, and our posterity are preserved.

So I close, with a few statements on the traits of your constituents and, finally, my request.

All the people not of Native American descent currently living in your district are either immigrants or direct descendants of immigrants. All of them have enjoyed the freedom of immigration into our country ensured by our government. Additionally, a significant portion of the immigrants in your district are Muslim, with ties to the very nations and peoples the President is currently persecuting.

A majority of the people who elected you are, obviously, Republicans. They support a Republican platform of small government – not one that spends billions of taxpayer dollars on a doomed border wall project.

Kansas itself was founded as a liberal Free State. You represent the children of frontiersmen and women who fought – literally – to ensure that their extension of sovereign territory was not also an
extension of the evils of slavery present in the nation of their time.

My final request is not a simple one, nor is it a straightforward answer to our nation’s blights. I request that you, the elected representative of my neighbors and me, represent our interests. I request that you do not simply follow the wishes of the Republican Party, or whoever professes to lead it — President or not. **I request that you consider first the abolitionist immigrants you represent, rather than the rich and powerful of Washington.** That, truly, is what “America First” should mean.

Genuinely,
A Concerned Citizen
(Scene 1)

Setting: Back tailgate of truck

Fade from black: Shot from above at shoulder, Trey is watching something on his phone. It’s a Snapchat story of a girl being asked to prom, the last one in the whole school. Trey closes the video, exasperated, and looks up. To Mike:

Trey: I can’t believe it. (points to phone) This means every single girl at our school has a date to prom.
Mike: What is that? Oh no, they got Valerie too?! We’re the only two dudes at school without dates now! Including girl dudes!
T: I don’t know what we’re gonna do. If we ain’t at prom, we ain’t gonna be the football superstars anymore.
M: Wait. I got an idea.
T: Right.
M: There’s two of us, right?
T: Right.
M: And we each need a date, right?
T: (pensive, nodding hesitantly) Yeah, I guess that’s right.
M: So… why don’t we ask each other to the dance?
T: What the hell, Mike—
M: No, hear me out—
T: No. That’s gay. And it ain’t happening.
M: (timid, reserved) … no homo?
T: (slowly softening, giving in only verbally – betraying nothing much) … no homo. Then it’ll be fine. Right?
M: Yeah, right.

Cut to black.

End scene.

(Scene 2)

Setting: Someone’s Bathroom

Mike and Trey are getting ready together. Camera is placed on mirror. Jackets are put on, Mike straps on a gun.

Trey: What’s that for?
Mike: Exercising my rights.
T: (whispered) You sure exercise a few other things, don’t ya…
M: (off guard, offended) What was that?
T: (immediately withdrawing) Nothing. Let’s go to pictures.

Cut to line of teenagers getting in position for a group photo.

Setting: Someone’s Backyard

Someone in the background says, among the mild clamor says, “The whole school!” And it is. Mike and Trey are on the left end of the group, arguing.

Trey: Look, I’m not gonna grab your hips.
Mike: No homo man, it’s for the picture. We all have to have the same pose – or the whole thing’s thrown off!

T: I can’t believe it. (Turns.)

Mike grabs Trey’s hips and both face to their left, in accordance with the other prom-goers.

M: See, this is better. (Hurriedly adding, tensely: ) No homo.

End Scene 2. Fade, opening to the two boys in the truck, starting

(Scene 3)

Setting: inside of truck, front seat. Camera in dashboard.
Mike and Trey are talking on the way to dinner. Mike pulls out a can of Copenhagen chewing tobacco.

Mike: Wanna lip?
Trey: Sure, I’ll take one.
M: Want me to put it in for you?
T: What?
M: (visibly nervous) Lemme put your dip in, bro. (then, recomposed) No homo.
T: (relieved) No homo.

Mike puts Trey’s dip in, leaves a finger to linger just a moment too long. The two look at each other, frightened, then lock eyes onto the road. Cut to dinner.
The boys sit side by side, feeding each other forkfuls, as if it is entirely normal. Camera pans to couple next to them, female mouths “what the...”. Camera pans back to Trey literally pouring soda into Mike’s mouth. Cut to dance.

Mike: What do we do? Everyone’s dancing.
Trey: I mean, we could dance. No homo or anything.
M: (in just the most horrific drawl) Like the whip, or the nae-nae?
T: Like slow-dancing.
T: Yeah, but slower. Let’s try.

Cut to boys on dance floor, classic slow-dance configuration apparently failing them. They switch hand configurations maybe five, six times. Final compromise is hands on the other’s hips, mirrored on both. Both look up and to their respective right, Cut to Trey’s face, then to Mark’s. Both faintly smiling, under masks of masculinity.
Cut to

(Scene 4)

Open with a pan to a half-lit backyard, covered in mud and half-naked teenagers.
Mud wrestling. It’s a real thing. Banner says “2018 Prom Wrestling Afterparty”. Participants are the same group from the picture. Swimsuits abound, along with mud. Mike and Trey get way too into it, in the center of the frame, and other Prom-goers get visibly weirded out. First couple leaves, then the rest, finally leaving Mike and Trey alone, still wrestling. Both fall, land facing each other in the mud, laughing.
Mike: *(holding back)* Tonight was super fun, bro.
Trey: I can’t believe everyone left us.
M: Me neither, we’re just dudes being bros.
T: Just totally bro stuff.

*Silence, for a few moments. Both pained by the unmentioned tension.*

T: I have an idea. Let’s get in the truck.
M: Truck stuff?
T: *(in that weird way teenage boys lie to their crushes)* Yeah, sorta. You’ll see.

*(Night)*
*Cut to God’s-eye shot of the two boys (mud left on cheeks) looking up side by side from a picnic blanket. Quick cut to full-body shot showing both of them laying down, looking up at the stars. Hands just very nearly brushing.*

Trey: *(obviously content)* This prom turned out pretty alright, Mike.
Mike: *(obviously sharing the feeling)* Ain’t that the truth, Trey.
T: *(now slightly nerved)* Can I ask you one question, Mike?
M: Shoot.
T: No homo, but – *(tense as concrete)* do you wanna make out? No homo.
M: *(leaning in)* No homo.

*Fade to black, print:*

THE END
A Grave Crisis Is at Hand

Where the hell did Lucy go? Colonel Potuit floated idly along the fuselage of her current residency: a two-man space plane of sorts — designed for moderately long missions. The word "moderately" seemed an ironic choice to describe a craft designed for the deepest trek into the black up to this point, the good Col. notes, passing by a now nearly half-empty food storage room. Besides food, the ship outsizes its crew’s necessities tenfold. This, as Potuit’s been told, is so that it may be reused in the near future for interplanetary rendezvous. To an astronaut whose comrade pilot tends to disappear, however, the interior is a bit extra roomy.

The portholes (only three, on Potuit’s right side) on the ship’s wall offered a view common to nobody in human history, untilCols. Josey Potuit and Anders Lusitania ventured into this particular part of the Milky Way. Just outside the window glared the dusty Ares Marble itself, the Elysium Planitia streaking slowly by. Even if the ride was a bit long, the views were stunningly gratifying. Josey’s childhood had been oversaturated with posters of the red planet, amateur — and then professional — telescopic photography of Mars and other planets, and a weird knack for mathematics.

However, all her training at the National Space Agency couldn’t prepare her for what Potuit had been facing for the last three years: an antisocial astronaut. How someone, who was the epitome of charismatic grace on all otherwise occasions, could then transform into a recluse the very moment the Orion II left the ground, she had no idea. But Lusitania, or Lucy, as Potuit in her annoyance had taken to calling the celestial introvert, did just that. His video logs became strictly-enforced private times, as eloquently stated on Col. Lucy’s door in sharpie letters: “OUT. PRIVACY. LOG.” on a piece of government issued gridline paper. Oh, what intelligence that G.I. Bill Ph.D. afforded him, to write with such grace, Potuit snidely remarked on her video logs, which Lusitania was ironically rather interested in observing.

But, then, here was his door. That gaudy warning sign was gone, so — presumably — Col. Lusitania was available to speak, a distinction previously unheard-of on Josey’s previous four missions. He and she were equals; appointments should be unnecessary, especially when living together for the longest-ever-yet space endeavor. These months, as in the last eight of the mission’s seventeen, Potuit had gotten used to a solitary existence, eventually nailing down and subsequently reinventing forty different game-modes of Spider Solitaire. Now, with the climax of the mission so readily at hand, the annoyance had become dire; landing procedures had to begin in 36 hours.

“Hey, Lucy,” Potuit slapped her open palm on the metal separator. “Hey. We need to get the mobile labs set up for tomorrow.”

The only audible response from the inside of the room was the automatic rustle of the on-board A/C, an eerie swish muffled by the closed door. She rapped on the port again.

“Alright, asshole. I’m gonna go get my portion set up without you. Hope you enjoy spending all tomorrow morning getting those colonies seeded, cause I’m not gonna help,” Potuit lied. She probably would end up putting the entire mobile lab together by herself, while Lusitania remained holed up for all space and time.

Back down the fuselage, only about halfway back this time. These mounted experiments had sat dormant for most of the journey; their utility only became relevant with Mars dirt. Most of the undone experiments were either looking for dead organisms, trying to grow new organisms, or growing new organisms and then killing them. All the other boxes on the walls had been micro-gravity-dependent, and thus Potuit had finished all of them on the way here.

These new experiments were the fun ones. These actually required the astronauts to complete their mission; all the others could have been done back on the orbiting space station, had there been enough room. Potuit lovingly began unlatching the boxes labelled “EXP2” and gently unwrapp
boxes for the whole four hours of her assigned morning work schedule. Exhausted, she moseyed down to the “kitchen”, resembling more of a high-tech pantry than a place for cooking genuine meals.

Food for such a long mission proved difficult to keep interesting, the two Information Age Argonauts found. Around month three, peanut butter and jelly tortillas started losing their kick. Then, around month five, so did toasted peanut butter and jelly tortillas. Today, the menu consisted of rehydrated-dehydrated egg and what little they had left of cumin-substitute spice sauce. That and a weird brooding feeling when Lucy didn’t even show for lunch, his second-favorite time of the day. Josey ate and waited for around a half hour, by her watch, then decided to bring lunch to him personally – partially to be a generous crewmate, but mostly so she had an excuse to open his door without permission. In minutes, a (comparably, for a space kitchen) fabulous meal was prepared and sailing along the hallway with Col. Potuit.

Lusitania’s door was… exactly as it had been five hours prior. As expected, I guess, thought Potuit, though it somehow seemed odd that he hadn’t exited his chambers for, like, all day. In vestigial regard for privacy, Josey knocked a tap-tap-tuh-tap-tap on the titanium door, decorated only with the word “bedroom” stenciled in Latin, Cyrillic, and Chinese characters. She knocked again, after a minute, all the while advertising the admittedly just-alright chicken with eloquence. Still, for several rounds of barking and knocking on the door, there was no response.

With faux deference, Potuit creaked the noiseless door open by inches, peaking her ponytailed head around with the Velcro plate as soon as the opening was wide enough. The first thing she noticed was Col. Lusitania’s disembodied boot, floating footless at eye-level (though, weightless, eye-level was more of a polar measurement than vertical). After that, an oxygen tank; Wait, no, thought Josey, why does he have a Nitrogen tank out? The tank, newly disconnected from the Air Resolution unit, floated lackadaisically “up”, Potuit lifting her eyes to follow it. After that came the balding scalp and, then, along with a (given the circumstances) relatively calm exclamation from Col. Josey Potuit, materialized the dead, staring eyes of Col. Anders Lusitania. The mask covering his mouth and nose was attached by the expandable plastic tube from the emergency oxygen reserves.

Almost immediately (following the curt shriek she had involuntarily loose) Col. Potuit’s days in the Army came flooding back to her. Concurrently unstrapping her crewmate from his donned mask and checking his pulse, Potuit found Lucy’s sleeping bag was probably the best place to attempt CPR, and began pulling his lifeless body across the room. Strapped in with Lucy’s now-cold body, the living astronaut attempted breaths and chest compressions for what felt like an hour, before finally collapsing – or, rather, just balling up in an emotional, weightless desperation – into exhausted tears.

Colonel Lusitania was dead, had died probably hours prior. Really, had probably offed himself sometime late the night before, before breakfast. Taking a few minutes to compose her thoughts and, hopefully, vocal chords, Josey resolved to signal Houston the news, request advice for procedure. Turning to the late Lucy’s workstation, that goal was quickly diminished. The computer was fried; it looked almost exactly like, simultaneously, a really terribly expensive seafood dish and a scene from a shitty B-Horror science fiction movie from her adolescence. By any means, a message from this computer would not be happening anytime soon.

Panicked, the Colonel started to attempt reassembly on the only computer on the ship that could parlay with the Surface Communication Antenna. Reaching around the monitor’s mangled face, Potuit found a note next to the melted ethernet cable port.

The note was on Lustania’s trademark resumé paper, scrawled in surprisingly calm, neat lettering. It had a title, which – of all the things currently happening currently – struck Potuit as patently odd. She read:

Our Martyrdom

Hello, Josey.

It appears now that you’ve found my body, and a (hopefully) totally nonfunctional comm. system. Broken now for at least twelve hours. It’s really better this way.

There’s really nothing for you to do now, Josey, so please – read all the way through this before you go
trying to ruin anything for me. First, we will crash into Mars. We – repeat – will crash into Mars. The ship is pointed such that our crash will be spectacular, our remains irrecoverable. There is no fuel left. The tanks have been made to leak, I allowed for this on our last EVA when I fixed the Ammonia leak: I started another one on the fuel tanks. The discharge of fuel has been factored into the redirection of this ship to its current path. There is no fuel left. Do not try to change course. You cannot.

Second, and far more importantly, our communications with Earth are cut off; blocked, ended – and have been for the last half day or so. You cannot contact Earth. You cannot ask for help, nor could they help you if you could ask. It’s better if you don’t even try to ask – they will not know how or why we crashed.

We shall be lauded as tragic heroes, not condemned as idiots, or maniacs, or lunatics. Do not try to contact Earth – at this point, your best outcome of trying would be sustained electrocution.

I’ve left your air conditioning on, your power supply to your precious experiments and kitchen. For your comfort in your final hours. Speaking of which, if you find this any time after 1000h, you have fewer than 36.

It really has been swell to work with you, Ms. Potuit. You were quite tolerant of my plan, though you knew nothing of it.

We will be famous, Josey. The first man and first woman to die on Mars. We’re assured to be in history books, to have monuments at home, to be written and sung about. My children will be famous, set for life. It truly is a shame you were unable to start a family before our grand finale. So it goes.

Think about it – had we survived this mission, our names would be lost in history, rubbed into irrelevance by the racing eons —–

She crushed the note in her hand. The momentum of the fastballed note towards the wall started Potuit’s exit from the room, and she propelled herself down to her own room to grab supplies. Fumbling in the drawer of replaceable electronics, she found a radio transmitter small enough to fit inside the palm of her EVA suit’s glove, a roll of solid-core aluminum wire, and a USB to AV cable. Utilizing five semesters of a computer science minor at Yale, she constructed and assembled a radio dish that – given precision and some really really good fortune – could transmit signal from her laptop, reflect off the Surface Communication Antenna, and send some semblance of an SOS to Houston.

Turning on her laptop, the jury-rigged dish shorted out the USB port, and by extension fried the laptop’s inner power lines. Potuit grabbed a plastic sextant from the box of emergency supplies. After another period of time wasted, Lucy’s grim sentence was proven true. Their path was into Hell, a downward trajectory severely unadvisable for those wishing to arrive with all limbs and heads attached.

Potuit had never put on an EVA suit without assistance, but managed it in a relatively impressive time. Carrying one backup laptop, a USB cord, and a pen (for typing), she entered and exited the airlock, bound for the still-intact Comm. Antenna. On the outside, Col. Potuit noticed the three missing plates on the three gas reserves, all displaying inner emptiness. Ripping her eyes from them, she aimed her whole consciousness at the antenna. Within two minutes, Potuit had the laptop connected and logged on. In her intense concentration, Josey Potuit had not realized she was holding her breath, or that the suit had sprung a leak in the back of her left shoulder, unreachable by her even when oxygenated and pressurized. She had just barely gotten the command prompt open when she felt the sweat on her forehead and the saliva on her tongue start to boil. She blacked out.

DARING MARS PIONEERS DIE IN MYSTERIOUS ACCIDENT

Houston (AP) – Yesterday, at approximately 5:00PM Eastern Time, the historic Sagan Ares Lander crashed on the surface of Mars, as confirmed by barely-recognizable debris, in photos transmitted from orbiting satellites. The two astronauts on board, Cols. Anders Lusitania and Josey Potuit, both American, are presumed dead.
The crash’s cause, at this point, is uncertain to NASA and the DoD, though impact with high-speed debris (pursuant to the sudden loss of communication, fuel, and navigation) remains the most likely agent, according to Vice President Warren, chair of the National Space Council.

Although Col. Josey Potuit left behind no recognized family, Col. Lusitania is survived by his wife and three children.

In a statement made early this morning, Vice President Warren said, “Our adventures into space have always been marked with tragedy. It is the fate of ambitious peoples. Today, we remember those we lost, Col. Anders Lusitania and Col. Josey Potuit, in full knowledge of their devotion to their nation, to our great nation. Their sacrifice, though unwilling, will go down in history as one of courage …
Solipsism

1

I’m not very religious, I don’t think our actions are watched by God. I don’t think that all of our actions are pre-determined, but free will isn’t real. What a fun, quantum coincidence it is. It’s all rather oppressive, however, to think on the futility of our actions, so I don’t. More fun to exist while you’re alive than to try and untangle the metaphysical consequences of egging your friend’s house until you die.

2

Is the singular form of “mentos” just one “mento”?
When I first met Caspian, I asked that question. I was genuinely curious.
It was the fifth of June, summer of the two-thousand-and-fifth year. I was at work, alone, at noon. I was scheduled to work from twelve to five, but it’s slow in the first few hours. So I wrote a letter.
I took an honors class in English that past year, so I was pretty good at it. My teachers told me I was okay, but they never told me to enter any writing contests, like my friend. I think I write too literally.
So, I wrote a letter.
I printed, addressed, stamped, and mailed it before I got in my car. Then I drove to Colorado with five hundred dollars in cash. The next day, that is. I drove there with three of my good friends; we were going to explore the “roof of America”, the state with the highest-altitude rocks in all of the contiguous 48 states.

3

My friends say I’m smart. I’ve never understood what that meant, since I do a lot without really thinking at all. Maybe that’s what they mean by smart, that I don’t ever think the wrong things. That’s because I just sort of don’t think. Either way, it must’ve seemed really smart to them when I didn’t let Caspian leave.
I don’t know why, I already said that. I just had the idea. We had just gotten back from our trip and were drinking in my basement. So I drugged Casper’s beer and told my friends to go home, I was just going to let him sleep it off on my basement couch. The whole time I just felt weirdly numb and nervous, but outside I was a “cool cucumber”, like someone somewhere says.
Anyways the other guys left me and Caspian alone, so I handcuffed his wrists and ankles together, laid him on his side in my car. He probably couldn’t walk or run, how I connected the handcuffs, and that was okay. Just wanted him to be able to stand. I didn’t know why, I figured I’d see some pretty sunset that I’d want to share with him, so I made it so he could stand with help. Just not run.
So I went to sleep that night but only for a while, just enough to be awake, driving, and far awayish when Caspian awoke. He was really scared at first, then realized he was in the back of my car. He laughed and I laughed. Casper asked me to let him go, then he asked where we were going; I wasn’t done laughing yet.
A few minutes later he started yelling, so I turned up the music from the radio. It sounded better than yelling, but it wasn’t loud enough to really cover Caspian. So I decided I would talk him out of yelling at me. I offered him a mento. Or a mentos. Not sure.
That calmed him down, so I smiled at the highway, since it would’ve been unsafe to smile in any other direction, really. “Joker and the Thief” came on the stereo, so I bobbed my head to it.

4

We were driving north, I think. We were in South Dakota. In a town called Woonsocket. Or, at least, I was. Casp was in the car still (the windows cracked). What a weird name for a town. I parked south of Woonsocket and walked for about an hour until I got to a grocery store and bought some oreos, a jug of water, and lots of beef jerky. For the road.
Walking back to the car I dropped an oreo on the dirt. I was so pissed. But then I saw a truck coming towards me so I stopped yelling and hid the blood on my hand.

When I got back to the car, I set a few oreos down by his face and some jerky. He didn’t really let me pour any water for him so I guess he wasn’t thirsty. I was. I put the groceries in the passenger seat.

Caspian kept asking me questions, but I wasn’t really talkative. I just listened to the change in his tone when he asked the same questions over and over. Around sunset he started to sound really sad so I stopped off the road with the car pointing west and went around the side of the car to prop him up so he could see out the windshield.

That sunset was pretty. I think it has something to do with the dirt in the air. South Dakota has interesting air-dirt. Caspian didn’t think so, just cried. I told him *Look! Look at that sunset!* but he wouldn’t listen or smile, so I yelled at him.

I didn’t like yelling at him. I regretted it. I didn’t watch him until he fell asleep, I felt so bad.

Casper cried for a while, before he fell asleep. It looked like he was asleep, so I parked and got a towel out of my truck to cover him. I needed gas.

5

A half-hour after I got gas, I stopped the car. I went potty in a ditch outside the car, far enough away that Casper or I wouldn’t smell it. Then I got back in the car and slept in the seat.

When I woke up I realized that I never let Casper out to go potty. I got out and went around to the door by his feet and saw that he had been awake for a few hours probably. Looked really tired. But I pulled him out and helped him with his pants so he could go. He didn’t look at me or say anything, just did his thing. I told him I didn’t have anything to wipe with and he didn’t react. That was weird.

I helped Caspian put his pants back on, and gave him some food. I hoped he would want some water, but he never asked. So I gave him a water bottle I found in my glovebox. It was already open, but that’s a good thing because he couldn’t really open it while handcuffed. What a fun coincidence.

I set it on the floor in front of him, full of water, so that he could pick it up with his teeth and drink. I put another seven oreos and four pieces of jerky in front of him for breakfast. I ate some too, but less than I gave Casper. I don’t think he likes the name Casper. I started calling him mentos.

I ate another mento. I’ve decided that that’s the way to just eat one, since mentos is what I call Caspian now. I actually ate two more mentos. Mentos didn’t want any.

Later, I had lunch. Caspian had finished his whole water bottle and breakfast, so I stopped calling him mentos and gave him jerky. His eyes were really bloodshot. I thought that was bad, but I didn’t fix it. I couldn’t. Unless I cut his eyes out. But that’s messy, and would make the car smell.

I drove until one-thirty. There’s security before you can enter Canada. I turned around. I drove until I was almost out of gas. Caspian asked me to take him home. I said “okay” and didn’t take him home. I’m a dirty liar.

I parked outside of a town like at Woonsocket and walked to the gas station and got gas in a jerry can. An old woman asked me for help. She was very kind. I told her I was fine. She didn’t believe me and I shoved her and ran back to the car. That was so stupid. I was so mean to her. She didn’t deserve it. I drove away from that town, I don’t know which.

6

I fell asleep while driving, and the car went into a ditch. Casper screamed and I remembered I didn’t ever give him dinner. Stupid. So I refilled his water and gave him some more oreos and jerky. I went back to sleep.

I woke up there was a man tapping on my window. He was wearing a hat, even though it was dark out. He wore a black hoodie sweatshirt, like a concert sweatshirt. He asked Are you okay, so I got out. He said he had a chain to tow us. Caspian was asleep. When we started towing my car, Caspian woke up and screamed. The hat man went to go see. I killed him. Used a hammer I found in his truck. It was so messy. I moved his body over. He had a pistol in his truck. I put it in my trunk.

I think Casper saw me do it. He stopped yelling. I finished towing my car back on to the road, and
unhooked my car from the truck. I was awake then so I got back in and started driving. I wanted to go camping.

Fuck. Fuck. Caspian probably hates me now.

Wyoming’s pretty. I stopped, got more food. The gas station had other cars so I parked around back, ran into the store, bought powdered donuts and allergy medicine, then ran back to the car. Caspian had opened the door. He hadn’t yelled. I think he’s scared.

I put him back in the car. I put the child lock on, kept driving, put a bunch of donuts by Caspian’s face. He cried a lot. I felt bad because he was scared. His water bottle was spilled so I put new water in. The store owner followed me out and I hit him with my car on accident. I was driving away too fast. I felt bad.

Caspian was talking again, asking me to go home. He asked the same question a hundred times. I didn’t say anything. I had to drive. Had to focus.

I drove to Utah, found a great spot. It was empty all around. I drove off-road to arrive in the desert. It was dark. I ate dinner. Caspian wouldn’t eat. I made him eat. Made him eat donuts. He cried. I don’t know why. The donuts are good. I ate a few.

I stopped here because I was out of gas. I was going to drive up a mountain. I ran out of gas before I could. I was disappointed.

I took Caspian out to let him potty. I went potty too. I lifted Caspian, went away from the potty, dropped him. I grabbed the towel and made it a blanket for us. I snuggled up against him. He was shaking bad.

Caspian didn’t eat anymore. He soiled himself. I yelled at him for doing that. I felt bad for it. I tried to make it up. Gave him donuts. He didn’t want any. I talked to Caspian, but he didn’t want to. I told him stories. I told him about my dead dog.

The donuts ran out. I still had jerky and oreos. Caspian wouldn’t eat. The rest were mine. I was going to eat but I dropped another oreo. This time I didn’t stop yelling. No one was going to see me. I yelled and yelled I was so mad.

It was dark. Time flew by. I was having fun with Caspian. We were camping! Me and Caspian. I was ready for bed. I snuggled up to Caspian again. He bit my arm when I hugged him. I got mad. I hit his head. I felt bad. Didn’t snuggle. I took the towel, left, and slept in the car. I bled some.

It was cold after that. Caspian wasn’t where I thought. I got scared, thought I lost Caspian. He wasn’t hard to find. Maybe a mile away. I found him. He had blue lips. I poked his cheek, it was cold. His eyes were open.

He wasn’t looking at me. He was looking at something over there. He looked like he was looking through me. Caspian was playing games.

I played games too. I acted like he was dead. I screamed, cried, screamed. It was all a game. I knew he wasn’t dead. I knew.

He let me feed him. I put a donut in his mouth, helped him chew. He didn’t swallow. Caspian was savoring the donut I know. Funny guy. I laughed when he didn’t swallow. So funny.

I wanted to explore. I found a baseball, the stitches gone. It was fun to throw. Caspian sucks at baseball. He can’t throw. It’s okay. I threw the baseball at the car. I stopped. I didn’t want a dent.

Caspian got cold. I slept in the car because snuggling with him wasn’t warm.

The next morning was cold. I was cold. I only had oreos. Casper’s belly got big last night. I think he ate some. Lots. He didn’t share any.
I tried to make him share. I used the pistol I took from the man. It made Caspian’s belly open but I didn’t want to share because the food looked like guts. It was guts. I didn’t want that.

I told Caspian jokes. He didn’t laugh. He still had some donut left in his mouth but he was sharing it with a critter. I saw it crawl out. Caspian shares his donuts with bugs. But not with me. Caspian fucking hates me.

11

I dreamed weird. Dreamed a big monster. It was tall-black-slimy, was a mountain and had a hundred arms and fingers and had Caspian’s cold face. It talked to me about Caspian. It said I killed him. I got mad at that. I didn’t. I tried to kill the monster. I woke up.

12

I woke up and the sun was up high. I slept long. I was out of food.

I looked at Caspian until my eyes dried. I looked into the food he wouldn’t share. The gut stuff. I stared. Staring is rude. Into the gut stuff. I was hungry.

The monster came back. I couldn’t see it. It talked to me. The voice that said I killed. The voice told me to eat. Eat the food Caspian was offering me. The gut stuff. No I said No I don’t want to eat the gut stuff but it kept going, telling me to eat.

I ate some and puked. One bite. Then puke. It smelled and it tasted bad. I was so sorry. I puked on Caspian’s legs. I tried to chew. I puked when I chewed. I was sorry. I was hungry. The monster told me. I was hungry.

I washed Caspian. Wash the puke. I washed the gut stuff off of Caspian’s legs. Caspian was purpler now. And colder. The game wasn’t fun. I tried to wake him up. To wake Caspian up. He didn’t wake up. I was so pissed. I yelled and yelled at him. He didn’t wake up.

13

I felt sick. After I puked. I felt really tired and sick. The monster was gone. It didn’t come back. It wanted me to eat. I tried to eat. I think I messed up. I missed Caspian. I made him talk.

Made him say Hi I’m Caspian, Where’s the donuts? or Please take me home I want to be home. Made him say I’m hungry please feed me donuts. Ha-ha-ha. That one is funny. I laughed for an hour at that one. No donuts for you. You didn’t share.

I passed out. Woke up at night. I was really hungry. I saw Caspian. Really I smelled him. First. I smelled him before I saw him.

The monster is back. I can’t see him he’s behind me but he’s there. He whispers now. Whispers to me. He is whispering to eat. The gut stuff. Eat the gut stuff. Eat it. Eat the gut stuff. I can’t I say I can’t. He won’t stop.

14

I waited until night. I ate gut stuff. I needed it. I puked all of it. I puked all night. Now I can’t move. I can lay on my back.

It’s dark. There are stars. I never saw them. Never looked up at night. There’s hundreds. All white. It’s so cold. I’m so cold. I feel like Casper felt. He was so cold. I can think. Barely. But I can. I can think. My legs are numb. They’re cold. I’m cold. But I can. Think. I can.

The monster. It’s Caspian. I see it now. It has its hands on me. On me. On my neck. On my throat. I can’t breathe can’t breathe can’t breathe can’t breathe can’t breathe can’t breathe can’t breathe.

15

The letter. I wrote the letter to Caspian. I thought he would receive it, but didn’t, after I took him. I didn’t know I was going to take him, just did. He would’ve gotten it the day we left. He never read it. It was mostly nonsense. I told him I that loved him, that I was gonna kill him, that I wanted him to see sunsets with me, that I wanted him to love me, that I wanted him to kill me. I meant all of those things.
Caspian did love me in the end. He loved me because I let him die. He wanted to die. I wanted to die and so did Caspian. He wanted to die because I know it’s why he loved me. I let him die, it’s what he wanted. So then I could die. Because Caspian didn’t love me anymore.
There Was God

I walked into the woods, searching for solitude – finding it smothering me in the oversaturating presence of millions of surrounding creatures. I had found my river, I had come to the end of my Siddharthic journey. Here was my ever-changing same, my ever-same transition of waters. Rather than jump in like the archetypal Hessian, I sat.

Satan embraced me in my post-modern asceticism. With no concrete buildings around me, their concrete morals vanished, and I found myself in contemplation of an absurdist end. I found in the river the transience of my life, the inevitability of my departure from it. Whence these thoughts came was my solitude, was my implosively overlapping mind; Human reason almost always amounts to suicide. Here was my human reason, pulling my lonesome heart towards the deeper parts of the tide.

There came Gabriel. From her side of the stream, she walked, child in tow, to the cold flow – some twenty yards from me, some twelve yards downstream. In the late Autumnal sun, her hair of smooth brown and grey highlight glinted a moving picture almost unbelievable, as though nothing living could outshine her solar pelt. In unison, she and her fawn stooped Earthward to drink.

In that moment, in my self-immolating hour of dark, there shown God. Such beauty, in the natural piece of pre-historical, pre-human art of her hair; Such order, in the stooping of necks to the silver water; Such beautiful innocence, in my total invisibility to her, in her total awareness of her child; from these things came the Divine to the base of my skull, to my accelerating heart, to my now-smiling eyes. There was God: in the entirely unhuman nature of the deer mother yearning for a quenched thirst, in my entirely human perception of my utter insignificance.

Then came my Beatrice – my herald of Divine Comedy. I realized in my bliss that, though by itself my worthlessness validated a swift and unceremonious death, when placed in view of the vast beauty in untouched nature, it is exactly that triviality of existence which God intended. Not, however, so that we humans must grovel in Fear and Worship so that we may be raised up and made into more than ourselves – rather, that our status as puny observers allows us to behold the infinite elegance of a mysterious Universe.

I heard, then, the bends of a bird calling far off. I reminisced about my childhood music, hearing the choral hymns that lifted me from my Sunday fog, the harmonies that would alleviate the failings of the sermon. The idea that elaborate, monumental symphonies could ever even approach the stark, singular beauty of one songbird seemed foolish. That thought led me to the imagination of all art as the effort of the child outside a movie attempting to recreate from memory the themes, plot, and setting of the master work they had witnessed: farcical.

Then, still watching my heavenly Messenger finish her drink, I knew my own birth was a ticket of admission to the nose-bleed seats of the greatest musical theater show of all time, unable to truly hear the more obscure messages, capable only of a holistic glance at the Universe’s true beauty. I knew then that suicide would mean leaving the show, would mean killing the lights on such amazing actors and sets as Heaven itself. Like a man crying for lack of tears, the act now seemed laughable.

Indeed, I did laugh – so humored was I in my delirium. My own ecstasy was my end. By my cry of joy, Gabriel looked – startled – right at me. Before my eyes could see my mistake, the mother, then, immediately, the child, fled out of sight into the trail-starved brush. Again the morphinomimetic chills, the rush of endorphins. To think, a walk to escape civilization metamorphosing from descent into savagery to an ascent to Heaven, all from one oblivious Bambi and her child. The smile from my moment of Natural revelation lingered as I returned to my home; returned frequently, as the songbirds in the church-tower extolled their creation on Thursday, the fourth day. And there was God.
On Social Contract

“Giving back” to one’s community, to one’s family, to one’s school, is an ideal drilled in children’s brains from a minor age. Can it be justified? I assert that it can, and must, by the *Social Contract* on every human. *Social Contract* is a term hereby defined as: an individual person’s inherent debt to his/her family and to society in general – debt best paid off through charity, service, information, art, science, compassion, and c. To the skeptical reader, the following thought might occur: “Surely there can be no inherent debt imposed on all people?” The thought is far from unreasonable, but misguided. To assume that all who are subject to debt are human people is to assume the inherent nature of the debt. In other words, the very humanity of people is what allots them their portion of obligation.

Pure Individualism is impossible. The fact that one can even read this essay is absolute proof. In order to learn even the very basic skills one would require to live outside society (hunting/farming, fishing, survivalism, and c.) the very least sophisticated skills must come from someone else. No human is born with the innate ability to survive – it must be learned. Take, for an example, the exception to this rule. Any child who somehow manages to survive even the first two years of their lives without familial assistance (really, any human assistance) would either be some sort of Antichrist or an impossible product of imagination.

I assume here that every living person was raised by other humans. Barring some mythological outliers, such has been the case for all recorded history. How, then, does this apply to *Social Contract*?

An inherent debt is owed to one’s family, the principal amount being one’s health, both mental and physical. As the starkest Individualist philosophers would agree, value must be bought with value (see: *Atlas Shrugged*, by Ayn Rand). Sane people value their lives – thus every person must repay as much value to them who gave it: one’s family.

In a similar fashion, no person born in a civilized country lives and dies without having been the recipient of *some* sort of value from their society. Some wonderful examples include: hospitals, roads, trade, commerce, police, vaccinations, schools, the military, agriculture, science, technology, law, banking, welfare, energy, libraries, firefighters – a miniscule fraction of the whole. For Objectivist-Capitalist-Individualists to claim zero reliance on government, one would expect them to give up polio and measles vaccines, subsidized corn groceries, and paved roads in their heroic rejection.

Now, to address repayment of said Contract. These following examples expand on a selected number of methods to repayment of one’s *Social Contract* – not the sum of all possible methods.

First: monetary wealth. No person is deserving of more than his/her share of wealth. Yes, those who contribute more value to this would deserve more value in return, in whatever form they can manage. However, in many cases, disproportionate wealth is given to disproportionately undeserving people. Creators of successful industrial innovations deserve the largest share of their innovation’s resultant profits. Not so large, though, that the return from the value contribution of laborers is unjustly directed away from them to management. Under amoral distribution, the top earners of this nation earn thousands upon thousands of times more than the lowest earners. While genius, ability, and talent must be rewarded, no corporate executive is worth a hundred thousand human beings, regardless how poor they may be.

To repair this disparity, redistribution of wealth is in order. More on this later.

Second in method: information. The discoveries made today in science and technology owe their origins to millennia of research by countless generations of great people. Accordingly, especially in such areas of innovation as medicine and surgery, new patents deserve exactly the protection that their value of novel contribution justifies; no more, no less. Specifically, patents on medicines should allow only for protection against intellectual theft – use of a patent to force exorbitant profits out of American pockets should be unlawful, as opposed to its relative legality today.

Third: public service. Public servants such as public defenders, police, firemen and women, educators, and c. deserve sufficient repayment for their contributions to society. For those aforementioned public servants, higher pay, better benefits, or both is generally in order. For certain public servants,
however, value contribution has been far exceeded by repayment for far too long. I refer specifically to
elected officials in the Legislative branch of the United States Government. With Congressional payrates
at current levels, these offices have become ends of reaping value from society in their own right, rather
than a means to provide service as repayment to society.

Fourth: compassion. As seen in Hippocratic laws of medicine, in religions of peace, in
Americanism, in family; every human is afforded, at the very bottom, some basic compassion from
her/his neighbors or family members. This can be in the form of charity, of conversation, or even in basic
human understanding of one another. It can thus be expected from every person – in business ethics and
practice, in interpersonal relations and contracts, and especially in legislation – compassion for fellow
humans.

All these repayments are justified by the previously validated and explained Social Contract, and
expected from everyone to his/her ability.

**Subhead: On a Socialist Economy’s Morality**

As previously discussed, via Social Contract, every person owes to society a return for that which
they have been given, and each person is owed in return for that which they have created and given to
society. This applies most immediately to wealth, and to the creation of wealth. As additionally
previously discussed, the status quo in American Capitalism is such that, in most cases, owners benefit
directly from profits while employees are paid fixed rates for their time, regardless of the company’s
success.

Should the Federal Government, then, directly interfere with businesses, writing and rewriting
their very bylaws? Absolutely not – such would violate and compromise free enterprise.

Rather than increasing government control within the private sector, it is my stern belief that an
improved graduated tax scale can effectively provide for the necessary redistribution of wealth in
America. Without getting into specific details, I will entail some tax plans to discuss their benefits.

The first step to maximizing tax revenue is to raise taxation rates on corporations who earn more,
much like personal income tax, yet a higher percentage by far (not so much, of course, that larger
corporations lose all potential for growth in capital).

Then, reducing tax loopholes that only the ultra-wealthy can utilize will substantially increase the
nation’s wealth. Once tax code is simplified, slight upticks in the highest brackets’ – coupled with
reductions in the lowest brackets’ – rates will produce further gain from tax revenue while simultaneously
decreasing the burden on the middle class.

These gains from the increased taxation on corporate and personal income will serve to provide
anywhere from partial to total funding for Universal Basic Income, Single-Payer Healthcare, or both.
These programs would serve to establish a far happier populace: one, because a more well-off bottom line
makes bloody revolution less likely; and two, because there is the added bonus for the capitalist class of
increased expendable income of the lower class.

These programs are products of the aspect of Social Contract of compassion. These programs do
not only follow a moral imperative of kindness, though. As I said, improving the lives of the poor will
improve both the happiness and the quality of life of those who help.

The second method I will mention uses, again, taxation. However, this method would tax not
corporations or individuals, but stock market transactions. A laughably insignificant increase of tax
ation on stock market transactions (as originally proposed and propagated by Sen. Bernie Sanders) would
entirely cover the cost of college for millions of young Americans for generations to come.

This subsidy of higher education (modelling the inherent subsidy of K-12 education) along with
local and community college promotion and improvement, will allow an entire generation to enter the
workforce with enough knowledge to innovate – without sinking them hundreds of thousands of dollars
into debt before they even begin.
Subhead: On Legislation – Socialist or Otherwise

I will start my digression to this topic by stating two things: That legislation is the product of humans and therefore human and fallible; and That the current structure of American politics accounts for this is an unacceptably subpar capacity, not due to the difficulty of repeal but rather due to influence on legislators themselves. Both of these facts confirm the need for application of my Social Contract.

Many current government policies and federal/state laws currently favor profit over human interests. This is not to say that good economic policy is nonexistent or impossible – just that it should come second whenever at all necessary to human needs and desires, e.g. the Greater Good.

Legislation, due to its property of being man-made and accordingly fallible, has no right to exist if it is not founded first in both ethics and morality, equally. Any law that purposefully harms a specific group of citizens in unfair favor of another on basis of employment or income is immoral. Taxation, in my opinion, is not of this class, given that it is not unfairly favorable, and especially given that the wealthy, as much as the poor, typically benefit more from a more economically liberated lower class.

Legislators, however, while directly responsible for the creation of such law, do not hold the whole blame for current policies favoring the ultra-wealthy, for those ultra-wealthy people themselves actually fund the creation of those laws. High-pressure lobbying by third parties – in the forms of gifts, trips, donations to charities or to campaigns – are constantly employed to sway Congressmen and Women, and are – at their most basic essence – bribery.

To end the promotion of this practice, colloquially “voting with one’s wallet,” several options remain open. In descending order of severity:

- A revolution (bloody or otherwise) purging the entire current, corrupted Congress and executive branches and beginning anew. While this option is obviously not the best idea, it would certainly work in the short term.
- A congressional committee on corruption within Congress, and subsequent Constitutional amendment(s) limiting congressional terms to 12 years (six consecutive terms) in the House of Representatives, and 18 years (three consecutive terms) in the Senate. This again excludes limits on non-consecutive terms.
- A Constitutional amendment requiring independent, disinterested, and publicly-conducted research to be done before any regulatory legislation (on energy, medicine, industry, and c.) can even be introduced for debate.
- Finally, the most direct (conversely the most-easily circumventable) route would be a Federal law outlawing any bribery, gifts, or donations from corporations to Congressmen.

Any one of these actions would serve to ensure that Congressmen would vote according to the wishes of their constituency, rather than just the pocketbook-filling top five percent. However, given the effectiveness of that first method, I strongly suggest faster and less violence-inducing actions be taken.

Subhead: Conclusion

In closing, I would like to restate the essence of the Social Contract: every individual owes an inherent debt to society and to their family – debt best paid through art, innovation, or monetary wealth, among others. In order to ensure that all who benefit from society, I propose what I have laid out in this essay: that through taxation and legislation the United States of America can become again a beacon and enforcer of equality, morality, and justice.
Wiped off the Face of the Earth: Outdated Wiping Weapons

Why do men commit crimes; wage wars? To answer this question, I find that men are, at the very core, most ambitious when they feel the least satisfaction. This dissatisfaction can take many forms, but I believe wholeheartedly that a dry, chafed rectum often causes many a man’s daily displeasures.

The root of this displeasure names a problem as old as modern civilization. It has plagued Roman legionnaires, Chinese emperors, French Huguenots, even American Rancheros. In fact, most humans have, at some point or another, encountered the issue at hand: cleaning up after oneself. Indeed, humans have been defecating forever, so why has a proper solution not yet arisen?

It, quite simply, already arose – in the form of flushable wet wipes. No, not baby wipes, as large a role they may play in the promotion of adult wet wipes. Decades of disinfectant, hygienic, and biological research produced these wipes; they represent the ultimate in self-care cleanliness and luxury. I personally vouch for the unmatched comfort and global potential of flushable wipes.

For the sake of perspective, allow me to address some alternative options. Ancient Romans used sponges (on sticks!) to sanitize themselves, then dipped them in salt water for cleaning. Unsurprisingly, the practice ceased with the fall of the empire. Chinese toilet-engineers pioneered the first toilet paper, and American Westerners revived the practice by scraping literal furniture magazines on their colons. After the use of the ever-present Sears catalog lost its appeal, corporations developed the now-mysteriously-universal toilet paper, while some years later splinter-free toilet paper originated. Somebody call OSHA. Finally, the bidet: some would say the most “advanced” form of post-poop preening (this remains, indubitably, palpably, false). Man maintains his dignity when dry. The bidet – the singular wettest wash routine – therefore most closely resembles the practice of waterboard torturing one’s derriere.

Enter the flushable wet wipe. The cotton-blended fabric feels soft and supple; the godly fabric soaks in sanitizing solution; the wetness of the wipes more closely mimics the cooling-off of a brisk towel after a run than the afternoon agenda of a resident of Guantanamo Bay. No other washing option competes even marginally with this juggernaut of the porcelain palace.

Now, there endure more reasons than petty for a man such as I to so highly value such a relatively minor piece of his day. Most people dwell not long on their daily experiences with toilet paper. Not, however, because people find the interaction some irrelevant fact of life – those who suffer at the hands of Big Toilet Paper simply repress their memories of those hellish white sheets, forgetting their pain rather than changing their ways.

The gentle laborers of this world suffer enough already at the hands of the Capitalist class. We must prevail against our oppressors’ trespasses into our undersides; no good woman or man will accept this harassment without putting up a solid fight any longer. As I stated previously, I insist that the conflicts of class struggle retain a core cause in the discomfort of the lower intestinal tracts of the masses.

The first step towards world peace must thus entail colonic peace. Revolutions must enjoy revolutionaries, however; in order to foment support, I plan to form one International Wet Wipers (or IWW for short) to assist in bringing about a peaceful revolution in hygiene. Just as with socialism, judicial review, or that one time the middle school DJ thought I was trying to flirt with him, misunderstanding often directly interferes with progress. We Wipers will not woo our neighbors with radical language. Rather, the theorized IWW will focus on letting people know that wet wipes already fit within their current ideologies. Through this method and this organization only can true change germinate. Wet wipes for the world; the world for a wet wipe.
Colorado

The mountains breathe deeply with us tonight.
The stars above have never been this true.
Not even the trees are as wise as you.

The birds in nests to each other cling tight.
The crisp, blue creek slips quietly through.
The mountains breathe deeply with us tonight.
The stars above have never been this true.

With the earth beneath me, I feel all right.
With you right beside me, my heart feels new.
In the morning, we are reborn with dew.
The mountains breathe deeply with us tonight.
The stars above have never been this true.
Not even the trees are as wise as you.
OBE off of I-87

my reflection stared out of grimy glass
the whole area smelled strongly of gas
my hair was unkempt and my eyes were tired
near me, a woman no longer desired
private moments upon which to trespass

the woman heaved to the sink all her mass
(one of the forgotten things there was class)
and, with an effort, shakily respired
   my reflection stared

outside, i journeyed over the brown grass
past decaying truckers, crude, cruel, and crass
a youthful couple in a car conspired
while i stood by, divinely uninspired
as cars careened by on the underpass
   my reflection stared

Cape May in January

The fog rolls in and swallows me
and the gray ocean roars on.
Completely alone in front of the sea,
the fog rolls in and swallows me.
It is here that I can be free,
melancholy in the winter dawn.
The fog rolls in and swallows me
and the gray ocean roars on.
Somewhere in Nevada

Nothing tastes as good
as a McDonald’s cheeseburger
after driving for eight hours.

“I told you we wouldn’t make it,”
you say, a smile flirting
with the corners of your lips.

“We never do,” I sigh
dejectedly, which takes effort
when I’m so content.

The yellow sign outside
gleams like just-found treasure
in the sparkling sunlight.

Inside, a peppy pop song
gently muffles others’
conversations.

Nothing tastes as good as
a summer afternoon somewhere
decidedly far from home.

Chicago O'Hare at 2 AM

People carry suitcases and the bags under their eyes.
Curled into the seat, I fold into myself.
My senses are dulled without you.

An adolescent daughter tries to prove alert
all while her mother calls her bluff.
People carry suitcases and the bags under their eyes.

A group of young friends sit, legs splayed,
on the floor, sharing drinks as fatigue seeps into voices.
Curled into the seat, I fold into myself.

I rub the small strip of skin that the silver band once hugged.
When the flight to New York is called, I stand, alone.
My senses are dulled without you.
Night Shift at the Musee Marmottan Monet

“Even Monet rots in the ground,”
his colleague said with a sly smile,
abandoning the gallery
without glancing back behind her.

He turned back to *Sunrise*, knowing
even Monet rots in the ground.
It was well into the night shift,
but the moon didn’t fill the space.

The flashlight glared at the canvas,
interrogating the oil paint.
Even Monet rots in the ground.
The emptiness was oppressive.

He sat on the bench, surrounded
by masterpieces, knowing that
they all look the same in the dark.
Even Monet rots in the ground.

Intersection

in seguin, texas, i sit alone at the intersection
neutrogena natural ivory (20) in the glaring red
lights dancing on
left turns now
eastbound and westbound now
no one there to go

how can i blame the traffic lights for continuing their performance
when there’s no one in the audience
under the weight of eyeshadow and lip liner and empty i’m fines to the mirror
am i not exactly the same
Beach Town, Missouri

while driving in missouri i looked out my window and saw a lovely beach town. the waves and wind had caressed the white and blue stores and houses just enough to give them character. there was a charming local pizza joint and a charming local ice cream parlor. everyone drove cars at least five years old but no one minded because those things don’t matter when you’re that close to the ocean. the ocean is freedom. true freedom. to live so near a being that could swallow you whole without even trying. to know you are so small in the end and the beginning and everything in between. it was the kind of town where everyone works in gift stores and everyone’s marriage is happy and everyone is too busy living to fear death.

one mile farther and i saw the drab green-gray of missouri once again.
Dead Buck: I

Dead Buck: I
Dead buck in the basement.
Electrical issues: no, suicide:
Maybe. Sixteen

Is a trap with blue eyes and blonde hair;
Pavement gone bleary: yes

Mothers are whatever fathers say they are: no father—
You are whatever mother says you are: yes
Flames blazing in the Sunday heat—
A funeral: no
Cremation: yes

Muddled beauty in a crumbling roadside inn—
The commercial value of paint-stripped pillars in Perry County: low
The commercial value of painted and lacquered bars in Perry County: high

I am he: no
I am she: yes
Says the boy in defiance of educational authority,
A soul perturbed
By the little nowhere town tumbleweeds that roam: unexplained

Boy’s tears or girl’s tears: same response
To meeting dead bucks on the school bus,
Antlers taking seats: stand

Bully destroys art project: once—shame on
Him—Bully destroys art project: twice—shame
On me—Bully destroys art project: thrice—
Pencil goes through his hand.
He’s done for, Mother,
In the most unremarkable of ways.

**To The Coal Miner’s Wife:**

To The Coal Miner’s Wife:

I still cannot decide who was the canary
and who was the coal mine;
toxicity often enjoys a life of anonymity—
especially in a little nowhere town.
I think that’s what Grace is—
divine toxicity living in small towns.

What I have decided is that sometimes Christ lives
in the heart even if it is as a bullet;
you aren’t religious, so you won’t agree,
but I wonder how a one-legged man doesn’t inspire faith.

In the storms of ‘08,
we all huddled and said the Lord’s Prayer—
but you wouldn’t sing for us after—
when the rains slowed, and we were sure
that the walls wouldn’t scream and cave in.

The pastor told us that zealotry is an
inherently Roman trait,
and that’s when I first realized that you have the nose
of a Greek.

That winter when my hands turned vaguely black,
I began to wonder if maybe I was
the miner stuck between the two of you.
Still, you refused to sing.

On the morning that all of us remember,
and yet none of us speak—
not even to the children, and especially not
to the adults, I remember
that He sang in the shower—*Amazing Grace.*
He knew every verse—
But you mumbled unsure,
Toxic as the bathroom filled
Out all uncertainties,
As the mine emptied.
Mother Says

Mother Says

Mother says fathers are
An Atheist’s prayer at the foot of
Damnation—
The banter of men—
Everyday Willy Lomans—
The vapors of her sixth cigarette at noon.

Mother says fathers are
Men
With cocaine and blood and years on their sleeves—
Men
Who skulk up stairs and bang on tables—
Men
That carry thermoses of coffee to day jobs.

Mother says fathers are
Whatever she says
They are.
If Plates Are Shirts Are Milk Jars

It’s dawn or dusk or
Some other time of dark
And you can hear Him on the stairs,
In the hallway, in the kitchen—
Hear Him moving plates around,
Cooking something bitter
To your taste buds like soured milk.

Before five years old alcohol soothes
Fairy-inflicted wounds in the night or day
Or whatever time of dark this is
When He steps out the screen
Grabbing the grass with His boots
Taking hold of the door, slamming it quietly.

You hear Him beneath your window
Walking away and you pray on your knees
In the dark of this time that He’s coming back.

Or you pray on your elbows that He’s leaving,
But you can’t tell at this time of dark
When He walks through the gravel driveway
Towards the cows or the road
And for a split-second you hear Him
Choose the road;
You never heard Him pack a bag in the kitchen
Unless plates are shirts,
But maybe he did and dark sounds fooled
Half-awake brains into smelling bacon as bitter—
Or was it sweet?

Maybe plates that are shirts are milk jars.
Maybe they’re neither and are really just plates. Maybe
It’s just impossible to tell at this time of dark.
Elegy Under The Couch

Elegy Under The Couch

Out in the elegy country
There lay a wooden spool as big as a hand
Drawn closed into a compact fist.
Glistening dully in an attic it weaves

Yarns of those that once were
And those who are yet to be, imagined
Like Cortazar’s whirring bug—
Perhaps, it thinks,

Men will remember I am here.
Though I am gone by virtue
Of having rolled somewhere dim,
Suppose they hear me and are arrested

With pitiful fits of tears or exaltations
Of my beauty.
To Those Yet To Be

To Those Yet To Be

To those yet to be
prenatal whispers in shriveled palms and glistening eyes,
you who cough phantom coughs and sigh
phantom sighs—

beauty divine. Bodiless, you are but lined
words on paper
titled, “Boy one.”
Named not

Jacob, or John, or Jack.
The tips of bean stalks and corn husks whistle
missives of lamentation.
This season yielded not

a cob or a head of hair.
Must’ve been the dust
settled thick over thinly seeded fields.
The locusts ran free

this year, and the beetles came out to play.
Pestilence is your name,
if not forever, then today.
We pocket our whispers,

bury them in the earthen fray
beyond the green
and perhaps, with rain and shine, will yield
a shivering sheen

whom we will call son.
Forever Fields

We have to think of them as forever baling,
all sun beaten brows
and red necks hiding somewhere
among the corn and beans and wheat
harvesting their ears.

There is forever meat and potatoes in the kitchen
always eight kids huddling
‘round a church door waiting
for bells
to go inside and worship
the promise of forever.

Forever stagnant,
they’re a Schrodinger experiment—
safe, sane, and swell
so that it’s impossible to tell
even when the box opens.

We have to think of them as forever alive;
existence legitimized perpetually in the rustle of the fields.

July 30

Happy birthday to a coffin—
To dry cheekbones
And long-rotten jawlines—
To the soul promised,
To the wife survived.
We threw rocks in the water
Today as a ceremony
Just in case the stars really are
Windows—in which case,
There is a god—
In which case I prayed on my knees
Before bed last night
And the night before
And the night before that
And the night before, before that.
Wednesday Afternoon

Phones buzz in pockets
as heavy brown doors are pushed
open, one hand reluctantly answering
a call from wives, the other hand
fumbling around leather briefcases
for car keys. Sleek black shoes squeak
against polished floors until

even hit dense pavement
and flakes of gravel crunch underneath
the weight. Heads turn side to side,
watching for cars, not listening
to wives, eyes squinted as sun rays
illuminate afternoon skies, accompanied
by a refreshing gust of wind
and the occasional whistle of a bird

in a nearby tree. Car engines rumble
in the dim parking garage;
okay! \( \text{monmywayhome-I’llseeyousoon-Iloveyougoodbye;} \)
front ends peek out into the sunlight
again, windows roll down
welcoming the kind breeze to flow
through the cars lined up on the streets
beside lonely gray buildings whose only wish
is to touch the clouds, to be one with the trees,
to sing with the birds.

Conference rooms bustle, turn signals blink, a bird
chirps, noses breathe in crisp summer air.
Multitudes

I won't remember this in the morning. The way her arm feels wrapped around my shoulders. She is helping me into the car, her car, which is red like mashed up cranberries. The last time I ate cranberries was when I was seven. My aunt had just left her husband, who hated cranberries and raspberries and strawberries with obvious passion. She showed up on my parents' front porch in the rain, which looked very dramatic like a scene from a sad movie. In her hands were bowls full of the berries her husband detested, and so we all sat around the coffee table with criss-crossed legs and ate red berries that stained our fingers and chewed and swallowed in silence pretending that my aunt wasn't on the verge of tears, that her life wasn't dramatic and upsetting like a sad movie. I don't like sad movies, because I like to live in denial. That's what my girl told me, anyway, that I like to live in denial. I don't want to acknowledge all the disappointments of this world, because then I'll be sad like the people in the movies, and maybe then I'll show up on someone's porch in the pouring rain wearing squeaky shoes and the wrong type of jacket and I'll pretend not to be upset even though I am.

She's asking me where my home is now. I've never called the place where I live home. Not for any specific reason, but I guess I've always considered where I am now as a stepping stone, a rest stop on the journey to a successful future. I never thought I would live in a shitty apartment next door to a crack addict and a low budget porn star for more than a year. This isn't my real life was always my state of mind. But it's been three years since I moved in and I still don't have a couch, because like my girl told me I live in denial, and I still refuse to believe that this could really be my life.

I told her where I live and she's taking me there. I don't recognize this street we're on, but she's telling me that we are close. There's something poetic about the way lights look at night, big and round and bright, juxtaposing the blackness and infiniteness of the sky. Traffic lights are beautiful at two AM, and I think that not enough people have realized this. Not a lot of people are outside at two AM, and I don't know why. This time of night is the only time I feel like a human, like I'm real, like I'm a manifestation of atoms and nerves and thoughts that get to ponder how we got to now and where we go from here. I don't know where to go from here, because even though I can ask the questions I don't always have an answer. But it's at two AM that I'm certain of my existence, that I am human, and she is too.

She says we are here. My home. The heat in her car is still running because I left my coat at the bar. It was my favorite coat. I wonder if it is someone else's coat now, or if I call the bar tomorrow they will have it in their lost and found. Living makes kind of a game out of lost and found. You lose yourself, you find a new you, or maybe you don't. Depends on how good you are at the game. She is helping me out of the car, her car, that is red like the bowl of cranberries my aunt cried into, and I feel again her arm holding my shoulders which I will not remember in the morning, or the morning after that, or seventy two mornings after that. That's the truly disappointing thing about memories. After they are forgotten once, they are forgotten forever. Into the void, no second chances. Maybe that's where we go from here. The earth forgets us, and all our atoms and nerves and thoughts drift off into the void, lost in the sure infinite blackness of the night sky, where traffic lights flicker and glow, trying to compete with the beauty of the stars.
Morning Prayer

a daydream of something better.
tranquility a silk ribbon secure
around our shoulder blades
tied loosely into a drooping bow
at our sun kissed chests. we sit there
on the bank of a river we have never
known before, toes dipping into cool
rapids whose white noise replaces
the sound of heartbeats and
a nearby fisherman. sunshine
a yellow gaze like stardust-- mystical,
a moment in time from a memory
we both have forgotten to remember.
behind us children play
with the earth that has been
so kind to the soles of our feet, the aching
in our backs. you bless the life you never
lived. to fill the space I begin
to speak of mediocrity, the way that we
so desperately pined to breathe
the sweet air of a field just like
any other. how we wished for
the same sun to rise above us
though there are thousands
glinting in the solid blueness of the sky
we yearned to touch. your legs turn
into water as I speak, and I pretend not
to notice until all that is left beside me
is your shadow. kids continue to romp around
in the forgiving grass that you waited
your entire existence to never see.
10:15 am

Saturday, November 30, 1996

I was raped on my first day of high school. That finally caught your attention, didn't it? It wasn't a big deal, really. I didn't become suddenly depressed or scared or suicidal or anything like that. I mean, getting raped on the first day of high school will do some psychological damage to a fourteen year old, but not that kind. Rather, my eyes were opened up to all the hatred and malice and desperation that crowds the space that we aimlessly float around in. I don't know if I was unaware of all this evil before my first day of high school, or if I was just hiding from it. It's easy to pretend like things don't exist when they haven't crowded into your space yet. But on my first day of high school, all the bad things that exist in the world found my space, and all the terrible things that were happening to me and everyone else around me found a corner to creep into, and suddenly I was no longer able to hide from all the evil in the world, because it lived with me and breathed my air and slept soundly while I stayed awake and wondered how anyone could live this way. So, getting raped on my first day of high school did not make me sad or depressed or suicidal, but worse: it made me doubtful of any benevolence that might exist in the world.

Since I've mentioned the rape a couple times now, you're probably looking for the details. I was walking around the locker room before football tryouts after school. Actually, to be more precise, I was scrambling around the locker room in a panic, afraid that I was going to be late to the first day of tryouts. Everyone else had already gone out to the field, and I was the only one left in the school, or so I thought. That's always how these stories go. As I was frantically running around the locker room desperately searching for my other sock, I heard the ancient locker room door creak open. I was afraid it was a coach who was looking for me to tell me that I was going to have to run an extra mile for being late to the field. It turned out to be an upperclassman, a senior boy who I won't name here because it's best if the only life I ruin today is my own. This senior boy seemed innocent enough to me, and in that first moment when he pushed open the locker room door his cruelest possible intention seemed to be to break the news of my tardiness and its coinciding consequence. That, however, was not the case. You see, this senior boy had something wistful about him, something dreamlike. He floated over to my flustered, helpless body like he was on a cloud being blown by an unassuming breeze. It felt like maybe he and I were meant to be there, together in that moment, and maybe that's why I never told anyone what happened- it felt too much like a fantasy, one of those moments that are so surreal you want to keep them to yourself. The boy was very tall and tan, like he had spent the summer somewhere nice- a place with tropical drinks and almost naked girls. I will spare you the rest of the details, but I skipped football tryouts that day and had to run two extra miles the next day for missing the first day of tryouts.

I knew that if I told someone about what happened that day, the whole thing would become a news headline, a whisper in the hallway, a local or national or international discussion about teen rape or blah blah blah. The country would know the boy's face and maybe his name and maybe colleges would hear about it too, and through all of this I probably would have ruined the boy's life. And that would have made me depressed. I don't want to ruin the boy's life because I shouldn't be able to. Sometimes when I'm up at night thinking while the evil things are cozying up in my space, I think about how scared I am to have control over someone's life...

The football season went, freshman year dragged along, and soon enough May came and the boy graduated and I haven't seen him since. The days pass, things change, life goes on. Everything is escapable. Nothing lasts forever. That may sound really cliché, but this is what I know: I am not nostalgic for the past, or anticipating the future. Each day will come and go, and sooner or later all your days will
have come and gone and there will be no future to anticipate, no birthday parties or weddings or date-nights, and the past will be so much like a dream that someone else had that there will be nothing to be nostalgic for. Like me, for example. When I die you may be sad or hurt or angry, but in time “he killed himself today” will turn into “my son died years ago” which will turn into a bent photograph in a shoebox or a torn page in a yearbook which will turn into a memory of a distant relative two hundred years from now which will turn into nothing. The days pass, the world spins, life happens, and one day there will be no trace of my existence on this earth, no photograph or yearbook page or memory. And that will happen with all of us, do you understand? I’m not being selfish, or self-deprecating, or egotistical. There will come a day when no one remembers Isaac Newton or Gandhi or Louis XVI. And one day sooner than that my name, too, will be on the tip of your tongue, in the back of your head, then lost.
To Bicycle
I like to bicycle
And before I biked I tricycled
Or at least I tried to tricycle
Untied shoes and an orange popsicle
Population: me and my try-hard tricycle

I like to bicycle
And when I was nine I bicycled
Isolated on an empty one-way street
Determined to go to where two streets meet
And keep going, never stop, bustling through trees
Seeing sights that I had never before seen
But I stayed on that street
Kept bicycling on the worn out bicycle seat
Slight defeat of a nine year old bicycle queen
Trapped within the boundaries
of trucks with ice cream
Sweet taste of almost freedom
On my nine year old bicycle

I like to bicycle
And by the time I turned twelve
I was ready to delve into off-road bicycling
So I bicycled past houses housing people I’d never met
Making my way through the city’s silhouette
Found myself on a path with no clear end
Hustling through a forest with infinite bends
Beat the bustle of the town that often tends
To forget the sound of rustling leaves
And forgets the trees from where those leaves breathed
And forgets the beauty of natural things
Because who would choose biking over watching Stranger Things?
Feelings get lost inside our TVs
We forget what it feels like to be free
Free of car horns and traffic lights
Free of office parties and “date nights”
Free of noise pollution and revolution
We’re so caught up in society
That we’ve forgotten ourselves
Unmelded our souls from everyone else
Disconnected without reconnecting

I like to bicycle
Because I like to connect
To remember that I am a part of a bigger network
Of billions upon billions of social architects
Constructing a foundation for a world with one soul
A population of people with a common understanding
Of what it means to be free

Girl Crush

I plotted her death three years, two months, and 15 days ago. I was at the park that day, and fate would have it that she was, too. A bleak day, it was. Her syrupy brown hair blew across her face, eyes glinting as she pushed the shimmering strands behind her right ear. Her cheeks were blushed like ripe raspberries, and the chilled winter air danced across the tree branches and waltzed with the dried leaves being dragged against the sidewalk. In those few moments, life seemed to slow down, like a runner slowing to a jog while turning a corner. The world was blurry, unfocused, but she was clear like a crystal vase, perfectly sculpted, without any cracks. Our gazes met, her hazel eyes stitching through mine like a messy piece of patchwork, sloppily looping through me, poking at my edges, pulling me nearer to her. Sometimes I wonder if she, too, knew in that moment that someday I would be there to witness her last living breath. She and I became instantly inseparable, like the first time someone poured milk in cereal. We were two organisms living and breathing in symbiosis: we benefited from being around each other, and it seemed as if we both needed each other to live. In the beginning, no one was harmed. Really, for the past three years, two months, and 15 days, no one was ever harmed. But slowly, mutualism became predation, as is the natural order of being in love with your best friend.

I knew ever since that winter afternoon that I was in love with her, her creamy skin and seamstress eyes that stitched and wove and knitted themselves through every part of me. She saw I was vulnerable, in love with a girl like snow, cold and eerie and beckoning. It was never going to work between us; the love story of two girls in a winter park is too ominous to end well. So that day I took fate into my own hands and started preparing for the end. This is really all her fault, too, because I never asked to be there in the park that day, I never asked to see her, or for her to see me, or for her to attach herself to me like a parasite. I never asked to be here in this moment, clutching a bottle of poison pills and standing dry-eyed over a dead body. I did not ask to be the one who had to kill her best friend. But what other choice did I have? She was never going to love me. One of us had to die—she had to die.

There must be other options, they say. Move away, forget the girl, live your life with someone who will reciprocate your love. Or better yet, tell her how you feel, you never know, she might feel the same. They are ridiculous, they are ignorant, they are worse than the worst person you can think of. They do not understand my love. When you feel a love like mine, it doesn’t just flow out of you like beads of sweat on your forehead. When you feel a love like mine, even the most extravagant plane ticket can’t erase it. When you feel a love like mine, you know when you feel it back. She does not love me, so she must go. It’s that simple.

No one wants to kill the one she loves. Grief hangs heavy on your heart like the grayest cloud at dusk. No one wants to feel unloved. Rejection ignites a fire, pours gasoline on the wound, let’s the flames grow, and burns until it’s all turned to ash. And if you brush away the ash, you’ll see a sour word burned into the tender skin. Revenge.
One, two, three. One, two, three steps, and he was out of the house, past the floral furniture in the family room, past the front hallway closet, past the kitchen with the green walls. One, two, three steps down the wooden porch, past the swing his father made for his mother’s birthday, past the potted plants, past the window he broke with a baseball when he was nine. One, two, three steps, and he was at the end of the driveway. There he stood still, a leather bound suitcase in each hand and a scowl as deep as the ocean on his face. “Please don’t go,” he heard his father shout from the front porch. “We will miss you.” But the boy was sick of his father and his mother and all the floral furniture and sick of the driveway he stood on. He looked straight ahead to avoid his mother’s gaze, and without even the softest utter of a “goodbye,” the boy was off. One, two, three steps into the shuttle and a click of the door shutting behind him, and he was gone.

“Where to?” asked the pilot with a kind smile. He seemed almost as excited as the boy felt to be leaving. “To Saturn,” returned the boy, and the pilot didn’t ask any questions. Soon enough, the shuttle landed, and the boy took one, two, three steps off the shuttle, and the next thing he knew it was gone. The boy dropped his bags by either side of him and looked down at his feet, which were floating on the gaseous soil. He looked out at the Saturn landscape in front of him. The pitch black sky around him seemed to swallow anything else in sight, and Earth was a distant memory. It was always night on Saturn; always dark, always quiet, always lonely. The only audible sound the boy could hear was Saturn’s icy rings whipping around the planet, which was so loud it almost seemed to not be there at all. The boy’s lungs tightened when he tried to breathe and he fell to his knees, which dipped into the cold gaseous dust. He brought his chest down to his knees and silently waited near the shuttle stop for the next shuttle to arrive.

Three days later, a shuttle came, and the boy stood up and grabbed his bags, and took one, two, three swift steps up into the shuttle. He sat down on the cold, metallic seat and glanced at the pilot. Her blue eyes seemed to glow in the darkness and she had a familiar scent that the boy could not place. “Where to?” the pilot asked. “To Jupiter, thank you,” said the boy. The shuttle was off, zig-zagging through the imploding stars, past black holes and meteor showers. Soon enough, the shuttle landed, and the boy waved “goodbye” to the pilot. He then took one, two, three hops off the shuttle and landed in Jupiter’s cool soil. The boy dropped his bags by either side of him and sighed with relief; he could breathe again. He sat down on a bench nearby and surveyed Jupiter’s landscape. It was dark and vast, and the only thing in sight was rust-colored sand blowing through the thick air. The boy began to feel a headache forming in the back of his head, getting worse by the second, until it became unbearable. He held his head in his hands and rested his forehead on his knees and began to scream, and continued to do so until the next shuttle arrived.

Seven days later, a shuttle came, and the boy stood up, grabbed his bags, and took one, two, three quick steps up into the shuttle and looked at the pilot. He was listening to a song from years ago, one that the boy’s father used to play for him when he was younger. “Where to?” asked the pilot. The air about him reminded the boy of something familiar, but he didn’t let it distract him. “To Mars, please, sir.” Next thing he knew, the shuttle was off into space, speeding around the infinite darkness of the universe. Soon enough, the shuttle landed on the dusty, red soil of Mars. The boy thanked the pilot and said “goodbye,” then took one, two, three leaps off the shuttle, planting his feet in the barren soil. The shuttle left, and the boy dropped his bags by either side of him. He watched the creatures of Mars scurry about the red planet, just as his family was doing on Earth. But no one stopped to talk to him, and they all strode past him without the slightest, “hello.” The air was frigid and made the boy’s chest compress as snow began to fall. Cold and alone, the boy sat under a light post and waited for the next shuttle to arrive.
Two months later, a shuttle came, and the boy stood up, grabbed his bags, and took one, two large strides into the shuttle, so large he skipped the third step, and beamed at the pilots. There were two of them, a man and a woman, and they reminded the boy so much of his parents he could not resist staring. “Where to?” asked the female pilot. The boy closed his eyes and thought of his mother and father, and about how lonely he was, and how much he missed his home. “To Earth, please, kind lady.” Soon enough, the boy saw the green and blue tints of his home planet out the window. Within minutes, the shuttle landed on the familiar concrete driveway of his parents’ home. The boy thanked the pilots and yelled a sweet “goodbye!” as he took one giant leap off the shuttle and onto the pavement, and the shuttle was gone.

The boy took a deep inhale, his eyes closed in bliss, and spoke loud enough for his parents to hear, “Hello!” The boy walked down the driveway, one, two, three steps up the wooden porch, and noticed the swing his father made his mother for her birthday was gone, and the window he broke with a baseball when he was nine was fixed. The boy yelled out again, “Mother! Father! I missed you!” He took one, two, three steps and opened the front door. The floral furniture was gone, too. One, two, three more steps.

“Mother! Father! I missed you! And this house!” One, two, three. The kitchen walls were no longer green, and the boy’s family portrait was taken off the wall. One, two, three. The boy dropped his suitcases on the tile floor and sprinted out of the house. One, two, three, one two three. A man was jogging on the sidewalk, and the boy ran over and stopped him. “Excuse me, sir, but, the owners of this house, where are they? Did they move? Where did they go?” “The old couple that lived there? Oh, boy, they’re dead.”
Summer Abundant

It was during the summer that Joseph came to visit that I snuck out of the house for the first time. I was seven years old, and the white moon rested on the soft horizon and I could hear crystal waves lapping the shoreline outside the rec room window. I was reading *The Witches* by Roald Dahl, sprawled out across the aged woven rug that covered the damages on the hardwood floor, when I heard the familiar high-pitched creak of the storm door that led to the back porch. By the time I sat up, whoever opened the door was long gone, and I figured it must have been Stephen and Joseph who left out the back and were headed to the beach. I set *The Witches* on the kitchen island and made my way to the beach as well. I didn’t realize that I was technically sneaking out. All I noticed was the blank sky, save for the twinkling stars that I could make out when I stood still and squinted my eyes and tilted my head back. It must have been near 10 o’clock, which is a strange time to go to the beach, and the sand felt cold against the pads of my bare feet.

The day before, Joseph mentioned to me that he had never gone crab hunting on the beach before. Stephen must have been in the room when he said this, and I concluded that this is what the two of them had gone out to do. How thoughtful of Stephen to take Joseph crab hunting! I knew the boys would have a lot of fun chasing crabs around the shore with flashlights and a net, and afterward they would build a fire and chat and enjoy each other’s company, and I wanted to join in on the banter. The beach was vacant that night, just the shore and the shells and the salty water kissing my toes. In the distance my eye caught a faint glimpse of red, and as I walked closer I noticed Joseph, in a bright red sweatshirt, standing with Stephen, the ocean water swallowing both of them up to their knees. Stephen noticed me first, and gestured me towards the two of them. I jogged toward the boys, pulling on the bottom of my pant legs, folding the hems up to my knees. I waded in the chilled water with the boys, the salt irritating the rug burns on my calves, and I listened to the boys talk about college and girls and professors and Joseph talked about his life in New York City, and I talked about crabs. I taught Joseph all about crab hunting, and he thanked me, and said we would have to go out one night before he left.

We were on our way back to the house a while later; the moon had risen off of the horizon and now hung among the stars in the black sky. Joseph was the first to feel it, the prick of a cold water droplet on the back of his hand. His pace slowed down, and he looked up toward the clouded sky. Another droplet landed on the middle of his forehead, and soon Stephen and I took notice, and looked up toward the sky as well. Within seconds, the three of us were being pelted with water all over our bodies. Joseph and Stephen smiled as they exchanged looks with each other. *Rain*, Stephen whispered. *It’s been years since we’ve gotten rain*. The three of us stayed on the beach a while longer, arms extended outward, feet sinking into the damp sand, clothes heavy with dripping water, tongues stuck out to catch the mystical raindrops. As we stood underneath the boundless black sky, Joseph talked about lightning, and Stephen taught us about the history of droughts, and I smiled and thought about feelings that never end, summers that you remember forever.
I AM NOT THE CHOSEN ONE.

Chapter One // Winston lacks a bit of self confidence, but anyone would if Winifred Camille Redwell was their sister. Winston.

I am not the Chosen One. I am not here to fight the Delebmag in an epic battle where in the end he is huddled up on the floor, begging for mercy. I am not here to ignore him and crush him like a bug. I am not here to run out of the Great Tower to see a large crowd crying with happiness, knowing that they are all finally safe from the Delebmag’s wrath. I am not here to see my lover in the crowd with a shining smile on their face as the wind runs through their hair. I am not here to kiss them as the crowd cheers. I am not here to have a great feast as my peers and friends eat like kings, I am not here to have a holiday named after me. I am not here to die a legacy, a hero, and have following generations come listen to my story in pure awe.

There’s nothing too special about this. About me. Tons of people out there aren’t the Chosen One. There are people out there who don’t even know who the Chosen One is, what a Chosen One is. The only thing that sets me apart from those people, is that the Chosen One, the one to save us all is Winifred Camille Redwell.

My sister.

My sister, Winifred Camille Redwell, is the Chosen One. The girl with the shining brown hair and even shinier smile that wins everyone over, is here to kill the Delebmag. And everyone she hadn’t already won over with her dazzling looks and interesting, but kind of dishonest personality, will be won.

I’d be happy for her, if I didn’t know her well enough to know she doesn’t deserve the title. She doesn’t care about magick, not even a little bit. She could give it up without a second thought.

The whistle of the train and the hustling of my peers around me, eager to get to Wellbelove, snap me out of my passive aggressive thoughts and make me pick up my luggage. Those passive aggressive thoughts are the ones I have every year when school starts. When I get to school, the thoughts dissolve, but they come back the second anyone mentions Winifred’s name.
The train station’s crowded with students eager to get to Wellbelove and see their friends that haven’t seen for maybe the entire summer. Eager boyfriends and girlfriends antsy to see partners that live all the way across the country. About the half of these students have already started using their magick, with absolutely no fear of a Normals seeing them. The train station is sort of an in-between place. Not really here or there, like a stairwell (that was my buddy Meg’s analogy, she’s great at that sort of stuff). These in between places are perfect for magick communities. Normals don’t know anything about in-betweens (unless they do, us Mage’s don’t really know how Normals deal with all this stuff) (Trashmouth Tachauer says they’re just idiots).

A group of kids are shouting behind me. I don’t even remember walking to the platform.

“Move you pygmy loser!” A boy shouts behind me.

I take my train ticket out of my fanny pack (I only wear it when traveling!) and give it to the conductor, a tall lady who looks displeased at the 11 through 18 year olds hustling on the train and shouting out spells and greeting their friends.

I should’ve told him that the train wasn’t going to go without him. Yeah, that would’ve shown him. I wish I thought of that earlier. Also I should’ve said something about him calling me a pygmy dwarf. Like...for instance... well, I can’t come up with anything right now, but I will later.

I am happy to start school again. However, just the mere idea that every waking moment someone will be talking about Winifred and asking me about Winifred, tends to suck the happiness right out of me.

I am happy about going back to Wellbelove, and if I wasn’t I would let someone know. I’m happy about seeing Finn Tachauer, also known as Trashmouth Tachauer, for reasons that will soon be obvious. Well, I’m not so jazzed about seeing Finn in general, I’m more excited about the movies he plays in our dorm. I don’t have a tv at home, so this is my only dosage. When he brought that little tv from his house (mansion) into our dorm the first time, the first thing he played was Star Wars. I loved it so much I saved up all my money and bought a poster. I hung it up over my bed. Finn apparently approved because he didn’t even make a snarky remark about it. Or maybe he just kept his mouth shut for once. We watch movies nearly every night before bed, but that doesn’t mean we like each other.

“Why are you sitting over there?” I remember him asking me when we were watching The Silence of the Lambs. I was huddled up in my corner of our dorm room, against the cold wooden wall like it was a magnet with opposing polarities to me. He was in front of the tv, in one of the bean bag chairs he brought from home. There was a bean bag chair next to him that was saved for me.
I didn’t want to tell him I was genuinely terrified, so I decided to make fun of him, instead.

“The image of that guy eating his own brain plus your cologne is too much for this gut, Finn.”

“Shut up, Whine-ston.” He pushed up his glasses and turned his head back to the tv. We both kept quiet during the rest of the movie.

While we’re on the subject of Finn I might as well bring up how stupid his face looks. Just stupid. His hair isn’t long but it isn’t short and it isn’t curly but it isn’t anything else and it isn’t black but it isn’t brown but it’s just stupid. His nose isn’t flat but it isn’t arched. His eyes aren’t blue but they aren’t brown and he just looks stupid. And I don’t want to get on the subject of his stupid glasses or Hawaiian shirts over his school uniform. I might accidentally murder someone.

Finn also feels like one of most affected by the Delebmag’s attacks. I had to ask Meg last year why he felt that way, because he wasn’t giving me a direct answer. “I’ve grown up with the Delebmag as a common topic for small talk, why wouldn’t it affect me?” The answer to that is, literally everyone in the magick world has grown up with the Delebmag. Meg said her mum said he had a twin murdered as a baby by a follower of the Delebmag, followers weren’t all that uncommon back 15 years ago. (The Delebmag is great at bribes). She had done more research eventually, but due to my stupidity I forgot exactly what she said about everything. Typical me. The sister’s name started with an F. . . Was it Fiona? No. . .

I’m happy to be surrounded by magick again. Words can’t even describe it. I love magick, with all my heart, even though I’m not that good at it. I love the feel of it, the way it seems to create a pull in your tummy and draw you toward it, and how it’s like you’re throwing a bucket of magick onto your words, your spells. Verbal spells are the greatest feeling in the world when you get them right, there’s something so satisfying to it. I used a stutter and mumble a lot when I first came to Wellbelove, and when I was practising verbal spells in our dorm Finn would always chime in,

“Use your words.”
And I would always chime back,
“Use your adderall,”
And then he would chime back,
“I don’t have ADD, you’re just boring,”
Despite all of this, his advice sort of helped. Use your words.

I also love the smell of magick, I used to never shut up about it, which sparked another conversation with Finn.

“What does magick smell like to you, Finn?”
“It smells like your mum,”
I sputtered. “Well it smells-it smells like your-your girlfriend.”
He had a girlfriend at the time. Her name was Cinnamon. She was nice, but
something about her just put me in the worst mood.
“Shut up,” He said.
“Have you ever kissed her?”
He paused and said, “Yeah, why?”
“Well, I was just wondering what quote you want on your tombstone, since you're
gonna die of a deadly disease.”
“I want the quote to be, ‘shut up.”’ Then, he opened his water bottle and threw it
at me.

And then there’s Meg, my bestest friend in the world, the person I’m most looking
forward to seeing. Meg is-

Oh, Meg is right there, saving a seat for me. I walk over to her seat, a little
compartment with a table in the middle and a large window at the side. There’s a smile
on both of our faces, hers more toothy. I set down my luggage and sit across from her.

“Hiya, Winston.” She says with her smile still very much visible.

“Hiya,” I say back, barely able to talk because I’m smiling so much. We live on
opposite sides of the country, and neither of us have cell phones, though I have a
landline I’m not allowed to touch. She doesn’t have a phone because her family is afraid
of the Delebmag's supporters hacking into it, even though there aren’t any supporters
left. I don't have a phone for the reason that I just don’t have one. When I ask my
parents why I can’t have a phone it's like when a little kid asks their tired parents why
the sky is blue and they say “Because it just is”. I haven’t seen or heard from her in
ages. Man, I missed her.

“I’m liking the hair colour,” is the first thing I say when I sit down, and the
compartments so small I have to put my knees to the side for us both to fit. She’s half
black, and she likes to keep her hair natural, save the fact that she spells it a different
colour about every year. It’s one of her most noticeable traits she’s not worried about
drawing attention to. She instinctively touches it, pulling a curl down so it shoots back
up like this old slinky I had when I was 11 that bugged Finn to death.

“It’s the colour I had first year.” Her smile widens and her cheeks turn as pink as
her hair. She’s a blushy person. I, on the other hand, am a flushy person. My cheeks
don't turn a pale pink, my whole face goes red and I sweat. I think back to our first year,
when we met.

I was in our Potions class, and though I don’t remember what we were doing, I
was excited that we were starting stuff the first day. I was about to pour some liquid into
some other liquid, when I felt something tap my shoulder. I turned around to see an
extremely short girl with bubblegum pink hair and unfashionable round glasses shyly take my beaker away from my hand.

“What are you doing?” I said as my face flushed and she put a different beaker in my hands, she tilted up my elbows and poured that beaker into the bowl. She was like a puppeteer and I was some dummy.

“Oh,” Was all I said.

“I’m sorry, it’s just that, if you had poured that into that,” She pointed a stubby finger back and forth between both bowls. “Wellbelove would’ve been blown up.”

We were friends from that point on. We were 11 then, and we’re 15 now, and that story is still a good metaphor for our entire friendship. Me, trying my best but still screwing up, her, knowing the answer off the top of her head and shyly fixing the problem. Though Meg’s expertise in analogies (and everything else she’s ever faced) she has yet to come up with a metaphor for our friendship, and I feel proud for coming up with that on my own, but I still haven’t gotten around to telling her.

The train starts on it’s track, getting outside the station and into the countryside quickly. I turn my head to the open window, I can smell the daisies and wildflowers along the rolling hills and the cleanliness of the air. I can see the infinitely blue sky, so blue it looks like a cartoon. A definite contrast to the constant rain there is in my share of Europe. They’re doesn’t seem to be a single cloud, though there is a bat, that’s funny. I thought bats were nocturnal. Meg admires the day as well, but only briefly. She peeks her head out of our little compartment and looks up and down the aisles with an unreadable expression that’s honestly almost a smirk. Just a little bit. It’s too out of nature for her to smirk, what could she even be smirking about? She turns back to me with her normal, timid face. It’s almost a relief to see it.

“Where’s Winifred?”

I stop admiring the countryside. I feel like those words coming out of her mouth were a foot, my mind a forest, my sanity a twig. (Meg’s metaphors have rubbed off on me). I can feel my chest heaving, and I know I probably look really silly, because when I get like this I don’t look angry, I just look like a very upset Italian woman who’s just learned that her son failed his maths class. I look like my neighbor.

“Winston don’t.” She begins.

“You wanna know where she is, Meg? Do you seriously want to know? Is it just eating you alive?! Well I’ll tell you! She’s in Paris! Paris! The literal week before school started she just packed her bags and told us she was going, and would be back by the first day!”

She opens her mouth to say something, but I beat her to it.

“She could’ve taken me with her! I get it, she’s stressed, she has every reason to be stressed! She wants a break, but who says I don’t need a break?! Huh?! It’s not like I
don’t have any stress built up for having to share a dorm with Finn, or the fact that I’m gonna fail my classes again no matter how hard I try, or having someone remind me every two seconds about how important Winifred is—"

She opens her bag beside her, a bright yellow satchel she’s always worrying about since she thinks it draws attention to her, which is silly because she has bright pink hair and is the top of our class. She digs around takes a blue ballpoint pen out. Her magickal item.

To be a Mage, you have to have magick in you, and and a way to get in out. And the way to get it out, is through something called a magickal item. A magickal item can be anything, a wand, a necklace, a belt buckle, and in her case, a ballpoint pen. Meg says she was 9 and her dad told her to take down a grocery list for her, so she went to her mum’s office and took a chewed up blue ballpoint pen out of a little mug improvised as a pencil holder, and she felt a connection. A magickal connection. She said she felt like she was finding a missing piece of a puzzle, the puzzle being her own brain.

My magickal item is a crappy wand that looks like every other crappy wand in the world. Winifred carved it for me as an art project, and I didn’t feel anything special, I heard a humming in my ears that I somehow saw fit as the sign that it was the one. She points the ballpoint pen at me, and says in a strong voice,

“Your attention, please!”

First spell she’s used this school year. I shut up and listen, but it’s sort of on my own terms, because she only says things in such a strong voice if she really means it.

“Winston, I have something to tell you. Something important.”
Everything sucks and I’m dying. Perhaps if the unfortunate event of being Winston’s dormmate for so long hadn’t happened, this wouldn’t have either. But sadly, his very noticeable trait of being the literal worst has rubbed off on me.

Last night I slipped into my satin-sheeted bed with my stereo still on (Hallelujah from the movie Shrek just ended, Bust a Move by Young MC started playing). (Diversity is important). Right before I fell asleep I remembered to set my alarm clock, which would’ve been really helpful if I had set it to the a.m, rather than the p.m. I woke up with my maid, well, not my maid, but the family’s maid that we’ve had since I was born, shaking my shoulders and shouting;

“Oster! Oster! Larm! Ool!”

I’ve known her long enough to know that she was shouting, “Foster! Foster! Alarm! School!”

I opened my eyes and tried to grab my Coca-Cola glasses from my nightstand but she was still shaking my shoulders and rattling around my brain, and the smell of her off-brand Chanel No.5 was probably killing off some brain cells.

“Gertrude! Gertrude! Use your words!” I twisted my arms around so my hands were on her chubby forearms so I could stop her shaking me.

“Oster, your ‘larm ‘cyock ‘in’t ‘o off!”

(Foster, your alarm clock didn’t go off!)

I pushed up my glasses and turned my head swiftly to my blood-red digital clock that laughs like Count Dracula when it goes off. My mum thinks it’s distasteful. I think it’s perfect. The clock read 9:37, I set it for 8:45. I threw off my duvet and shooed Gertrude out of my room. On regular school days, me and Winston both get up around 7:00 to get to class on time. But since it’s the first day, (if you could even call it that, this day exists for students to fart around with their friends and for first years to get settled in) the teachers are lenient on when we arrive, but I still had to get up early enough to catch the only train to Wellbelove, which I was going to miss, if I didn’t hurry.

Since I thought I would have enough time to pack my bags for Wellbelove in the morning, I didn’t get anything done last night. Idiotic move, I know, I know. It’s the sort of move Winston would pull. Sometimes I wish that girl Meg Ferry was my dormmate. Not only would I be on time to every class, I’d pass them with flying colours. And by the end of the year I’d be getting brunch with my teachers and discussing the weather while secretly complementing them and sucking up. (I feel no distaste for Meg Ferry, though she is know to be a curve-wrecker).
I grabbed this very old leather bag from the top of my closet and threw it on my bed. I feel guilty for owning real leather (which is ironic, since I have to drink a living creature’s blood every other week to stay alive) but the bag was made in the fifties, and I suppose that was standard at the time. I threw nearly half my closet in it, which consists of Hawaiian shirt and nice fitting jeans, slammed it shut, and pointed my ring, my magickal item at it.

“Go on without me!” I yelled, sending it to my dorm in Wellbelove, which I had a clear image of in my head at the time.

The bag is magickal luggage, which is highly illegal in the magickal world. They started making them in the fifties, but stopped in the sixties, because apparently people were putting bombs in them, then waving them away to their enemies with a, “Ta-tal”

I laid out my school uniform on my desk last night, which was about the smartest thing I did. The uniform’s pretty standard to be honest. Maroon and blue striped tie, blue coat (optional) and maroon pants. No school symbols or anything. I guess they didn’t want the Normal’s to see the symbol and ask questions. For the girls there’s a maroon and blue plaid skirt, but girls don’t have to wear them anymore, which is nice. The rule changed in the 80’s, and Winston said Meg’s mum was in the movement to change the rule. Meg’s family sounds so nice from Winston’s descriptions. My mum wouldn’t take any pictures of my aunt last year at Christmas because she was wearing a pantsuit. And apparently her dad studies flowers. Not even magickal flowers, just flowers. My dad works in magickal hell, I’ve never even met him.

You’re also allowed to wear whatever type of dress shirt you want, as long as it’s white. I use that to my advantage to wear short sleeved dress shirts with Hawaiian shirts over them. There’s no real reason as to why I wear them other than I like them, and my mother doesn’t.

“You look like an idiot when you wear that,” Winston had said to me at one point or another.

“Well you look like an idiot all, the time, permanently. And I do believe that’s much more unfortunate, Whine-ston.”

I rub my ring and think about why Winston and I have always talked to each other like that. When I rub my ring I think of another thing Winston said to me at one point or another.

“Why do you wear that on your ring finger, are you married to magick?” He had asked.

“No, I’m married to your mum.”

Your mum. If I had a dollar for everytime we said that to each other I’d be rich enough to find a cure for vampirism. I laughed to myself like an elderly man reminiscing about his past as I threw on my uniform. I took a quick look around my room, seeing if
there's anything I had missed. I turned off my alarm clock, so it didn't scare Gertrude to near death later, then headed out of my room, pushing up my thick glasses that were previously sliding down my nose.

My room's in the near middle of the house, and there are no windows, anywhere. It's so dark and hollow and empty it feels like standing in the my mother wants to) so they're dark and grey and a cliche sort of gothic. A stereotypical vampire's house.

"Edward chose the colourrrr..." She sobbed into her handkerchief when we brought it up to her. That was an utter lie, because she only married him for money and vice versa, and he was in America their entire marriage, save the time they made their kids. He would've had no idea what the wall colour in our house was.

My school shoes tapped against the cold hardwood floor as I ran to my front door, which felt about half the galaxy away. I passed my (half) sister's room, Emily's room, which was tidy and empty. I bet she's already at Wellbelove. I bet she didn't even think about me. She's 17, she has a car, which I knew she drove there. So I couldn't even break the law and drive it myself. Despite the fact that I was running late, I decided I had enough time to be petty, and I grabbed a pen and a sticky note from her desk, stuck the sticky note on her door, and in my best handwriting, I wrote;

you suck

By far my favourite phrase in the English language, you suck. Short and to the point. When I was younger, when I was mad at someone, I would just write it over and over and over again in my diary-

The diary. I'm an idiot. I'm such a- oh my Merlin, Merlin.

If Winston gets to our dorm before me, he'll read the diary. He'll read everything.

I thought to myself. I instantly began sprinting to the door again, nearly knocking over earns and cursed items along the way.

And now here I am, standing at my front door, not even admiring this stupidly beautiful day, trying to figure out what to do. Emily's car is gone, there's no way I'd ever ask my mother to drive me (plus, I don't even know if she's in the house). (I could have an axe murderer in my house and I'd have no clue). Gertrude can't drive, so I suppose there's only one option left, the one option I was sort of dreading since it can go wrong in so many ways.

I turn into a bat. I'd like to say after all these years it's as easy as blinking, but it still feels like I'm crashing into water off a high cliff. Or that time last year Winifred's friend shoved my head into a toilet and flushed and flushed and flushed. Thankfully,
when I turn into a bat my ring and all my clothes are still on when I turn back into a human. If you could even call me a human.

I begin flying to the train station, and though I’ve never found out why, I don’t have to echolocate, which is definitely a plus. When I reach the train station, I just fly right in, and no one seems to really care. Pigeons do it all the time. I find the train that goes to Wellbelove, and sneak in, since you usually have to have your student i.d with you. Still, no one seems to care.

The train starts on it’s track, I follow after it into the disgustingly beautiful countryside. I’m surrounded by rolling hills and green grass and fresh air, just tone it down, Mother Nature. I can’t admire you right now, I have to get to Wellbelove before Winston reads my mushy diary filled with highly, *highly* classified information. I fly down the left side of the train, looking for an open window. I’ll fly through a window, a couple kids might freak out, then I’ll go into the bathroom, then come out as my regular, dashing self. Sure, my hair would be messy and my breath would smell a little bit, but I’d be turning heads.

I have no such luck finding a window on the left side of the train. I go down the very back, make a sharp quick turn, and start scanning the right side of the train. I see Hena Abdella, Meg’s dormmate and my first girl-crush, with her floral hijab and muscles and confident look into the country, and down the aisles of the train. Across from her is my old flame Cinnamon (her real name is Cindy) attempting at a conversation with her and twisting her fingers in her fiery hair. Their window isn’t open, and Cinnamon wouldn’t recognize me as *me*. I continue down the right side of the train, continuing my search. The infinite *chugachugachuga* of the train is beginning to deafen me.

I see other faces I can put names to. I see Robyn Dhew and Tessa Adamson with their never ceasing laughter around each other and weird subtopics. I see Jamie and Sadie, the two siblings with their endless bickering but constant love. Then, I see Meg Ferry and Whine-ston with his stupid face.

In all honesty, Winston is an average dude. Short dark blonde hair. Brown eyes. Timid face. He isn’t a true character, unlike his partner in crime Meg. He isn’t that tall, but he isn’t that short. (I’m two inches taller). He isn’t scrawny but he isn’t a football player, and he’s about as regular as Joe could get.

But something about his face is so *stupid*. I hate looking at him. When he closes his mouth it looks like a witch told him to keep his tongue floating in the middle or else he’d die. And the second he’s caught off guard or does something even remotely stupid his face will go cherry red and his adam’s apple will jut out and it’s just this big *show*. And when he shows up to school every year he’s ghost-white and he tries to fix it by staying out in the sun and he gets even redder. And his nose is still crooked from me pushing him down the stairs when we were 12 after he *insisted* I had a crush on Hena Abdella from our maths class. (I did).
His face is just so incredibly stupid and I hate looking at it and I hate having to listen to him breathe from his stupid mouth nearly every waking hour and I hate having to watch him fix his hair in the bathroom mirror because it’s all just so stupid.

But right now I need to focus on the fact that even though their window is open I don’t want to look at his awesome face any longer so I should go in the one next to it.
I’ve made a terrible mistake. But I left Finn something. I know he probably won’t pay it any notice, but maybe, *just maybe*, he could pick it up and learn the truth.
Chapter four: Fun fact: America and cinnamon kind of suck right now!

Winston.

“Winston, I have something to tell you. Something important.”

Meg went on to explain, in her own special way, that she didn’t care about me at all, not even a little bit. Or perhaps Finn is right and I am a little bit (a lot bit, in his words) dramatic. And I do know that Meg cares about me, just as much as I care about her. And I do know that she has really no control over this situation.

“I’m...” She swallowed, then looked me straight in the eyes. “I’m going to America, with my parents.”

If I had been taking a sip out of the water bottle in my fanny pack I would’ve sputtered the contents across the entire train. Her face was soft and passive like it always was. But she hadn’t seemed to have blinked the entire time.

“America,” I said. It was halfway between being a statement and a question.

“Yes,” She pushed up her unflattering round glasses (the same ones she’s had since we’ve met. They’ve been through allot) and doesn’t break her stare. It’s impossible for her eyeballs not to be burning by now. She kept on pursing her lips and making her eyebrows dive up and down like ocean waves.

“America,” I said again. The word felt thick and heavy on my tongue.

“I’ll be leaving about a week after school starts, I had to convince my mum on that one.” Her voice seemed quick and monotone. “She originally said that I’d go a week before school even started, but after I cut off my right foot and pledged my allegiance to her forever and ever she said I could stay at Wellbelove for about a week. I did it because I wanted you to know where I was.”

“Wuh-”

“To study dragon bones. We’re going to America to study dragon bones, my entire family is. Save the grandparents and aunts and uncles. Mum has friends in America, you see. Paleontologists, which as you know, she’s dabbled in, my mum. They communicate via email, since you know that none of my family has a phone. Those American friends found some dragon bones in a little ranch in Missouri. It’s not that big of a deal, so it hasn’t gotten to magick news or anything. Mum just thinks it will be a learning experience for all of us. Silly ol’ Mum, you know her. And of course Dad is excited because Missouri has such beautiful flowers and wildlife if you look for it, it’ll be fun for all of us.

“I won’t be attending school, which will be especially sad since, you know me, I love school. Doing my school work. Talking about school. Thinking about school. Heck, I’m even on my way to school right now.”

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“America,” I said for a third time. She finally blinked, and her forehead wrinkled. “I know it’s hard to process, but I’ll only be there for a little while.”

I wanted to ask her how long a little while was. I wanted to ask her how long she’d known she was going to America. I wanted to know why she wanted to know where Winifred was. I wanted to let her know I was sorry for snapping at her earlier. It felt like my brain was clogged, and I couldn’t get a single sentence out.

For the rest of the train ride, it was all just happy thoughts about Wellbelove. No sadness, no Winifred, no America.

“I really just want to think about happy things today,” Meg said. “I guess I’m happy I don’t have to participate in gym,”

“I think girls are a little lucky in gym, girls don’t have to play shirts and skins or anything. I guess it’s just lucky I got a mind-blowing six pack over the summer,” I had lied and joked. I could hear Finn laughing in the back of my head, saying, “I bet you weigh 7 stones soaking wet,” or maybe “My niece could pick you up and she isn’t even out of the womb yet.” I could hear real insults from the guys I have gym with, and I thought about the time an unknown culprit took a hot steaming dump in my gym locker, as well as a bunch of other kids lockers later, a note scribbled in bad handwriting saying;

I noticed you were getting a little skinny so I cooked this up for u!

And now here I am, shuffling out of the bus in a long line of my peers. Robyn Dhew and Tessa Adamson are behind me, I can hear them cackling like witches at their inside jokes. The only reason I can even really put names to faces is because last year they said something to me that I’ll never forget.

“I got a 37% on my science test. I don’t know what I had expected, not studying and watching *Star Wars* with Finn instead.” I had said that to Meg, they were eavesdropping. Tessa Adamson seemed to have dropped in unannounced and said;

“Uh-oh spaghettio, you regretti.” Then, Robin Dhew slapped her across the face. Not playfully, full force.

Who says that?! Who does that?! That’s why I remember them. Plus, they sit a couple seats away from me in maths class, and I can hear them laughing at who knows what all the time.

Cinnamon Jones is in front of me. *Perfect*. I can smell her identifiable scent of starbucks and paint. Sure, it isn’t the worst thing in the world, heck, it isn’t even that bad, but something about it still makes me mad after all these years. I can still remember the first time I met her.
I was 13, and I walking back from dinner to me and Finn’s dorm. Meg was beside me, talking about how much better tasting the scones were last year, and how they should already be warm when they get to our plates.

“I shouldn’t have to use ‘Some like it hot!’ every time I sit down to a meal." I had added to the conversation.

“And, ‘You’re getting warmer!’ is an utterly useless spell, it takes about an hour for it to get even lukewarm," was what she was saying when I opened the door to my dorm. I expected to see Finn in a beanbag chair or on his bed, watching a movie and giving some snarky remark to me and a slight complement to Meg as we came in, then he would be quiet most of the time as me and Meg hung out. What I saw instead, was this;

Glitter. Glitter everywhere. And red paint, too. It looked like there was a murder at a dance party. A panic at the disco. A movie was playing, but it wasn’t anything that Finn would’ve played. Not ever. I think it was a romance, and a cheesy one at that. A girl with red hair and side bangs was on the floor with a paintbrush dipped in red paint and a posterboard. I don’t remember what is said but I think it had something to do with the football pitch. The redhead girl was on her stomach, giggling like crazy and Finn was sat criss-cross on the floor, an unbothered face. When he saw me, he stood up immediately and brushed off some glitter that was on his trousers. Very out of character for him.

“Winston," was all he said for an uncomfortably long time. The redhead had stopped giggling, and was facing both of us, smiling. Meg’s face was red, like it always is when she meets new people. My face felt hot.

“I’m Cinnamon.” The redhead said, breaking the silence. She stood up and put her hands on her hips. She wasn’t in uniform, she was in a tank top and shorts. “You’re Margaret, right?” She asked Meg, whose face got redder.

“I-I go by Muh-Meg,” She stuttered. It’s was quiet for a little while longer.

_Finn has a girlfriend Finn has a girlfriend FINN HAS A GIRLFRIEND_ was all that was going through my head. _What if she stays in our room all the time? What if she plays her movies? What if they suck? What if she sits on his bed? What if she sits on my bed? What if-

It was the first time I was spewing out everything I was thinking.

“Winston.” I finally said, breaking the awkward silence. “My name is Winston.”

“I knew that.” She said. “Finn never shuts up about you.” I knew she was a liar.

“Apparently you’re a super villain who spends to long in the bathroom. How terribly malicious of you, Winston.” Her rendition of sarcasm made my skin crawl. Her rendition of everything made my skin crawl. Her voice was scratchy but preppy and mellow but proper. I didn’t like how my name sounded when she said it. I didn’t like how anything sounded when she said it.
“Did you say your name was Cinnamon?” I ignored her other comment. Cinnamon? Cinnamon? What kind of monster would name their child Cinnamon? And if her parents didn’t give her that name, that means she did, and I couldn’t decide which was worse.

“It’s getting late,” Meg said quickly, pushing up her glasses, her chest puffed up with her holding her breath.

“Yeah, you should get going, Cinnamon.” Finn lightly tapped her on the shoulder, guiding her to the door, so lightly you would’ve thought she had the skin of a poisonous frog. A tan, freckled, poisonous frog.

The rest of the night I kept on bombarding Finn with questions about Cinnamon, his new girlfriend who thankfully didn’t spend as much time as I thought she would in our dorm. It still felt like an eternity had passed in the minutes or hours between her walking through our door and walking out. Every time she would sit in my chair or admire my posters or touch Finn’s shoulder or touch Finn’s hair it felt like I was astral projecting straight into magick hell.

I get off the train, Meg at my side, or behind me really, both of us carrying our luggage. The day is still warm, and the air feels nice on my skin and on my lungs. It feels clean, it feels right.

It feels like magick.

The whole school is surrounded by a ten feet tall stone wall. I’m not really sure about the circumference of this wall but it’s definitely big. There’s a magick train station a little while away, but the conductor feels it fit to just stop here every year. (She’s also made of magick). We aren’t going to get hurt or anything, we simply just have to jump a little bit. There’s a large wooden gate set facing the door of the train when we pull up. One of the teachers must of spelled it down so he hovers over the moat. The moat is wider than the door itself, perhaps it was a design flaw, but I think of it more as another asset to keep Normals out. Since the gate is made of magick we can just spell it longer for us so we can get across, the first person in line has already done that.

To get into Wellbelove without getting suspended for breaking in (an alarm will go off if you break in) is to touch the metal handle of the gate and let it recognize your blood. Both of Meg’s parents are magickians, which makes her Purebred. With Finn-well, he’s never really told me, but I’m sure he’s Purebred, his mum seems too snobbish to ever even think about having romantic interactions, or even platonic ones, with a Normal.

I, on the other hand am what the kids call a Mixed Mage, which makes Winifred also a Mixed Mage.

My mom’s the magick one. She met my dad, a Normal in the least romantic, romantic way possible.
My mom didn’t leave her house much when she was in her twenties. She was agoraphobic, which basically means that you get anxious in public. Sure, she went to work, got the occasional groceries, but that was it. Literally it.

One fine evening, she left the house with her ratty brown hair covered by her hoodie and shoved the thong of her flipflop between her two toes and headed to Tesco to get milk or some other.

The way she tells it, she was walking down the bread aisle when a handsome, but shaking, young man brushed her shoulder. She had whispered “Excuse me,” when the stranger stopped dead in his tracks, making her freeze too. He looked at her with eyes glazed with tears and a trembling lip, when those lips parted to say something when all that came out was sobs. Sobs upon sobs upon sobs. He had a mental breakdown, right next to the Wonder Bread. Mum said she had comforted him and did what you do and said she could buy him a cup of coffee (obviously thinking this emotionally unstable, shy stranger would say no like any other normal person) and he sniffled and nodded his head.

“I was surprised, yes, but not necessarily disappointed,” Was her exact quote when she told me.

They lived together for two years before they got married. One month after they got married, my mum was pregnant with Winifred. At this point, my dad still didn’t know my mum was a Mage. She had hidden her magickal item behind the dumpster of an alley two streets away. About a year later, when she was pregnant with me, she got her magickal item from behind that dumpster, and told him.

He had a panic attack, and after that panic attack ended another one started. He couldn’t believe it, he felt like his life was a lie. Mum never used magick again.

If she had waited another year to tell him I don’t think my life would be as awful as it is. I think when she did that, she cursed me. Plus, I think when my dad looks at me he thinks of that moment, and that’s why he hates me so much.

I touch my hand to the cool metal, letting it rest there for a moment, my hand gets hot, signalling that it worked, and it recognized the magick in my blood. I walk through the gate, standing inside the walls next to it, waiting for Meg to get in. She gets in quickly (the more magick there is in you the quicker it is) and nods her head to me. We begin our walk across the Main Lawn together.

The Main Lawn is, as it was expected, huge. It’s in between the Great Tower (where Winifred is supposed to kill the delembag) (or not, no one really knows) and the Dining Hall. There’s two trees in the middle of the Main Lawn, a Willow and a Cherry Blossom. When I was 11 Finn told me they were haunted, and I sort of believed him. I grew up in a pretty much magick-less household, and his family was one of the most aristocratic, well known magick family. If anyone knew what trees were haunted, it
would be him. The two trees are weirdly close, and their branches intertwine. It looks like they’re holding hands. I’m tempted to take off my socks and shoes because I remember how soft the grass was last year.

The Main Lawn has a lot of special memories for me, as I’m sure everyone else in this school does. Under the Blossom tree, I was able to watch Finn break up with Cinnamon through the bedroom window. Under the blossom tree, Finn got to watch me whoop and holler and embarrass myself in my dorm right after Cinnamon left with hot tears on her face. I met Finn on the Main Lawn, near the gate, as everyone else was meeting their dormmates. Meg met Hena Abdella, and Winifred met Brandon Hanscom.

Meg walks alongside me, humming quietly. The smell of magick is taking over all my senses, and now I have abandoned my socks and shoes, so the soft grass of the Main Lawn is in between my toes.

Everything feels right, until someone brushes against my shoulder, running like their life depends on it, and I turn my head to see a flushed Finn.
Alright, so my plan didn’t turn out how I thought it was going to turn out.

I flew through the open window of the students next to Meg and Winston, neither of those people caring too much. They looked like the people who wouldn’t flinch if a silver bullet was flying between their eyes.

Followed by me getting on the train, I flew to the bathroom, which was thankfully very close by, and flew in. Then I realized I couldn’t shut the door on my own, which was most definitely a problem. I hit behind the door, which was on the inside, and tried to turn back into my regular old self as quickly as possible.

I think it’s easier to turn back into me than it is to turn into a bat. I’ve spent more time as me than a bat (no, really?) and I feel definitely more comfortable as me. But I still need to focus all my energy when the task is at hand.

I focused on me. A picture of me. There’s a certain picture I thought of.

When I was 12, I got a camera for my birthday, from Cinnamon, who I didn’t know that well but she had a crush on me so she bought it for me. It was a digital camera, and my mum had to go get the pictures printed off for me. I took pictures of everything, everything. I took pictures of the trees on the great lawn, pictures of my food in the Dining Hall, I took pictures of the view out our window even though I looked at it everyday. My mother was ticked off at me, or perhaps I should say disgruntled, but she still printed them off. “It’s better you do this than smoke drugs or do the alcohol.” She said.

Now one day, Winston had gotten an A on some magickal history test, which was a first for him. I had never seen someone so happy. His face wasn’t red, it was pink and flushed and he was all blushy. He was grinning from ear to ear and his nose didn’t even look that crooked. Heck, he looked kind of sharp. Not dapper or pulchritudinous. He just looked handsome in some sort of boyish way.

He was showing me the paper, the “A” written in red ink at the top and circled in the same in, and I took my camera that was hanging around my neck, flipped it around so the lens was facing me, then put my arm around his shoulder (it was more floating above it) and took a picture.

I thought of that image of myself. Smiley and happy and at a truce with arch-nemesis.

I was able to turn back into regular old Finn pretty quickly and was able to shut the door, but there must have been a fluke when I was focusing, or some other,
because as soon as I shut that door, I turned back into a bat. And then me. And then a bat. Rinse, dry, repeat.

I played that game of me, bat, me, bat, until the train ride was over. While turning into a bat on one of those turns I fell into the toilet. Though I wasn’t wet with toilet water (gray water) when I was me, I was still shaken up, as one would assume.

When I could feel the train stop and could hear the noise of my peers going down the aisles of the train, I looked like a wreck, according to that tiny train-bathroom mirror.

My hair was a wreck. It’s a wreck all the time, according to Winston, but this time it really was a wreck. I hadn’t brushed it this morning, since I was in a half-rush, and the hairs on the back of my scalp were sticking straight up. One half of my hair was pushed down and looked straight, the other half had a cowlick I’d never seen before.

My glasses were one hit away from being utterly useless. They’re thick glasses, like the bottom of old Coca-Cola bottles, and square and bulky. They look as if they cover half my face. I’ve broken the middle before, and in an attempt to say “screw you” to my mother, I refused to get a new pair and instead used black duct tape to keep the ugly halves together.

My school clothes were wrinkled, and my Hawaiian must have had a tear when I put it on this morning that I had not noticed. I looked like an aristocratic hobo.

I waited until I couldn’t hear anyone outside the bathroom door until I got out. There was one person left on the train as I was walking my way out, Hena Abdella (my first girl crush). She was sitting in one of the compartments, her left leg up so she could tie her shoe. She had two bags at her side.

When she heard me coming by she looked up and said;

“Hey Finn,” Her voice was bored and deep and kind of nasally. “I didn’t see you earlier,” Her voice has barely changed since we were 11.

I put on my “cool guy” voice and kind of brushed the hair out of my eyes.

“Were you looking for me?” I asked, my voice squeakier than I thought it was since I’d been pretty much silent the whole day.

“No,” She said with a glare, taking her bags, one in each hand, and walk down the aisle to get out. I followed her, knowing my luggage was already up in our dorm. “I was just weirded out at the silence, since you and Winston weren’t able to scream at each other.”

I opened my mouth to argue, but she was sort of right. Really right. Correct.

“But I was looking for Winifred,” She continued, heading out the train door and walking across the bridge to the gate, me right behind her. Though she could, Hena didn’t put her hand on the knocker of the gate. Since she wasn’t doing it I put my hand on the cool metal until it got hot. I could’ve got in anytime then. Hena turned to me.

“Have you seen her?”

And now here I am, in the present, asking;
“Why would I have? You should ask Winston, I’m surprised the train wasn’t noisy with him screaming about how Winifred got a car over the summer so she drove herself to Wellbelove,” I chuckle at my own joke, but Hena looks ill. Her dark skin looks a shade or two paler and she keeps chewing on her bottom lip. Not in a cute way, in a nerve wracking way. I’ve never seen her nervous before, it’s strange. It’s freaking me out to see her freaked out.

“I’m just. . . Worried. Not really about her but-”

Then I notice Winston Freaking Carlile Redwell and Margaret Louise Ferry walking across the great lawn, so terribly close to the dorms. Then I remember why I even cared enough to rush this morning. The diary.

I don’t wait for my beloved Hena finish her sentence before I start running through the gate, pumping my arms and moving my legs as fast as physically possible across the Great Lawn. Several of my peers turn their heads at me, guys I have crushes on and girls I’m always pestilent in impressing, catching me in the discommodious moment of my first attempts at exercise. All because of stupid Winston and that stupid diary. I bump into Brandon Hanscom, Winifred’s dorm mate, a guy I thought I liked when I was 13, but our hands accidentally touched in magickal history and they were so cold and clammy something in my heart just went “ew.” As I bump into him he takes the effort to step forward a bit and push me. I catch myself but like- who does that? Can the man not see that I’m in a hurry? Even after the epiphany that I could never hold his hands I thought he was cute, but you know what? He can choke.

I miraculously manage to pass Winston before he actually enters the dorms, our shoulders brush ever so slightly, and whatever cogs he has left in his tiny mind turn, and he decides he should chase me up the stairs.
Chapter six

Though Winston does not know any of Finn’s motives whatsoever, he knows they’re bad, just because.

Winston.

Hmmmm. Don’t like this. Don’t like this one little bit.

You know, if Finn wasn’t this awful of a person, I wouldn’t have to be running like my life depended on it. And if I wasn’t running, I wouldn’t be out of breath, and if I wasn’t out of breath, I wouldn’t need my inhaler, and if I wasn’t running, I would have enough time to pull over and use, and if I wasn’t running, I wouldn’t even need it. But I’m still gonna keep running, because Finn wouldn’t be running either if he didn’t have some super mysterious thing in our room that could get both of us killed, or worse, kicked out of Wellbelove.

He looks like a hot mess. He looks a fright, as my mum would say. His hair is messier than usual, now it really looks like he doesn’t brush it. His stupid Hawaiian shirt has a tear in it and his school pants are all wrinkled. Though I can’t see his front I just know his glasses are crooked and his face is flushed. I probably look really weird while running after him, but the school will thank me once I stop the bomb he probably put in our dorm from going off.

Finn starts to run up the stairwell, his shoes tapping on the roughened-over-the-years marble steps. He doesn’t use the handrail, so his arms are just pumping ridiculously. I, on the other hand, am a responsible young man so I do. Plus, I’m scared of falling down stairs. Finn established that phobia when we were 12. We get to the second floor, our floor, and his shoes start to make soft little patters on the wooden floor, every once in awhile making zero noise due to falling on the velvety carpet that sits in the middle of the hall, going all the way up and all the way down.

I feel like I might be catching up with him—maybe—just maybe, and—

“Hello, Mr. Redwell,” I hear a voice say. I know I’ve heard it before— it’s deep and scratchy and it’s—

The Headmaster’s!

I stop in my tracks, planting my feet in the velvety carpet, almost stomping them there, then turning around to tilt my head down a bit to see a face as old as dirt and glasses so thick and dusty you can’t even see any eyes. His robes drag across the floor and his hands are folded together neatly, and brought back up to his chest like a T. Rex.

“Hello, Sir!” I say loudly, because there aren’t any spells for the hearing impaired. You have to respect the headmaster, you could get in serious trouble. Plus, if you do
respect him and treat him with kindness, then he’ll keep that in mind at the end of the year grading. I, personally, need that consideration.

“Mr. Redwell- it is nice to see you, have you gotten yourself into any trouble lately?”

“No, sir!” I laugh shakily, I know Finn has to be in our room by now, about to blow up the sch-

“Well, that’s good to hear, now where on this Earth is Winifred? She is very important, as you must already know.”

I don’t snap this time, I just, I just walk away.
Winston got pulled over by the Headmaster, perfect. He was right on my tail too, I’m surprised his oafish feet didn’t trip over themselves and send both of us destined to take a bite out of the carpet. I’m also surprised the Headmaster didn’t pull me over as well, he’s as blind as a bat, he probably didn’t see me. Or -conspiracy- he knows about the diary and doesn’t want Winston to see it either.

I open the door to our dorm, and I don’t even have time to take in the sunlight coming through the windows or how distilled it looks when it hits the floor. All I really see are two leather bound books, one on top of the t.v, the other on my twin-sized bed. One is my diary, though I can’t tell which, the other, well I don’t really know.

I grab the book on top of the t.v, opening it quickly. *This diary belongs to Foster “Finn” Alistair Tachauer* is the first thing I read. Thank Merlin and Morgana that Winston didn’t get it. The secrets this thing holds would ruin my life. I walk over to my bed, and pick up the book on my pillow. Now that I’m closer I can clearly see a different in size and material, but before I could’ve bet my life on that they were identical. I open it up, and I read, *This book belongs to Meg Ferry*. A note is scribbled at the bottom in a nice sort of handwriting;

Keep it for a while

Below is a picture. The material makes it look like it was cut out of a newspaper. I can see a recognizable face, my mother’s. Her usually straight hair is all springy, in its natural form, you could call it. She’s smiling brightly, and tall man, with long black hair and a stern smile, has her arms around her shoulder. In both of her arms are two babies, one with a frilly dress and blondish hair, the other one me.

The face of baby Florence takes me back a bit, where could she have gotten this? I slam it into the back of my closet, whispering a *don’t cry don’t cry don’t cry* to myself as I do so.
Chapter eight // life is confusing but Winston’s too cute to ask real questions. Winston.

When I enter the room, Finn is quickly shutting his closet door. His back is facing me, his half broad shoulders scrunched up and unsure.

“Finn-” I’m already reaching for my fanny-pack so I can get my inhaler.

“Ahh, Winston. I’d recognize your stupid voice anywhere,” He doesn’t turn around and do the cool James Bond villain thing he usually does. I push the trigger on the inhaler and say-

“But you knew I was coming-” I say with a shaky sort of breathless voice. He then turns around quickly- spinning on his heel. It’d look cool if there weren’t really obvious tears in his eyes that he was trying to hide.

“Do you need something?” His shoulder are still scrunched up. I’m almost tempted to ask him what’s wrong- but that would wreck the sort of mood I’ve put around me and Finn’s relationship. Don’t ask emotional questions, and if you do happen to get questions, reply sarcastically. Plus I have a bigger question on my mind.

“What were you looking at?” Now I’m realizing that’s a stupid question because obviously he would answer that and now he’s going to spell his closet shut. He takes off his glasses, not even hiding the tears anymore, and lifts up the end of his shirt to wipe his eyes. His stomach looks ghost-white compared to his arms.

“Your mum. I found an old yearbook in my aunt’s study, I’m telling you Winston, she was a babe.” He shoves his thick glasses back up on his face and snifflles. He almost gives me a smile, but seems to remember who he is and who I am.

“Don’t you have some class to fail?” He continues.

“No,” I say stupidly, and throw my luggage on my bed with a large creak of the old springs. “but it’s not like you don’t.” I recover. I walk out of the room, and the word America creeps up in my mind again, and I fall into that pit of inescapable depression yet again. I go down to the Main Lawn again, expecting to see a huge crowd and in the middle is Winifred, signing autographs and kissing babies. All I see are short and stubby 11 year olds waving goodbye to their parents and grandparents for probably the first time in their life, strong hugs and quick kisses on the forehead flooding the grounds.

America.
Chapter nine // You look as if you’ve seen a ghost!

Winston.

I have never been this sad in my life. I’ve never been this confused in my life.

I’ve been in school for about 3 weeks. Meg left two weeks ago. She said she had to take a train to her parents, then she would be off to America, when I asked if I could take the train with her, she laughed, and I gave her a chuckle as well, though I was completely serious. She gave me a hug that was too short, and I tried really, really hard not to cry, even though I’ve done it several times in front of her before. At that moment, it felt as if it wouldn’t be the right thing to do. She took a step back, and gave an uneasy smile as she clapped her hands and yelled, “Right!” which is her way of saying she should’ve left earlier. She said she had convinced her mum over and over again that she should “at least get a taste of my 4th year education before I go”, and “she’ll kill me if I stay a minute longer”. When she left, I went up back to my room and cried for a while. Finn was in the library, but I don’t think I would’ve cared if he had seen.

Beforehand I had never really realized I don’t have any other friends besides her. I thought maybe I was friends with Tessa Adamson and Robin Dhow, but every time I talk to them it’s inside joke after inside joke and I can’t ever keep up with what they’re saying. Hena Abdella- Meg’s dormmate- seems almost untouchable. I can’t even say one word to her without out her glaring at me. And I keep on trying to get into Finn’s wardrobe, but every time he closes it he uses a “Yeet!” spell so I quite literally can’t touch it without me being thrown to the opposing wall.

On the first day of school, there was something that seemed to hang thick in the air. It surrounded everything and followed everyone to class like a ghost. Teachers skipped calling roll after a while, and instead just silently counted the students in their seats. Since Meg wasn’t there to distract me, and Finn’s not in as many of my classes this year, I noticed. It was an unspeakable panic. Only a few people would come up to me every once in awhile and shove their hands into their pockets, maybe push their hair back, ask if they could bum a pencil first, anything to try to play it cool before asking, “So what’s Winifred up to?”

Finn has mentioned it much. In fact, I don’t think he’s mentioned it at all, which is both in and out of his character. See, Finn is a trashmouth, but he only gets quiet when important stuff is happening. The only time he ever shuts up is when it’s time to be talking. I don’t think we’ve exchanged any words for a couple of days, it feels like I have a ghost in our dorm.

Gradually and gradually the panic has seemed to be more noticeable, and right now, three weeks later, people seem to be coming up to me every two seconds,
“Where’s Winifred? Where’s Winifred?” and I don’t know what to tell them. Is she in Paris? Is she missing?

I walk to the Dining Hall for breakfast, most of my school books in my arms so I won’t have to go get them later. The doors to the hall are held open with chunks of wood, so I don’t have to use my shoulders to push them open, thank goodness. Our gym class just started and every time I move I seem to creak. There are bruises all over my arms and legs that I don’t remember getting, I feel like an apple. There are four short rows of table with with wooden benches in the dining hall, all the windows are stained glass and all three feet within one another. There’s a light fixture in the middle of the ceiling that doesn’t have any light bulbs in it, just candles. One of the teachers has to cast a spell for them to light up. Either, “Will you light my candle?!?” or “This little light of mine!” It’s oddly crowded today, it feels as though the entire school has sat down for porridge. I see Finn sitting near the door, eating one of the scones the lunch lady must’ve made the second before the students came in, because he keeps on tossing it back and forth between his hands as if it’s hot to the touch. I sit down two seats away from him, because it seems to be the only free space in here, not because I want to. I set my books down on the table, and I have no intention to actually eat anything since I’m so behind in maths class. I open up my composition notebook, flipping through the pages so I can find that one bit on diameters-

A chill runs down my spine. Then, it feels like chills are running through my veins. I look around, I don’t know why, it’s not like I could find a reasonable explanation to the chills. Maybe someone opened a window, it’s kind of cold outside-

Wait nevermind our windows don’t do that.

As I look around I can see that half my peers are looking around as well, the other half with faces made of stone, staring at their food or books, or just staring at the wooden tables. I turn to my other side, as if there’s some reasonable explanation on my left, and suddenly a bucket of cold water rushes over me. Icy water, water made to shock. I open my mouth to let out a yelp or a scream or whatever, but the shock seems so powerful I can only let out a squeak.

But I’m not wet. And now the feeling is gone. Kids are standing up now, yelling and asking what’s going on.

The voices stop when those heavy wooden doors slam shut, seeming like someone just bombed the dining hall. I hardly even notice the second bucket of icy water rushing over me or the lights going out. A few people scream though, that’s why I even give it notice. The room feel only vaguely darker, but the only light is coming through the stained glass windows making the crowded mess hall hauntingly beautiful. So beautiful in fact I could mistake Finn’s cry of “Look!” and finger pointing to the ceiling like something from an opera.
But I do look to where his finger is pointing. Everyone does. I can hardly see anything, no lights hits up there. But I can see something- a tattered flag? It’s greyish and flying through the wind and it has to be attached to something but I can’t-

Hair. It’s hair, long too. Girl’s hair. It’s blown across her face and I can’t see any of her features. I can see that it’s brown hair or at least used to be brown at one point, and it’s attached to an impossibly pale body- paler than Finn’s stomach. Now it really is ghost-white skin. She isn’t dressed like a stereotypical ghost or banshee- she’s wearing high waisted jeans and a grey shirt that I can tell used to be blue striped, and one ked on her left foot. A ghost wearing keds, if I wasn’t in pure fight or flight mode I could laugh. Her clothes look tattered and ripped and there’s blood everywhere and oh God the blood doesn’t turn grey like the rest of her. There’s a cut on her one bare foot and the blood is dripping on the floor. The thought of it dripping on someone’s face makes me reach around in my pocket for my inhaler.

_My bed no no I left it on my bed I can see it sitting there on my pillow I just have to run I just have to bolt out of here and get it and it will all be fine and the person who pulled this prank will come forward and everyone will laugh._

“Winston. . .” She croaks out. Her voice is so terribly rough and weak and now Cinnamon’s voice doesn’t hold a candle to how awful my name sounds on that things tongue. Her hair whips around wildly and her shirt gives a tug against her stomach. Her hair keeps flying around and around so violently I think her head might pop off. In the midst of it all it gets pulled away from her face and I can see three distinct things; Icy blue eyes, two moles on her right cheek, and a small scar above her eyebrow, shaped like an ‘L’.

Winifred.

That’s when I stop heaving my shoulders and gasping for air. My lungs can’t even pay attention because all I can think and all I can feel is *Winifred Winifred Winifred_.

“The wolves. . .” She continues. “I thought I could take them on my own. It was the wolves, the Werewolves.”

Finn lets out a choking sob next to me.

“Werewolves,” I can suddenly remember Meg telling me. It was just last year. I had asked her how Finn’s twin sister died, and she had done her research. “The Delebmag sent Werewolves to a nursery on campus about 15 years ago.” She shoved a newspaper article in my face, one of the pictures was cut out. “Finn’s mum had just dropped off her twins when suddenly those things broke down the door and started to go after baby Florence.” Florence. That was his sister’s name.

“Why her?” I asked.

“It was rumoured she could’ve been the Chosen One,”
“Why didn’t he kill Winifred when she was a baby? There were rumours back then about her,”
“The Delebmag can’t get within 10 yards of Winifred until the time is right, we learned about this our first year,”
“Oh,”
“Sorry, I didn’t mean to be rude.”
“Why’d he even kill Florence then?”
“I suppose it was a power move, he wanted to let people know he was horrible enough to kill a baby.”

Finn’s twin sister, Florence, was killed as a baby by Werewolves. And he’s balling his eyes out at the mention of them.

“I thought, if I can take on the Delebmag, I can surely kill some silly old Werewolves...”

Finn falls to the floor he’s crying so hard. Several other kids are crying too, 1st years who are convinced this is the end- but his is the loudest and the hardest to watch.

“And now, Winston,” Heads don’t turn to me when she says this. Everyone’s too entranced. I know it’s impossible, but it feels like she’s found me in the crowd. Her icy blue eyes are stabbing into every nerve in my system- yes- I’m sure she has to be staring at me. She brings her bloody hand to her chest, staining the shirt with even more blood and I can see the blood still running down her leg to the floor and everything is happening so fast and-

“Winston, you are the Chosen One...”

And then everything goes black.
About two seconds after Winston blacked out, or passed out, or fainted, whatever you want to call it, Winifred left. She left the way she came, inching towards her frightening goal, then suddenly engulfing it, making you question whether she was nimble or slow in her appearance.

I was still a wreck of course, everyone was. Allegedly a ghost hasn’t arrived at Wellbelove for about a hundred years. And the only other people that were crying were 1st years, little babies. I was crying harder and louder than anyone else. Everyone else was screaming and trying to find the Headmaster or the nurse for Winston.

I guess it’s silly for me to cry over Florence. I never even knew her, really. I guess the only reason I even care is because I think of what could’ve been.

I could’ve had a built-in best friend. Someone to sit with at lunch, someone to talk about Winston or Brandon or Hena. I wouldn’t even need a stupid diary anymore. I could’ve had someone to stick up for me at Christmas and Thanksgiving, someone to scream right back at my mum.

My mum. She says she isn’t haunted by it anymore, that the years of (secret) therapy have done her well, but if that were true, she would’ve taken down Florence’s nursery. She would’ve taken down those pink frilly curtains and that mobile with all the little stars on it. She would’ve put those stuffed unicorns and bears up in the attack. But now that Florence isn’t here, it’s like there’s a tomb in our house. Mum would probably like me. Or maybe she still wouldn’t. I’ll never know. I don’t know why she would decide to hate me because I was in the nursery when it happened, it’s not like I could’ve done anything, but it seems to be that Florence could’ve kept a mutuality between the two of us together. Plus, if Mum hadn’t gone to hysterics for a while over her death maybe my father would’ve stayed. Maybe that dark haired man whose face I have such a hard time picturing would’ve been in more family photos. Just maybe.

I went down to the infirmary with Winston. I think half the school did at first. Mrs. Abad, the school nurse who was in the Dining Hall when Winifred appeared, and had to run to the infirmary, was quite literally shoving them out the door. After queing for what felt like hours, it was my turn to be shoved, and I told her that I had to talk to him, that he’s my dormmate.

Now, I could be wrong, but I’m pretty sure she was in the nursery when Florence died. It’s such a sad thought, but I think that’s why she let me in. I don’t know if I like pity
all that much, but here I am sitting next to Winston Carlile Freaking Redwell who just blinked open his eyes about a minute ago.

“Foster,” He says, then he clears his throat and rubs the sleep out of his eyes.

“Don’t call me that,” God, I have such an enmity for being called Foster. My name is Finn, Finn.

“Finn- why are you here? Why am I-” His face turns a little pale, then he mumbles, “oh.”

“I wanted to talk to you about something.”

“If you’re gonna talk to me about how my mum was a Betty back in the day then leave,”

“No,” Any other time I would’ve laughed, but right now my stomach is doing flipflops at how no-nonsense this situation is. “I wanted to ask you- do you think you really are- you know- the Chosen One now?” I (for all practical purposes) almost put my hand on the infirmary bed, but instead I rest it on my knee.

His face contorts. He looks completely humourless, and I’m afraid of what might come out of his mouth. I’ve never seen him so pensive. Not even after I pushed him down the stairs. I should’ve never even come here. I should’ve just gone back to my dorm and waited until till all the tears came out because seeing this sombre look on this face and the idea of this serious situation and

(the wolves, the wolves, the Werewolves)

everything’s getting to me and my nametag is HELLO MY NAME IS Mr. Dust-in-my-eyes and I hate it.

He shakes his head. I know I was the one who asked, but I knew the answer.

“Yes,” I say, trying to think of something smart to say but I come up blank. “yes, you are.”

“No. I can’t be. Winifred is.”

“Were you not in the dining hall?”

“I was, but-”

“Winston, Winifred is dead. She’s gone, you should know more than any of us, she visited you. You saw her ghost.”

“But-no-I-it wasn-”

“Use your words,”

“That wasn’t her- I don’t know how to explain it but I just know that wasn’t her. It was a decoy or something or someone dressing up as her but I just know that wasn’t my sister-” He’s sat up in his bed now, and I’m pretty sure he’s not supposed to be doing that, so I put my hand on his shoulder and push him back down into his bed. He bounces right back up.
“Don’t talk like that- How could that’ve been fake? Decoy? What could a decoy even be? A projector? This isn't Scooby Doo, Winston!” I'm so scared of crying I start yelling.

“I know that wasn’t her! That wasn’t Winifred! I know she’s alive- she’s in Fr-Paris! My sister is alive and in Paris!”

“Winston, you have to be the Chosen One!” I shout so loud I think Nurse Abad might come back in.

“I am not the Chosen One!” He shouts right back.

I storm out of the room, in that dramatic strut I thought Winston was making up before but now I can really feel it's aura. And when I'm out of the infirmary, that's when I start to cry.

Later, I'm in our dorm room, sitting criss cross on my bed, doing my maths homework. I know that Winston’s behind too, and I’d study with him if we weren’t sworn enemies. I’m in flannel pyjamas, and I’m 90% sure they were my sister

(Sister, Florence, the wolves, the wolves, the Werewolves)

Emily’s at one point.

I took a shower and washed my face about an hour ago. I was about to go to bed when I remembered the homework. I’d been sitting in this position for about 20 minutes, and my hair kept on falling in front of my eyes so I put a small pigtail in it. I know I look ridiculous, but Winston isn’t here to say anything.

Well, he is now. He just walked through the door. His school clothes are wrinkled and his hair’s a wreck, and his eyes look red and puffy, and his cheeks are blotchy.

“Knock much?”

“No,” He said, but I don’t think he was thinking. He looks so ready to just pass out.

“Why’d the nurse keep you in so long?” I pull the pigtail out of my hair when he’s getting his school-issued pyjamas out of his wardrobe.

“She didn’t, I wanted to stay there.” He paused, “It isn’t that hard to just be nice, Finn.” It feels like an out-of-the-blue thing to say, but I know why he said it. I stand up, shaking some of my papers of my lap, and stretch while saying;

“You’d be surprised, you’d be the biggest bully in the world if you had to look at your face all day,”

For half a second I could swear he was smiling. A goofy, tired grin, almost handsome in a boyish way. The look disappears in that half of a second, and he walks away and into our bathroom.

I put up my maths homework in my bookbag, I’ll do it tomorrow in the Dining Hall.

(The Dining Hall, Winifred, the wolves the wolves the Werewolves)
Nevermind, it’s Friday! I'll have the whole weekend. I feel like this week’s lasted a century, I kind of thought it was Tuesday.

I hang my bookbag on the post of my bed and walk to the t.v. I bought both a dvd player and a VSR for our pleasure. (Diversity is important!) I grab the VSR version of Star Wars and pop it in. I grab the remote on top of the t.v., switch inputs and yada yada yada. So much work to see lightsabers and Luke Skywalker’s pulchritudinous eyes and Princess Leia’s hot cross bun hair. And to cheer up Winston, I suppose.

I’m not a completely evil person, I keep an inhaler in my school bag in case he forgets his (though I forgot to toss it to him in the dining hall) and I feel bad for yelling at him when he was in such a delusional state. I feel bad for pushing him to stay in that awful infirmary all day, but I think both me and Winston both kind of suck at actual conversations. Like adult conversations, apologies and formal thank you's, that sort of thing. The only way I can really think of making peace with him is playing his favourite movie and shutting up for the rest of the night, which might be hard since one of my known nicknames is ‘trashmouth Tachauer’. But I’d do anything instead of actually saying sorry. I just can’t.

He comes out of the shower in his blue school issued pyjamas and a towel wrapped around his neck. His hair is wet and spiky and he still looks dead on his feet. He pay a meagre amount of notice to what movie I put on and lays down on his bed, wrapping himself up in the covers, and closing his eyes.

“I know you think I’m going insane,” Winston says in the middle of the night. I was awake, staring at the ceiling and thinking of Winifred. She’s been one of the few pretty girls at this school I haven’t fallen head over heels for. It’d be a shame if I was in love with both the Redwell siblings, wouldn’t it?

“Yes,”

“I know you don’t want to bargain with me,”

“Not even a little,”

There’s a pause.

“Though I am sorry for yelling at you,” My stomach lurches when I say that. He’s quiet for a little while longer.

“Prove it,” I can hear him sitting up in his bed so I follow, I can see his brown eyes due to the moonlight coming from our window and spilling into our room. His eyes look similar to the way to they did in the infirmary; no-nonsense, grave, and heavy.

“What, pray tell, are you talking about?” I ask him, my eyebrows furrowing together and my neck craning towards him. Prove it? Prove what? Does the bloke want me to get on my knees and bow down to him?

“I want you to prove that you’re sorry, and if you really do believe that Winifred is dead, then I want you to prove that she really is dead.” His voice seems more driven
than I’ve ever heard it before. I actually audibly gasp. Prove she’s dead? What is he saying?

“How would I even-“

“I wasn’t in the infirmary all day, I was in the library. That’s why I’m so tired, I spent hours upon hours reading about how your dad works the files in magick hell!”

I gasp again, and I’m just about ready to punch his stupid face.

“You had no right to go read about my father!”

“The library is open to the public, right? Am I not the public?”

That is just about the smartest and worst thing he’s ever said.

“Though legally you did nothing wrong, you should still have morals about these things!”

“I have morals, that’s why I was nice about asking! That’s why I’ve never brought up Florence after all these years!”

And with that, I stand up and waving my ring hand, shouting a, “Light ‘em up!” illuminating the room with pure magick. Winston stands up somewhere in between those moments, walking over to me so I can tighten my fists around the collar of his shirt.

“I’ll help you find your dead sister, but you can never bring up mine!” I let go of his collar and shove him away from me, he stumbles but he’s still standing his ground.

“Fine then, if you weren’t such a punk I wouldn’t have even said her name!”

“Fine!”

“Fine!”

Then we’re quiet.

“It’s Friday, right?” He asks.

“Yeah,”

“I was thinking that we could go to magick hell tomorrow,”

“No,” I say. “I’ll put off visiting family even in a crisis. First, we go to The Cold One.”

“Who’s The Cold One?”

“It’s a place, idiot. It’s a Vampire bar.” I can practically hear the gooseflesh appearing on his skin.

“Why Vampires?”

I turn away from him so I can crawl back into my bed, waving my ring hand again, yelling, “Light’s out!” Then I tell him,

“They always seem to be filled with secrets they need to tell someone. That’s why their skin’s so grey,” I lie, Vampire skin isn’t even that grey. “every time they spill the beans, it gets greyer.”
Chapter eleven // Finn has an embarrassing taste in music but he has a pretty nice car.

Winston.

I’m going to Finn’s house before we leave for The Cold One. Why? He wanted me to come. He just wanted to.

He went an hour before me. He said that I should stay here for a while so it doesn’t look suspicious, I think he’s over thinking this stuff but I probably gave him that trait. He left at around 5 o’clock, and it’s 5:30 right now. I’m destined to leave at 6. With my time I watch Raiders of the Lost Ark.

I finish the movie, while eating popcorn on Finn’s bed (brushing of the kernels into his sheets) (chaotic evil). I take my wand out of my pocket, give it a whirl and yell, “Time for you to get a watch!”

The numbers 7:20 appear in red font on my wrist. Crap. I rub off the numbers with my thumb, grab my school coat, and walk down to the station next to Wellbelove. One ticket to hell, please. I’m tempted to tell the ticket lady. I put my sarcasm aside for nearly the entire train ride as I try to think of an excuse as for why I was late. The train station I stop at is apparently a mile away from Finn’s house, according to Finn’s as well as a kind stranger’s directions. I take a cab there, since I’m definitely not walking. Finn gave me money for that, he told me to give him back whatever I don’t use or he’ll hex me. The cabby was silent and I gave him 5 bucks that I earned over the summer while watching my neighbor’s cat while she went out with her friends. He nodded his head and drove away.

And here I am, standing in front of the Tachauer mansion with sweaty hands and a bad excuse as to why I was late. “Oh, I just lost track of time and all, I was doing research on Vampire’s, since, you know, we’re going to a Vampire bar,” I know he’ll probably make some sarcastic comment like “Oh really? Why can’t vampires drink their own blood then?” and I’d have nothing to say except a confession.

His house is set in a magickal town. It’s not really here or there, it’s just set in this grey area of magick. Like the train station. Mages can use their powers out on the streets with no fear of a Normal seeing them. And his house really is a mansion, by the way. The outside is painted grey, the outside of windows painted white. The number of windows seem to be in the millions, and I can’t see inside a single one of them, not that I’m peaking or anything. It’s just weird, are they all drawn? Are they all tinted? Who knows. The porch outside the house is painted white and has roses with thorns bigger
than the flowers in front of them. The door is painted white and has the most unwelcoming door handle. I walk up the steps on the porch and rest my hand on that handle.

*Wait this isn’t my house I can’t just walk in.*

I remove my hand and put it on the knocker. I let the brass meet the wood three times, then I wait. The wait’s only two seconds, because a stubby woman in a maid’s uniform is here.

“‘Oster, ‘ve date!” She yells. *Foster. . . You’ve. . . Date? Foster you have date?* Ew, no!

“No, no I’m just his friend from school,” I wave my hands in front of her, she rolls her eyes and shimmies up the staircase. I’m not sure what to do so I awkwardly step over their threshold and close their door. Their foyer is a wide hall with a staircase to the right, and a room with a large entrance that I’m able to peer into. I decide to walk into it to inspect it further, since it’s better than just waiting awkwardly at the door. The room is about the size of our dorm, and has wooden floors and a fireplace nestled between two large bookcases, both bookcases completely full. There’s a small carpet in the middle of the room, and on this carpet sits two large red chairs, one of which holds a girl about my age. I’m fairly sure she goes to Wellbelove, and she scribbling into a diary with a blue pen.

“So you’re Finn’s date, are you?” She says, looking up from her diary, closing it after using her pen as a bookmark.

“N-no. I’m just a friend from school.”

“Finn doesn’t *have* any friends.”

Ouch. I guess she’s right, he doesn’t sit with anyone at breakfast or lunch or dinner, and he doesn’t really talk to anyone outside of class. Besides me, of course. It’s still such a harsh thing to say. Like, it’s true, but you shouldn’t say it. *Finn doesn’t have any friends.* Screw you, Finn’s sister! I’ll be his friend!

“If he didn’t why would I be here?”

“Because you’re his date.”

“No,” I say, my face flushing. This house is a million degrees. She sits up straighter and smooths her skirt.

“What are you too going to do?”

“Uh-” I can’t just tell her we’re going to a *Vampire bar.* “we were about to go out clubbing.”

“Any of your friends going with you?”

“Just us,” I answer. I tug on my sweater, this house really does feel hot. I’m sure they have a million fireplaces all lit.

“Is that what you’re wearing?”
I look down at myself. I’m in my nicest sweater, a light blue one that fights nicely, my school issued pants that self-iron, and my school coat. If I’m being honest I look quite posh.

“Y-yeah.”
“Hmmm...” She hums, drumming her fingers on the top of her diary.
“If you have something to say, say it,” I feel my face turn even more red. “please.” I add. She leans back in her chair and shrugs her shoulders.
“Oh it’s just that- that really sounds like a date,”
“It isn’t a date-” I begin, but Finn comes in and I stop. He’s wearing black pants and a white long sleeved dress shirt with rolled up sleeves. His hair is combed and he looks like a functioning person in this society.
“Oh, Emily, if this were a date I would’ve been screaming to the whole house about how late my boyfriend was,” He pauses, and shoots me a glare. When he looks back to Emily he has a sour smile on his face. “but it’s not, and I just fumed silently in my room for about,” He makes it a point to check his wrist with no watch, “an hour and forty minutes.”

I give him a crooked frown that’s meant to say “sorry” but probably looks more like constipation. He begins to walk back to his front door, when he turns around to face me, his hand on the doorknob. He lets out a weary little sigh and then a dramatic tsk.
“Does everyone in your family do that?” I ask, putting my hands behind my back so he won’t see me clenching my fists. He takes the hand that was on the knob and puts it on his hip.
“Do what?”
“Put on a little show before actually saying what needs to be said,”
“I feel that it’s better to put on that little show before telling you that if you’re this late you should at least look somewhat okay.” He tilts his head off to the side and blows some air at the hair on his forehead.
“Puh-pardon me?!” I say loud enough for even Emily to hear. He rolls his eyes and begins to run up the stairs. “I am wearing amazing clo-”
“Just follow me, you’re not wearing anything school issued while clubbing,”

His room doesn’t match the rest of his house. The wallpaper is still fleur de lis, but it’s covered in posters and on one wall he’s taken some spray paint and wrote in cursive;

Oh no!

I don’t know exactly what he means by that, but his handwriting is nice enough to make it not look trashy. The room is the same size as our dorm, maybe bigger. He has a red
alarm clock on top of a black dresser with three drawers. His bed is a king, and as far
away from the door as possible. It has four posts, one for each corner, and on each post
is a gargoyle. I know, a gargoyle. His duvet matches his dresser. His closet is near the
door, and he’s rummaging through, looking for something that isn’t school issued. He
pushes up his glasses and pulls out some grey pants.

“You know, for someone who wears Hawaiian shirts over his uniform you
shouldn’t go around praising that school issued stuff is the epitome of a fashion faux.”
“Do you want a coat? I’m just kidding that wasn’t an option.” He shoves a
matching grey coat to go with the pants in my arms.
“Will we even be allowed in the bar?”
“Vampires don’t care, as long as we don’t look twelve.” He pauses. “That’s why
I’m not giving you my best clothes, since the bouncer might pull you over.”
Trashmouth Tachauer.
“Where’s your bathroom?” I ask him.
“Down the hall and to the left,”

After I get changed, I start checking myself out in the mirror. The pants fit well and the
coat makes me look older. If we didn’t have to wear uniforms to school, I’d probably be
a lot nicer to Finn so I could borrow his clothes. I walk back to Finn’s room, and after
seeing that he isn’t there, I go back down stairs. But not immediately, I look through his
room a little more. Perhaps he’s put whatever was in his wardrobe in here somewhere.
Or maybe I’ll just find some other interesting thing. I get down on my hands and knees
and look under his bed. I lift up black duvet that drags on the floor to see another shade
of black. I take my wand out of my back pocket and say,

“This little light of mine!” The space under the bed lights up dimly, not as much
as it would if Meg were casting the spell. I can see some dirty underwear, a couple of
socks and nothing else besides a book near the foot of the bed. I grab it, picking up a
few dust bunnies as I go. I blow off the dust, which blows right back in my face, causing
a coughing fit. I open the first page and read,

This journal belongs to Finn
2012-14

13-14, we would’ve been 11 and twelve. Does Finn still journal? Does he have a journal
in our dorm? I turn the page to read-
Dear diary,

I’m not going to write in you often because I think this might get boring. But I have to tell you something. I hate my mother. I hate my father. I hate my dorm mate.

None of this is news to me.

“Winston!!” I hear Finn shout. I break out in a cold sweat, ohmymerlinandmorgana he caught me caught me he’s gonna REALLY gonna kill me this time-

“Your taking forever!” Finn shouts again, I can tell that this time his voice is faraway- downstairs. I take a deep breath and quick shot from my inhaler, then go downstairs.

He’s waiting at the door, checking the clock next to the coat rack and twirling his car keys on his fingers before looking up at me.

“Time to go,” he says. He walks out of the door, and to my surprise, holding it for me. I decide it’s best not to thank him or bring it up, and instead just follow him out to his driveway, where a red ferrari is parked.

“Shouldn’t we steal something. . .” I wave my hands around. “Cheaper? Like, what if we crash the car or get in a street race with a Vampire?” I wipe my sweating palms on my sweater. He just shrugs his shoulders. I got this sweater for my birthday over the sweater. I didn’t actually get the sweater, I got some money from my mum and dad and then I went to Freaser’s department co. I contemplated buying some new shoes, but I decided that my yellow keds and school shoes were fine.

“It’d be a nice ‘screw you’ to my sister. It’s her car, and she used it on the first day of school without giving me a ride.” He opens the door and sits in the driver’s seat. I walk around the front and sit in the passengers. I feel like I’m in a movie. I feel like a million pounds. I almost forget I’m a skinny 15 year old with Finn Tachauer as my dormmate and Winifred Redwell as my missing sister and Meg Ferry as my best friend all the way in America.

“How d’you get to school on time?” I ask him, buckling my seatbelt as he buckles his. He turns his keys, and the engine revs. He puts the car in reverse and pulls out of the driveway, starting down the road. “How did you get to school on time?” I repeat.

“Told a cabby, idiot.”

I squint my eyes at him as he focuses on the road. He’s a good driver, I hardly even need to vomit. I know he’s lying, but why? And what else could he have done rather than call a cabby? Fly?

“Can I play some music?” I ask him about two minutes later.

“We shouldn’t draw attention to ourselves,” He’s lying again.
“We’re two 15 year olds in a bright red ferrari, music won’t hurt.” I lean over to turn on his stereo, as I do so his jaw clenches and he grips the steering wheel so hard his knuckles turn white.

The radio’s just static, so I press a button, letting it play whatever c.d’s in the player. A loud BOOM carries across the speakers and I reach over to turn down the volume. More rain sounds start to play as a piano and a woman with a husky voice chimes in. “It’s Raining Men,” by The Weather Girls is playing. My jaw drops a bit, and I let out a loud gasp that’s more of a laugh.

“Is this- is this your c.d?” I ask him. He doesn’t say anything, he stares at the road, his cheeks flushed for the first time in his life. “IS THIS YOUR C.D?” I ask him again. He opens his mouth quickly, turning his head towards me, the car swerving a little.

“I told you not to play it!” He shouts.

“IS THIS YOUR C.D FINN?”

He stops in the middle of the road, jerking me forward.

“ALL THE OTHER SONGS ARE BOPS OKAY? I BOUGHT IT FOR MYSELF WHEN I WAS TWELVE AS A JOKE BUT I WAS QUICK TO REALIZE THE WEATHER GIRLS ARE NOT A JOKE!”

“So it IS YOUR C.D?” I SHOUT RIGHT BACK.

“Yes it IS MY BLOODY C.D JUST LET ME LIVE!” He screams to the neighborhood.

“OKAY FINE I’M SORRY!”

“JUST STOP YELLING AND I’LL FORGIVE YOU.”

Okay,” I say in my normal voice. I take a deep breath and he follows.

“Alright,” he whispers.

“Is that why you didn’t want me to play any music?”

“Yeah,” he whispers, laughing very quietly as he starts going down the road again.

“We shouldn’t park here,” I say as he stops the car four songs later. The sun is sitting on the horizon, making the east fiery and orange and the west black and blue.

“Why?”

“We’ll look suspicious if we park here,” I say a little more quietly. I look around to see two chavs (or perhaps two slavs) walking down the road. He must notice me doing this because he says,

“They’re mages too. Everyone here uses magick. And I’m not parking anywhere else, this is fine.” He unbuckles his seatbelt and takes the keys out of the ignition.

“Being a vampire is illegal. What if the bar gets raided by police? What if we’re able to escape, but they still arrest us because our car is here?” I turn myself towards
him, not yet unbuckling my seatbelt. He looks at me for a moment, and I can almost hear him thinking about what I said. He faces the steering wheel again, jamming the keys back in the ignition.

“I’m not nervous,” he says as he starts driving. “I just don’t want this car to get towed, that was illegal parking anyway.” Morgana, he’s just- he’s just such a liar. He gets us about a block away before we start walking down the street, hands in our pockets and seven feet between between us. The idea that we shouldn’t walk together was actually courtesy of Finn. He said he didn’t know how to explain it, other than he doesn’t want it to seem we’re together if one of get arrested in a hypothetical bar-raid. We arrive at The Cold One, which looks like an abandoned building on an abandoned street. The outside is painted grey but look black with the now darkened setting. Before he knocks, I fumble to get my inhaler out of my pocket and takes a couple shots. It makes a slight hsss that brings an attraction to the loud silence around us. He turns to me with one fist knocking above the wooden door and holds out one open palm to me. I give him a confused look, and he shakes his palm out to me again. My arm curled up, I lightly give him a high-five.

“I don’t want a light sign of affection, you idiot, I want a huff from your aspirator.” He says with a light glare. I shrug my shoulders and smack the inhaler in his hand. He wipes the end on his sleeve and puts it to his mouth, pushing the trigger, gagging instantly.

“Crowley Winston- that tastes like battery acid.” He hands it back to me and pulls his fist back to knock, but turns to me again. “You know- if I hadn’t brought you, I would’ve never even considered that this bar could be raided.” He raps on the door three times, pauses, twice more, pauses, and one more. A burly man with long brown hair pulled back in a ponytail opens the door a crack.

“Password?” The burly man asks.

“Hopscotch,” I can hear Finn whisper. The door opens all the way, and the man’s expression softens.

“Finnnnnn- you know I would’ve let in you in anywayyyyy,” He wraps his arms around Finn and gives him a tight squeeze. Finn walks into the bar and I quietly follow. The music isn’t really loud but it isn’t really that quiet either. It’s something to dance to, I can tell. The place seems to be crowded, and there are several very slightly grey-skinned Vampires in booths, at the bar, and in line for the bathroom. The people near the door turn their heads when we walk in. They did as the bouncer did and yell, “Finnnnnn!” A few more people follow, and eventually the whole bar is shouting Finn’s name. Not even an exaggeration.

“Whatcha doin’ here, buddy?” A man asks him.

“Who’s the friend?” A girl asks.
“This is my dormmate at Wellbelove, Winston.” he answers the girl. “Francis, he’s looking for his sister, Winifred Redwell. We were trying to see if any of you guys knew where she was, since Vampires seem to know everything.” The man clapped Finn on the back and said,

“Oh, sure buddy! If you’d told me you were looking for the Chosen One I would’ve already gone halfway across the word lookin’ for her. But the one or two pints I’ve had are kicking so I may just have to stay in this bar,” The man stood up on the table in his booth and pointed to us, shouting, “Hey! Listen up!” everyone listened up. “My boy, Finn, has a boy of his own, who has some trouble. He’s looking for his girl,”

“How romantic!” A girl interrupted.

“No, she’s his sister.”

“Oh,” the woman says sadly.

“And she’s also the Chosen One. Now I know us Vampire’s have had our experiences with the Delebmag, bribes, killings, whatnot. . . But that girl’s supposed to kill ‘im, so we should probably find her! Now, does anyone know where the Chosen One is?!”

The room was silent for a minute, when a lady yelled, “But ain’t she a Vampire too?”

“No,” I said loud enough for the bar to hear. “she isn’t a Vampire.”

“I heard she was a Vampire, too.” Another lady says.

“No-” I begin, but a man cuts me off.

“Yeah, I heard Nicodemus Adler Turned her, when she was 12 or some other.”

“Nico-who?” Finn asks, then suddenly the Delebmag comes crashing through the door.
Chapter Twelve // Great Timing, Spawn of Satan!

Finn.

There are 3 main things you should know about the Delembmag;
1. It love’s It’s bribes. It bribed the Werewolves to kill my sister, and It’s constantly bribing the Vampires to kill Winifred. I’ve always wondered why they never did it, and I always kind of figured they didn’t want to mess with her because of how powerful she is. I learnt that tonight they all think she’s a Vampire, and Vampires are bonded in blood, we never turn their backs on one another.
2. It loves fire, oh boy does It love fire. It’s super fortuitous for him that he isn’t flammable.
3. It’s your worst nightmare. It’s been around as long as magick itself, and has only grown more powerful, more terrifying with time. There’s a discussion on whether or not It should be called and ‘It” or a “he”. It’s learned how to look into your brains, find your greatest fears, and make them flesh. I’m not 100 % sure what he would turn into for me, but I have ideas . . .

Oh, and one more, he’s right here.

The place is already on fire, Crowley- It’s fast. It’s turned into a horrendous pile of rotting flesh, arms and legs sewn onto this pile of flesh in every direction. It’s running, and as it passes, I can see a large gaping hole at Its front, filled with human teeth that looked like they’ve been sewn in. It’s swallowed a few Vampires so far, and everyone is rushing to get out. People are breaking windows, walking straight through fire, anything to escape Its wrath. I’ve cast a “Make a wish!” that’s helped with some of the fire at the door. Winston’s climbing out one of the windows, and now some of the Vampire’s are turning into bats, flying out the windows and into the night. There are police sirens outside, and I just know me or Winston’s gonna get arrested. Why Winston? In case you forgot; Both being a Vampire and keeping a Vampire in hiding is illegal. But, being arrested is better than burning alive or eaten by the Delembmag, so I turn into a bat. I’m so scared and so ready to do it that it happens in an instance.

I get out a window, and the second I’m out, I can see firefighters using their hoses on the building, and cops arresting Vampires, the second they get out of the fire they’re being arrested. I hover above the scene for a moment, just trying to put together what I’m seeing.

The bouncer is on fire. His clothes are going up in the flames, his hair has been singed off. Winston’s getting arrested. A large cop is putting him in handcuffs. I decide to fly back to my house. There’s nothing I can do, I’m the reason me and Winston even came here.
I got arrested.

It was quite apparent that I was a minor, and it was obvious I was sober, so the police (magick police) sent me to Wellbelove so the school officials could sort everything out. The school officials argued for about an hour before deciding that I should be expelled from Wellbelove for the school year, and that I’m not allowed in any magick communities. If found in any magick community, I will have to relocate and go to a different school next year. The cherry on top of this sucky-sundae is that they took my wand away during my expulsion. I was sent home, without any magick or any answers to Finn’s whereabouts, not that I asked any questions. I’m not that stupid, I know that if I had asked he’d be expelled too, and even though I could kill him right now I’d kill him before taking away his magick.

And now here am I, stuck at my house with an angry Mum and a crying Dad.

“My daughter’s ghost shows up in the cafeteria and they don’t think to call us!” She yells, clutching her hands in her hair before throwing them up.

“The whole school was kind of in hysterics, Mum.” I answer shyly. I want to tell her that it wasn’t really Winifred’s ghost, but what would I even say to convince her? She isn’t Joyce Byers, she isn’t holding onto whatever evidence she has that her kid’s alive.

My father hasn’t said anything, he’s just sobbing away, his shoulders heaving up and down, up and down. I can’t imagine how he’s able to get in any breaths.

“And on top of all this you have to go get some pints with Vampires?!“ She continues.

“I didn’t drink. I was safe.”

“Not until the bloody Delebmag attacked! And if your sister wasn’t dead she’d go ahead and get her revenge, but no-“ She stops, and I think she’s remembering that I’m not responsible for Winifred’s death.

“My child, my child’s gone!” My dad cries, sitting down on the couch and burying his face into a pillow.

“Why were you even at a Vampire Bar? Is that how kids get their kicks now? Drinking Bud Light while your pals drink Blood light?”

“Mum, I didn’t dr-“ The doorbell rings.
“Oh, is that one of those Vampires right now? Are the legends true? Do I have to invite them in or will they just jump right in and have their brunch?”

I ignore her comment, and walk over to the door. I look through the peephole, but someone’s put their finger over it, and all I can see is darkness.

“Mum, Dad, leave for a second.”

“Wh-”

“Just go! Please, you don’t want anyone to see you like this, do you?!”

Their silent, and mad, but they leave to go to their bedroom. The doorbell rings again, and I open it to find a flushed Finn, a huffing Hena Abdella, and a crazed Cinnamon. The last one didn’t work as well but you get the point. I don’t know Hena Abdella that well, I just know her as Meg's dormmate who’s apparently killed a man. She has muscular arms, a floral headscarf and book bag. There’s something so intimidating about her, and I know the “killed a man” thing is a lie, because by Meg’s account she’s one of the sweetest people in the world. I just can’t figure out what she’s about.

“What in Aleister Crowley are you doing here?” I say, directed at Finn mostly. “Is this some sort of apology, because it’s both unwanted and a first.”

“Hena’s the one who wanted to come here,” He says, jabbing his thumb at Hena, whose brows are furrowed together and fists clenching.

“You didn’t have to blame this on me,” She says to Finn, throwing one of her hands in the air. “it was your decision to bring me here. I’m just concerned for Meg.”

“Meg?”

“You oughta know her. You’re like, best friends.” Cinnamon chimes in.

“Y-yeah, it’s just- Cinnamon why are you even here?” I ask, trying to not sound too rude but failing.

“I don’t want to be left in the dark. I heard Hena and Finn talking, and I just wanna know what’s going on.”

“Hena, Meg’s in America. That’s all there is going on. Please, just go home.” I begin to shut the door. Hena takes one of her strong hands and keeps the circuit of the the door going into its frame from being completed.

“That’s what Finn told me,” She says, widening the door. “if I had believed him, I wouldn’t be here.”

I invite all three of them in, and they sit on the couch, chatting with concern as I bring them cups of tea. We’re out of scones, I remember a time where someone came over and we weren’t. I set the cups of tea in the table in front of them, and Hena is the first one to thank me and take one. The rest follow her lead, their hands shakier.

“Where do we even start?” I ask them. “If Meg apparently isn’t in America, then where is she?”
“It’s a sort of a long story. The shortest version of it is: I don’t know.” Hena begins, take a rolled up piece of parchment that looks older than dirt out of her bookbag. “My suspicions began when Winifred didn’t show up on the train for school. I knew it was stupid, I told myself she had just gotten a ride from one of her many friends-”
“You told me you were concerned, when we were alone on the train.” Finn interrupts.
“How’d you guys manage to be alone on the train?” Cinnamon asks. Hena gently raises her hand.
“I wasn’t finished.” She continues. “Alright, so I continuously got more worried as the days passed and Winifred wasn’t there. When Meg told me she was leaving for America, it was like the straw that broke the camel's back. I went home, broke into my father’s study and stole this map.” She gestures her hand to the parchment she put on the coffee table.
“What’s so special about it?” Cinnamon asks, letting her fingers brush over the paper.
“Don’t touch it! I’m not mad, but my father would kill me if it got damaged. I mean, he’d kill me if he found out I had it, but . . .” She reaches over and unrolls the paper, showing us it’s contents by keeping her hands on both ends. “It tracks magickal items. I didn’t really know that when I got it, it took me an eternity of research to find its purpose. All I knew when I stole it was that it was a map, and that maps find things. I found out that this map is used for finding magickal items, which can pretty much just automatically find Mages. I figured out how to use it just yesterday, and I tried to find out where Winifred’s magickal item was.”
“Where was it?” I ask, I’ve leaned in so far I’m literally on the edge of my seat.
“It said-it said-”
“What?” I ask again.
“It said it was in magickal hell,”
“So she really is dead,” Finn whispers. I forgot this is his first time hearing this too.
“Do you ever pay attention in class?” She asks Finn. “Magickal items don’t go to hell with their Mage’s. They stay on Earth, for some other Mage to find one day.”
“Then what does that mean?” I ask.
“Why would I know?”
“Finn, your dad works in magickal hell, we could go to him!” I say, putting my hand on his shoulder.
“N-no. Let’s let her finish this first.”
“I went to Winifred’s dorm. I couldn’t find anything, but I didn’t really know what I was looking for. I broke into the room where they keep student files. No such luck, but
Winston, I found your wand." She fishes it out of her book bag, and I hug it like it’s my child.

“Thank Merlin and Morgana, Arthur too! Hena, thank you so much!” I cry, inspecting every inch of it, like checking a kid for boo-boos after they’ve been playing outside too long.

“And then I went into your guy’s dorm.”

“Wait, what?” I put the wand in my pocket and snap out of my happiness.

“While you guys were out. I figured since you’re her brother you might have something, and while I was looking through Finn’s closet, I found this.” She swiftly takes a leather bound diary out of her bag.

“You went through my stuff?” Finn yells, Hena looks as calm as ever. “How’d you even get in there? I spelled it shut so this idiot,” he jabs his thumb at me. “couldn’t go digging through there.”

“For the greater good, okay? I opened it up, thinking it was probably just Finn’s journal or something, when I read this,” She ignores the second question and holds up the diary for all of us to see. This book belongs to Meg Ferry. I read. Underneath it is a note that says to keep it for a while, and a picture that looks like it was cut out of a newspaper with Finn’s mum on it.

“Why did you have that?” Cinnamon asks Finn.

“It was on my bed at the beginning of the year. I just ignored it, okay?” Finn says uncomfortably. What’s that picture? I want to ask him, but there are too many questions already floating around the room. Maybe that picture was already there in the diary, and it had nothing to do with Finn. But if it had nothing to do with Finn, why was there a picture of his mum? Why would Meg have that? Where would she find it? Who were those kids, who was that man? Was Meg trying to set up a conspiracy that Finn’s mum leads a double life, or was that just her first husband? WHAT IS GOING ON?

“Why’s that diary even important?” Out of all the questions hanging thick in the air, Finn chooses that one to ask Hena.

“I was reading it through it, trying to find something useful, when I found this.” She begins to pass the diary around the room.
Chapter Fourteen// Everything is beginning to make sense.

Winston.

She hands me the book first. The first thing I read is,

_I have fallen madly in love and after my descent I believe I broke in two._

_I haven’t been writing much in my diary because I didn’t think words could quite capture what was going on. But now I need to write this down, because I know I won’t be able to tell anyone else. I’m going to keep this as short as I’ll let myself._

_Winifred bribed me._

No.

_She bribed me with soft lips that made my stomach dissolve into stars every time they touched my own._

This isn’t real.

_The first time she did it I didn’t know it was a bribe, and I’m still questioning that now. The first time it happened she had pulled me into the art room after school was over and compared the colour of my cheeks when she touched my hand to the fiery sunset. When she finished her simile she leaned over and world’s seemed to collide. She continued this, though variated each time, for several weeks last year. Eventually she pulled me into her room and told me her plan._

There is no plan. This isn’t real. Finn was right. Winifred’s dead. There’s nothing we can do about it. This isn’t real.

_We would go to magick hell together. She would trade in her magickal item in order to be able to turn into a ghost when she died. Then, she would go to Paris before school started. I would tell everyone I was going to America, when in reality I’m visiting her with Nicodemus._

_Then I would stop her heart for 5 minutes, allowing her to turn into a ghost and tell the school Werewolves killed her. Then, we could live happily ever after together in Paris._

_And somehow, I agreed to it. She told me I was the only person she allowed to stop her heart, and I don’t even remember how I did it. I used a spell to repress_
memories, “Little bunny foo-foo I don’t wanna see you!” so I could stop replaying visiting magick hell and killing Winifred.

I’m leaving tomorrow, but I don’t know what I’m going to do with the diary. The evidence.

“This isn’t real. I know this isn’t real. Nothing can convince me that this is the truth.” I say after everyone finishes reading.

“Yeah, how do we know that you didn’t make this up?” Finn asks Hena, who still looks calm and cool.

“I waited to find Meg’s magickal item, so I could do it with all of you. I don’t know if doing that would prove my point and make me feel better, or help you find your sister and your best friend, Winston.” She pauses. “Both, I guess.”

She puts her hands on the map. Her two pointer fingers rest on the compass, and she takes a deep breath.

“Meg,” Her voice is a breath. It sounds more ghost like than Winifred’s did. At first nothing happens.

“See, I told you-” The glowing of Paris cuts me off. The glow is a blue-ish green, and it doesn’t feel real. Nothing about this feels real. It feels like some prank Hena is pulling on us. It feels like she’s taking advantage on the fact that Winifred’s dead and my best friend is in America to make me even more anxious about everything.

“Told me what?” Hena says. A sly sort of grin appears on her face. I stand up. I’m about to flip the table.

“Alright, if they really are in Paris, then we’ll look for them there. If Winifred’s really alive,” Oh my God am I crying? Nevermind, just passionate. “if what you say is true, then we’ll find them in Paris.”

“So you think Winifred’s dead now?” Finn asks. I don’t want to admit that he was right, so instead I say,

“I’ll grab my coat, and we’ll find out.”

The train ride wasn’t so bad. It was the realization that Paris is really quite huge that sucked. Finn wouldn’t shut up for the entire ride, and it got to the point where I had to keep my hand on his arm so that every time he opened his mouth I could pinch him.

“Too bad it wasn’t your mum that went missing. I’d be much more motivated to find her.”

“Finn do you ever shut up?”

“Or your dad,”

“You’ve never even seen my dad.”

“Yeah, but if he was able to get the betty that is your mum, he’s probably a Mr.
universe contestant." He held his hand in the air for Hena to high five it, but she just shook her head.

"I mean, unless he's really ugly now. That just gives me a better shot of making your mum stray from the path," He continues. "Winston, I could be your dad one day! I could buy you baseball gloves and emotionally neglect you!"

"Finn, shut up!" I had yelled. A woman who was sitting near us stared. We had other conversations such as;

"I'm really hungry for water. I mean thirsty." He said as he stared out the window.

"Finn it costs the low low cost of free for you to shut up right now,"

After the train ride, we stop and get coffee. It's a small little cafe in an okay neighborhood. The air in the cafe smells like coffee and, if this makes any sense, warm. It smells warm. There's some art on one of the brick walls, the one that catches my eye the most is a drawing of a curly haired boy. It's against a blue black ground, and it looks like the artist took a black pen to draw the boy but didn't pick it up from the piece of paper. The wall is filled with art, over 50 pieces maybe, but if I had to pick a favourite, it would be that one.

"My favourite's that painting of the restaurant." Cinnamon said, as if reading my mind. I look over to where she was staring. It wasn't an original, it was a painting I'd already seen. Nighthawks.

"You guys are nerds, let's order." Finn said. Cinnamon was about to walk up to the cashier when a tall Eastern Asian woman who looked like she was about 20 years old walked up to our table.

"Hello, how has your day been?" Her accent isn't French, it's American. I've never heard one in the flesh before. It's really nasally but isn't southern.

"Good, and you?" Cinnamon says, her skin and voice seem to glow.

"Very good and what would you like to order?" The woman asks.

"I think four black coffees will do," I answer for her. I checked the menu, that's all we can afford plus a train ticket back home.

"Very good, and what name will be with that order?"

"Redwell," I say. I've only been to a restaurant twice in my life, and both times my parents have put their names for the order as Redwell, otherwise I'd probably never do that.

"Oh, what a small world!" The woman exclaims. "The young lady over there just put her name for the order as the same thing," The barista raises a thin finger to point to across the cafe at said young lady, and Cinnamon, Finn, Hena and mine own jaws collectively drop.

Icy blue eyes, two moles on her right cheek, and a small scar above her eyebrow, shaped like an 'L'.

Winifred.
Winifred and Meg.
Winifred’s hair is shorter, it’s up to her shoulders now. Meg’s hair is brown. Not anything cool or wacky but brown. They’re sitting across from each other, faces bored. They’re mouths are still.
She’s right there. If I had decided this was all some prank Hena was playing on us, we would’ve never even found her. If we had gone an hour later than we had, we would’ve never even found her. If we had gone to any other cafe in all of Paris, we would’ve never even found her. If I hadn’t put my last name as the name of the order, we would’ve never even found her.
“Muh-muh-m-” Hena stutters, her words tripping over themselves. That’s all the noise in the room for a while, before I tell the waitress to cancel the order, and that we’re terribly sorry. I’m the first to stand up and walk over, the rest follow me. The barista’s left to stand there in confusion, but I can hear her walk back behind the counter. Hena walks next to me, still stuttering. Meg’s the first to look up at all four of us. Her reaction is slow, and she does a double take. Then she’s just frozen, her jaw on the floor.
“Winifr-” Meg begins, putting her hand on Winifred’s arm making Winifred look up at us. Winifred does the same thing as Meg did, but she doesn’t gasp. She doesn’t do anything. The only change in her appearance is how teary her eyes are.
“Meg,” Hena finally says.
“Hena,” Meg says back, and that’s all any of us say for a while.
All I ever wanted was a break, okay?
Is that too hard to understand? Because I feel absolutely insane whenever I tell someone that.

Besides Nicodemus. Nicodemus always understood. He’s understood since the moment I met him.

“Hey Vampies, did you know that food is power?” I asked the hoard of Vampires who were attacking me at the moment. I was twelve. I kicked a Vampire in its gut before stabbing it in its heart with a chunk of wood I found in the forest.

“See that? That was spaghetti!” I yelled, taking down three in one shot with my necklace, my magickal item. I’m so powerful I can cast spells that don’t even exist by thinking about them. I killed more and more and more Vampires until I thought I was done so I sighed with content and put my hands on my hips. Until Nicodemus Adler appeared out of the shadows. I kinda lied, it wasn’t the first time I’d met him. I’d heard of him before. He was apparently well respected in the Vampire community, despite being 15. This is sort of embarrassing but, he was my first crush. His hair was the colour of chocolate and floppy and his eyes seemed so big and dreamy, a girl could melt. Oh, and he was American. To be specific, he was from California. If I paid too much attention to his accent I blushed. I grabbed one of my many knives out of its sheath along my hips and stuck it’s blade towards him. I wasn’t really worried that he would attack, it was more of a power play. Step towards me and I’ll repaint my dorm with your blood, Adler. I remember thinking to myself, then I remember that ‘Winifred Adler’ had a nice ring to it.

“You’re really cute there, with your knife and all,” he had teased, and my face turned red. He stepped closer, slowly, slowly. “Dangerous, though. Like a toddler, trotting along with scissors in their pudgy little fists,” He was close enough to lean forward and pinch my cheeks. I flinched away.

“I’m not pudgy. What do even want, Adler?”

“Are we going by last names now? Redwell, I was only making fun. I’m here because I have an offer.” I stood up straight and put my blade back in its sheath.

“Whatever you’re selling, I don’t want to buy it,” I crossed my arms, trying my best to look tough in front of this cute teenage Vampire. “Adler.” He shook his pale hands in the air.
“Winifred,” he’d dropped the last names thing. “I’m not a girl scout. I thought I was being slick, but maybe it just went over your head.”

“Then what are you talking about?”

“I was going to ask you,” he leaned in close. “offer you, a chance to become immortal, always know when your next meal is, and a greater chance of beating the Delebmag.”

“Huh?”

“Vampire! I was trying to ask you if you wanted to be a Vampire!” He shouted, throwing his hands up into the air. For some reason, I wasn’t taken back.

“Vampires aren’t immortal,”

“No, but,” he paused. “you’ll have a greater chance of fighting the Delebmag.”

“No, I’ll just be outed as a Vampire and I won’t be allowed on school ground.” I crossed my arms. The idea of being a Vampire was exciting, and I didn’t know why he was offering it to me. Now that I’m older it’s funny how obvious it was: Why would I kill my own kind? I’d been taught that Vampires are inherently gentle and still are. If you go to a Vampire bar you’ll find Vampires that were Turned against their own will. They’re the Vampires who don’t want to kill anyone, so they go to those bars to drink lambs blood made to look like a cherry soda. All the Vampires I had killed were the ones who sought out to be Turned when they were human, so they could be more powerful. The Delebmag is constantly turning into its human form and bribing them, bribing them to kill me.

“Winifred, you’d be surprised at how many Vampires go to your school. Your dormmate could be a Vampire, and you wouldn’t even know it. You’ll be safe. And even if they discovered your secret, do you think they’d really kick out the Chosen One?”

I let that sit in the air. If what he was saying really was true, then it sounded like a great deal. Alliance with my fearest enemies, greater power, greater chance to kill the Delebmag, why would I say no?

I don’t want to go into great detail about how he Turned me. I’ll tell you that Vampires don’t have to bite your neck, Nicodemus said if he did it would be too obvious. He bit my upper arm. I’ve had my hair singed off my Dragons and my skin broken by Werewolves claws, and that was still the worst pain I’d ever felt, being Turned. I was dying.

But I was happy.

I had power, and everywhere I went it went with me. It still felt foreign, like a second skin, but comfortable. From that point on I never got anxious, never got worried about the Werewolves or any Dragon getting me.

But then came the Delebmag.

And I realized I couldn’t do it. I had been through so much, I had defeated evil, tried to spare the innocent but failed, I knew there was no way I would be able to defeat
the Delebmag. I was drained, in a way. That’s when I came up with the plan, the plan to use Meg Ferry to go to magick hell with me and kill me for five minutes, then go to Paris with me. I chose Paris because Nicodemus has an apartment there. I’ve lost all attachment to Nicodemus, he’s changed, but he’s my only option. And I still owe him for Turning me. I owe him everything.

And after I tell the others all this, I feel like I’ve said too much.
Chapter sixteen// This can’t be happening.

Finn.

After Winifred gives us the story, we’re all quiet for a while. Winston’s the first to speak.

“So I’m not the Chosen One?”

“No,” Meg answers. Quietly.

“Did you want to be?” Winifred asks him. We’re all quiet for another period of time. Winston thinks on the matter, takes a deep breath and says,

“I thought I wanted to be. For a long time. I saw all the attention you got because of it, and in reality I think I really just wanted that. Not the role of having to kill the Delembag, I just wanted to matter.” He pause. “I guess.”

I can tell Meg has something to say. Something like, “Winston, you’ve always mattered, maybe not in the eyes of history, but to us.” And I feel like maybe I have to say it too.

“So where’s your magickal item?” Hena asks Winifred, despite the fact that she already kind of knows.

“Well, I was sick of magick and I needed a trade to be able to turn into a ghost, so I gave it to this man in magickal hell.”

“What was his name?” I ask too eagerly. The possibility that we’ll have to talk to my father is eating me alive. If it was him who she talked to, I don’t know if I’ll be able to go down there with them. “How’d you get down there?”

She ignores the first question.

“Like this,” And then she snaps her fingers, and we’re sitting on the floor of a cubicle, the lady in the cubicle barely paying us any notice. I stand up, and I’m able to see that there are cubicles for miles. Every Single one of them painted a boring white, though some are much taller than the others, taller than my head. I turn around and see a pocket door. Is this even a cubicle? I look up, and see an ugly white tile ceiling. Is this what magickal hell is? An office?

“Huh?” Winston grunts.

“Welcome to magickal hell,” The lady says in a monotone voice. “If you’re here to see anyone go down the row to the right and turn left. You’ll see two wooden doors, just go ahead and open them.

Winston, Hena, Cinnamon, Meg and Winston have all stood up now. Cinnamons the one to say, “Thank you!” And lead us out of her little cubicle.

“Winifred, how did you do that?” Winston asks her.
“One of the perks of being the Chosen One,” She shrugs. “I can visit this place anytime I want,” she pauses, “it’s like magick.” She’s the only one that laughs. We reach the two doors. They’re against a long white wall, with several other cubicles beside it. Cinnamon’s the one to open the doors. Cinnamon’s the only eager one out of all of us.

The inside of the room is empty. It’s got a maroon carpet, dark walls, and the only light is coming from a small green lamp sitting on a large wooden desk, stacked with paperwork. Behind the desk is a tall red leather chair. Cinnamon shouts a “Hello?” and for a while nothing happens. Then, all in one instance, they’re a cloud of dust, and a tall man with dark hair is sitting at his desk. Shouting, “Maurice! Maurice!” into his cellphone. There’s no point in buildup, it’s my father. He hangs up the phone without saying goodbye when he notices us.

“Hello, how may I help you today?” He says as sets down the mobile on his desk. Wait, is my dad American? There’s no reason for him not to be American. My mum traveled a lot when she was younger. She could’ve gone to New York or L.A with her girlfriends and ditch those said girlfriends after meeting a tall dark haired stranger.

No one says anything. I feel like we’ve been especially quiet today.

I get the urge to yell, “PARDON ME I’M YOUR SON. YOU LEFT ME AND MY MUM WHEN I WAS A BABY AFTER MY SISTER DIED AT THE HANDS OF WEREWOLVES. THIS IS THE FIRST TIME I’VE SEEN YOU IN 15 YEARS.” It wouldn’t be news to Meg, I remember. I have so many things to tell him that I can’t even speak. I’d tell him that I got an A in Potions last year. I finally broke up with my annoying girlfriend. I found this new band I think you’d like. I found a new book I think you’ll like. My dormmates getting pretty annoying. What do you want for Christmas? When’s your birthday? When exactly did you leave?

But I don’t say any of these things. Instead, I whisper,


“Well, a while back me and my friend,” I can see Meg wince at the word ‘friend’. She still hasn’t said anything about being completely lied to and broken up with. “came to you about turning me into a ghost when I died. I traded in my magickal item for it, a short necklace with a large opal. I was wondering if I could have it back now.” She smiles sweetly. Winston’s always ranting about that smile, how fake it is. I can almost hear that fakeness now, but I think it’s more the fact that I’m listening for it. I think she’s more worn out, really. She made friends or starting being expected to make friends when she wasn’t worn out, now she stuck in a bunch of lies and a fake personality.

My father- I hate calling him that, even in my head, he doesn’t even know who I am- pauses. I can see the cogs turning in his head, and he glances over at all of us, and when his eyes fall on me, my heart stops. My head’s filled with stupid thoughts like, “Is
he looking because he remembers?” “Is he sorry?” “Will he move back in with me and mom?” “Will I finally have a real dad?”

Just as soon as his eyes had fallen on me, they leave, glance at Winston for a moment, and in that moment I’m unconventionally mad at Winston, then he looks back at Winifred and Meg.

“Absolutely not,”

“What?!” Winston suddenly exclaims. Wow! After 15 years he’s finally found an ounce of confidence! I’m sorry that’s rude. I’m actually glad he said something because what does absolutely not even mean? “You know who she is, right? I know we never really introduced ourselves, but you should be able to recognize the Chosen One. You know, the one to save us all!? Denying her her magick is like- it’s like- really not a good idea!” He keeps on flailing his hands around. If he were talking to anyone else I’d be laughing my head off.

“If it’s that important then why did she give up her magick in the first place?” My father-ugh-remarks with a sly grin. Winston’s already opening his mouth.

“First of all: don’t talk about Winifred like she’s not here. B) It was your choice to take away her magick. Of course you should be mad at the person asking for drugs, but you should still get angry with the drug dealer!”

“Are you saying I run a drug cartel?”

“No, but now I’m saying you have no idea what a metaphor is!” Winston shouts.

“Okay fine, just stop yelling,” My father raises his hands. “I’ll give her her magick back, geez.”

“Thank Morgana,” Cinnamon whispers.

“At a cost,”

“So close,” Cinnamon whispers again.

When my father says this, Winston instinctively grabs for him wand in his back pocket, but it kind of looks like he’s discreetly scratching his derriere.

“Not your magick.” My father says to Winston. “Why would I want that?”

“Well what do you want then?” I ask.
“I want to punch your friend in the face,” The man says to Finn. I feel relieved for a second because that doesn’t really mean he wants to punch me specifically, but then I realize I wouldn’t want him to punch anyone else in the room.

“Right now?” I ask, because Finn seems flabbergasted that this man actually spoke to him.

“Yes,” The man answers. “right here, right now.”
“Do you want me to like, sit down or-”
“No- you’re fine right there.”
He pulls back his fist, and I flinch. He sets it down for a second, as if contemplating.

“Oh thank God,” I whisper, the second before he punches me straight in the nose. At first I don’t feel anything, and I think that maybe this is what shock is. Then, all I feel is pain. It’s hot and shooting up my nose and into my brain. I let out a gargled yelp, and fall back onto the wall.

“I didn’t think you’d actually do it!” I yell.
“I’m a man of my word. Young man, you hurt my fist.”
When I look up at him, I see a bit of Finn. The way he’s holding his fist, the look in his eye, Finn. The real Finn gives me his hand and helps me up. The real Finn’s definitely kinder, but there’s still that look.

“Alright we should go,” Winifred says with a shaky voice. “You punched him, alright? Just give me my magick back, okay?”
“Fine, fine.” He holds out his hand for a moment, a cloud of dust appears in his hand, when the dust disappears, there is her necklace. The second she sees it she snatches it out of his hands. She puts her middle finger on her thumb, ready to snap her fingers. In the milliseconds before she does the deed, Finn yells,
“By the way, I’M YOUR SON.” And then, we’re back in that cafe.

“He’s your dad?” Is the first thing anyone says, and it’s coming from me, and I’m yelling, really loudly. I wonder what that cashier thinks of all this. Did she see us just disappear into nothingness?

“Sort of, yeah.” Finn answers. “Meg, you knew that, why didn’t you say anything?” Meg’s face turns red.

“Wuh-why didn’t you say anything?” She says.

“I don’t know, wouldn’t that be kind of rude? Hey, fun fact, I’m your son!”

“That’s what I would’ve had to do. I mean, I wouldn’t have said that I’m his son- I would’ve said- whatever, you get it. Plus, that’s quite literally what you did.”

“Well-

“Guys!” Winifred yelled, but not the kind of yelling when your two friends are arguing. It’s more like she just saw something dangerous from across the room. Her eyebrows were furrowed down, her bottom lip trembling. Meg put her hand out from across the table to comfort her, but retracted her hand as if it was the physically rendition of “Oh.” Their skin didn’t make contact.

“What’s wrong?” Cinnamon asks, not being afraid to rest her hand on Winifred’s arm.

“I don’t- I don’t know. I know that sounds stupid, but all I know is that we have to get back to Wellbelove, right now.”

“How do you know?” I ask. I don’t want to explain to her that I’m not allowed to be on Wellbelove grounds.

“It’s just- It’s like somethings pulling me there, and if I don’t go my stomach will be pulled out instead, I-! I get this feeling a lot, I’ve always thought of it as not a big deal. I even got one this feeling on Saturday, it’s just stronger now.” She looks around at all of us. “Please,” She pauses. “I think it’s going to kill me.”

We take an Uber back, it’s quicker. And Winifred and Meg have money.

“Let me just leave a note so Nicodemus knows where I-”

“No,” Meg said. If anyone else had said it wouldn’t have really sounded scary or powerful but when it came from her- it sent chills up my spine.

“But he’ll-”

“No,”

And that was that.

The car was crowded, but it was still a van, so it could’ve been much worse. Finn didn’t really make any jokes this time. But there was some trash on the road at one point or another, and he pointed to it and said, “Hey, Winston, look! We found your doppelganger!” Otherwise, the ride was quiet. As you may have suspected, I was still in
utter embarrassment from being punched in the nose (I started to bleed like crazy, I have blood on my shirt too, it’s gross to say the least) and also being wrong about Winifred’s death. Well, I was also sort of right, since in the beginning I was the one convincing Finn she was still alive. I think Finn might be embarrassed too. (does Finn get embarrassed? I can’t ever seem to figure him out). (I can’t seem to ever figure myself out).

I asked Winifred how she made her ghost look all gory, and she said she bought a bunch of fake blood, and asked Nicodemus to-

Then she stopped. She didn’t trail off, she cut off. She’s been holding her stomach the whole ride. I wish I could understand what she’s feeling because, a pulling? Not a cramp or a queasiness, a pulling. I don’t know why it’s hard to wrap my head around the concept but the thought at something pulling me at my gut all the way to Wellbelove is so wild. Merlin and Morgana, I hope she isn’t lying again.

Hena’s face looked pale and green most of the ride, at first I thought she was carsick, but then I remembered how relieved she must be. To be right, to have her dormmate back. I started to wonder why I wasn’t green, but I still can’t seem to figure myself out. I’m not mad at Meg, I could never be mad at her, but I just can’t bring myself to look at her, not that I’m able to make real eye contact with Winifred.

The Uber drops us off at Wellbelove.

“Private school kids, are yah?” He asked.
“You could say so,” Cinnamon answered.
“Really? If I had known I was drivin’ the posh type I would’a brought out the champagne from the glove compartment!”

We ignore that comment, mostly because we didn’t understand it, and now here we all are, standing outside the gate.
“Do we go in?” Meg asks as we stand outside the gate. The wind feels so unnaturally cold. I shove my hands in my pockets and fiddle with some lint. The feeling of my empty pockets makes me realize that I didn’t bring my inhaler.

“Won’t there be students inside?” Hena adds.

“Why does it matter if there are students inside?” Cinnamon quizzes.

“Because they’ll flock all around me, I won’t be able to get to whatever’s pulling.” Winifred scratches the back of her neck, a worried expression still on her face. I don’t know if I should tell her-

“And I’ll be arrested.” The words spill out.

“How?” Meg and Winifred say at the same time. Meg blushes at the interaction.

“I got- I got suspended. Yeah, that’s what I’d call it.”


“We don’t have enough time- we just need a distraction so we can all get in.

Does anyone have any ideas?” Finn asks all of us. We just glance around nervously at each other. In the silence, Cinnamon pulls a pink Sharpie out of her pocket.

“What’s that?” Hena asks.

“My magickal item,”

“Cool!” Meg exclaims, it’s like she’s letting her kid side of her personality show.

“Mines a pen,” When she realizes what she says her face flushes and she whispers a, “sorry.” Hena notices and consoles.

“No need to be sorry, it is cool! The Headmaster’s magickal item is a quill, so maybe all great Mages use writing utensils to perform magick,” When Hena finishes, Meg’s still blushing, but it’s a nice blush. She doesn’t look embarrassed.

“I can tell everyone on the Main Lawn I have a new spell to show them, fumble around a bit, and you guys can sneak off to wherever you need to go,”Cinnamon smiles brightly, and I finally see why everybody likes her. She’s smart, popular, and genuinely nice. She’s willing to embarrass herself for our sake. I would never be able to do what
she’s doing. Maybe I don’t hate her. Maybe I was wrong. I can’t believe I’m even thinking this, but I was wrong. I had no reason to hate Cinnamon, ever. I guess Winifred’s thinking the same thing, because she gives her a tight squeeze and whispers,

“Thank you, thank you, thank you.”

After Cinnamon touches the metal handle of the gate and gets in, we wait until we can hear her shouting from the Main Lawn to sneak in. We all touch our hands to the same cold metal of the handle, and wait for Winifred’s signal, so far, everyone we can see is more interested in Cinnamon’s claims of finding a new spell than us. The air is still cool, and I keep getting chills in my spine. Or maybe it isn’t that the air is cool, and I keep on replaying Meg saying no.

Me, Finn, Meg, and Hena are all just following Winifred. And Winifred is literally going with her gut. What if this is just another prank? What if she’s leading us to Nicodemus, who will suck up all of our blood and give the rest of us to the Werewolves? What if… What if she’s with the Delebmag? It’s not impossible, not with all the lies she’s already told us.

Caught up in my thoughts, I don’t notice Finn stopping in front of me, but I do notice my forehead knocking into the back of his neck. He turns around quickly, and takes back his elbow, but doesn’t elbow me. He just gives me look like, “What gives?”

“Sorry,” I whisper. I look to where we’ve stopped, and my stomach drops all the way to the grass fields of the Main Lawn.

The Great Tower.

Why exactly does my stomach drop? Three main reasons.

First of all, it’s haunted. The dorms are right next to the Great Tower, and I can hear noises right before I go to sleep, moaning, voices. I can hear loud whispers that sound more like vacuums to be honest.

B) It could fall at any time. It’s leaning far over, and at the top of the tower bricks fall out in the middle of the night. (Gravity or ghosts). I’ve never gone up there, and I never want to. I don’t if anyone’s even been up there this century, I’m sure everyone else has the mindset that it’s going to fall under their weight too.

3. There are several prophecies about Winifred, of course. There are two prophecies hinting towards the final battle between the Chosen One and the Delebmag being in the Great Tower, and if that’s true, then it’s happening right now.

The Great Tower only has one door on the outside. It’s made up of oak wooden planks, the brass bindings keeping the planks of wood together. The knob looks more like a knocker than and actual nob. Winifred rests her hand on it slowly, so hauntingly slowly. She opens it, the door coming out of its frame towards us rather than creaking into the
inside of the tower. We all walk in one after the other, and the door slams behind us. Meg jumps at the sound. Hena puts her hand on her shoulder, and gives her a warm look. The floor of the tower is wooden, and creaks as we shift uncomfortably. The air smells so sour I could puke. About three feet to my right is the start of the spiral staircase, which looks like it’s made of metal, with no handrail. When I look up, I can see the floor to the only room above, which feels like miles away.

When I begin to hyperventilate, Finn fishes something out of his pocket and tosses it to me. I catch it in my hands, and just by the feel of it I can tell it’s an inhaler. I put the end in my mouth, and push the trigger twice.

“Why did you have that?” I say, wiping my mouth and taking a deep breath.

“I usually keep one in my school bag, but now I’ve been keeping one in my pocket.” He shrugs his shoulders slightly, and doesn’t meet my gaze.

“Why?”

“Winston, we may be arch nemeses, but I don’t want you to die,”

I think about that.

Winifred begins to walk up the stairs. Slowly. She puts one foot on the first step, then her second on the same one. She turns to us slowly, she isn’t teary eyed because fat salty tears are already rolling down her flushed cheeks. Her breathing is hitched, but her shoulders aren’t heaving. It’s a shameful kind of cry. “Please,” she pauses, letting her eyes fall on all of us, letting all of us see how scared she is, one by one. “I can’t go up there by myself,” her voice cracks on the word “myself”, and that’s when her shoulders start to heave. To my amazement, I’m the one to walk over to her, put my hands on her elbows, forcing her to face me.

“Winifred, we’re a lot of things to each other. To you, I’m your most significant annoyance, your shadow, the Boy Who Can’t Win. To me, you’re a liar, a Vampire, the Chosen One, and the worst pain in my neck. But you know what comes before all that? Family. We’re all your friends, and we would never ever leave you to fight him by yourself. We’ll never leave you.”

I turn away from her to face the rest of the group, my hand resting on her hand. All of their eyes are too the floor.

*Please, please look up.*

Someone does. Meg. She walks from where she’s standing, and puts her hand on top of our hands with a nod. As she gets closer, I can see the tears that stain her cheeks. Hena is next, walking with a more cocksure confidence than Meg, but it doesn’t matter. She smiles to all of us, and puts her hand on top of Meg’s.

“Finn?” I call to Finn, who stands there, staring. He makes eye contact with me, and he seems more mysterious and obscure than he ever has. But maybe I don’t really need to figure him out. Maybe the fact that I’m able to see that I’ll never exactly pin down what he’s about means I know enough about him. Maybe that means we’re
friends, maybe it means we’re our first assumption; sworn enemies. Maybe neither title matters because in the end we both mean something very deeply to each other.

He begins to start walking, slowly. He takes off his glasses and wipes his eyes.

“Nerds,” He whispers, and we all laugh softly. Nothing fake, nothing nervous. He puts his hand in.

The walk up the stairs is long, and I have to keep on telling myself not to look down. Winifred leads, me behind her, the rest of the group behind us. No one’s said anything, not even Trashmouth Tachauer. When we reach the top, one of the floorboards fall as Meg walks. Hena grabs her arm to keep her from falling and calms her down. We get to the room, the only room in the tower. The floor is the one I could see from the bottom of the stairs. The air smells even more sour. There’s only one window on the other side of the room, the window facing the Main Lawn. It barely gives off any light. I can hear my peers yelling at Cinnamon, and Cinnamon yelling back. The only thing I can see is the end of my nose.

“This little light of mine!” Hena shouts. The room lights up, and in the corner, well not really the corner, but to the side, I can see something curled up. A person? A child? Yes, I can see two arms, it’s hands in the middle of it’s chest.

“Is- is someone there?” It cries out. It’s the voice of a crying little boy, maybe five years old. Meg begins to run over there, but Winifred puts her arm across her chest.

“Don’t do it.” She whispers. As if communicating telepathically, Winifred lifts up her sleeve to show a giant scar in the shape of a bite. A comically large one, like the mouth was filled with millions of teeth.

Hena begins to step towards it, slowly, slowly. I guess Winifred trusts her. When she gets about two feet behind it, she raises a shaking arm, bends down, and touches the green jumper on the boys shoulder. He lifts his arm, and he bends it around to touch her hands. His small fingers squeeze hers, His face still hidden in his lap.

“Please help,” he whispers again, this time turning his head around to reveal nothing but a large hole, sewn in are seemingly millions of human teeth, and I can see straight down into his throat.

On queue, everyone begins to scream. Hena takes him by his throat, his little body dangling in the air. His legs legs kick every which way, and his tiny hands are reach at his throat, scratching the skin at Hena’s arms. His neck begins to grow too large for her too hold.

It’s neck grows thicker, everything about it growing larger, hairier. His face is completely covered in fur, and despite a snout, like the one on a wolf, it grins, showing those teeth again. Grinning at Finn, the Delembag turned into a Werewolf. His snout and fur are covered in blood. Thick, chunky blood, like blood clots. Parts of bloody muscle, foreign muscle, are tangled in the fur of its chest. I can smell thick breath, like
rotting flesh, from here. He faces Finn, and he’s nearly two feet taller than him. He isn’t grinning anymore, his mouth hangs open, drool creating a puddle on the floor.

When Finn makes eye contact with him, all that feels fit for him to do is close his eyes. With his eyes still closed, he points his ring, his magickal item, and points it at him. Of course, nothing happens. Our magick has proven to not work on the Delebmag, and it ends swooping down in one swift motion, pushing him down and taking his leg in it’s mouth, all the way up to the knee. He screams, taking his other leg and kicking at him, kicking him over and over again, me and Meg run over, I grip at it’s head, trying to pull it off, and Meg goes up from behind, trying to pull it off him. Hena pulls at Meg’s arms, and I don’t know how she hasn’t ripped them off. We shove it onto the ground, Finn still screaming and clutching at his leg. The fabric of that pant leg ripped off unevenly, the Delebmag sucking up the fabric like a spaghetti noodle while on it’s back. It looks like it melting into the floor, turning into a dark figure, his mouth a treacherous grin. That treacherous grin is the last thing I can see before it fades away. For a moment, I calm down. I catch my breath, and look over to Winifred, who’s still just standing there.

Hena raises a shaking finger, pointing right behind Meg’s head, which is three feet from one of the walls.

“Shadow,” Hena mouths. I look to behind Meg, and everything seems normal about her shadow, until I notice how tall it is, how lean it is, how wrong it seems. And by the lighting of the room, no one else’s shadow points that way.

I make eye contact with that shadow, if that’s even possible, and I see that same treacherous grin, millions of human teeth, some falling out, take a bloody root with them, falling right down the back of the thing’s throat. Meg turns around slowly, meeting its eyes, which are a foot above her. She does the craziest thing I’ve ever seen her do, and reaches out at it, and places a hand on it’s shoulder. The Delebmag’s mouth grows wider, and it hands it’s mouth over Meg’s head, drool getting in her hair. It’s so eerily quiet, no one dares to go to Meg’s rescue. In one instance, she pulls back her arm and punches the Delebmag in its chest.

Though Meg probably isn’t strong enough to take down the Delebmag, the shock pushes it back. I take the opportunity, and grab at its arms, pulling them behind it’s back. The arms simply twist, I can hear bones breaking and tendons snapping, as it twists around to face me. I’m so horrified I let go.

It’s skin begins to lighten. It’s neck is the width of an adult females. It’s hair begins to grow long and dark. The rest of his body contorts with it, turning into what looks like a teenage girl. Her skin looks torn and bloody, she’s missy one of her keds. She wears a bloody striped blue tee-shirt and jeans. I look up to her face, and I realize who it is, what it is because of the blood dripping down her leg onto the floor. She drops down to the floor, and slowly crawls back up, her bones seeming to break as she moves.
Winifred’s ghost.

The same chill fills the air. Her face seems normal, those icy blue eyes staring at me. Then she grins, the millions of teeth retreating back and back, making the rest of her face be pushed back, like someone taking off a Halloween mask. “Winston…” H- she moans. I let out a scream, and grab my wand in my back pocket.

“U CAN’T TOUCH THIS!” I scream, knowing well and well that the spell won’t work because of the way I delivered it, and the fact that none of our spells have worked. Her icy hands grab me by my sides, lifting me well above the floor. And I scream even louder, just pointing my wand at her, hoping for something to happen. Meg and Finn run to my rescue, gripping her off me and slamming her down to the floor. I fall down to the floor, and get back up quickly, holding my wand to her. Winifred stands on the far side of the room. Finn’s the one falls to the floor next to her, his head and shoulders hitting the wood before anything else. Meg and I take out our magickal items, Meg repeatedly casting a “You’re getting sleepy!” over and over. I cast a, “You’re not welcome here!” But all that’s happening is that I’m getting sleepier and Meg got thrown back a step. “HEY!” Winifred yells.

About time she’s found her voice.

All of us look over to her, including the Delebmag.

The Delebmag morphs again, it’s hair grower shorter and darker, it’s torso growing more square, it’s legs longer. It’s icy blue eyes turn a dark brown, and it walks over to Winifred, calmly. It looks like a man with a place to be. Save the gigantic hole in its face with human teeth sewn in, it looks like a normal person. Winifred stands her ground, her feet apart from her, her fists in tight balls at her sides. Hot breath comes heaving out her nose. The Delebmag stands mere inches from her, the drool now puddling at her feet. I turn to Meg, who’s arms and stomach and chest are bloody from the Delebmag scratching and biting at it.

“Nicodemus,” Meg whispers. I turn back to Finn, my skin covered in gooseflesh. I down to the leg with the pant leg torn off, right where the fabric cuts off there are millions of teeth mark, some of them breaking the skin. If the Delebmag had gotten what it wanted Finn would be hopping around with one leg. I look bag to Winifred when I hear the Delebmag -Nicodemus- whisper,

“You owe me everything.”

With nearly no hesitation, Winifred clutches at its neck, turning it around and slamming it into the wall next to the window, I had no idea she was that strong but, bricks fall out of the wall. There’s sweat on her brow, and her bangs stick to her forehead with sweat, the rest of her hair flies everywhere as she slams it into the wall over and over, yelling,
“I was just a kid! I was just a kid!” She keeps on saying it over and over again, her eyes closed, more and more bricks falling out of the wall. Her slams get sloppier and sloppier but stronger. She’s sobbing, her chest heaving up and down by the time she yells, 

“I DON’T OWE YOU ANYTHING!!” She screams, I can’t differentiate between her sweat and tears anymore. Everything seems to to happen in slow motion. Winifred moves her hands to the Delebmag’s neck, her teeth barred and sweat down her face. She strangled it while throwing it back and forth into the wall. The Delebmags skin is burned around her hands, gargling, choking noises coming out of its mouth. The bricks get more and more pressure on them until. . .

The wall collapses. Winifred, almost gracefully, let’s go of the Delebmag, shoving him into the collapsed wall. The rest of us exchange a quick look, then run over to a breathless Winifred, peering over the hole. A large crows is at the bottom of the tower, probably the whole school.

We watch the Delebmag fall to its death.

“Winifred,” I whisper. “you did it.”

“Yeah,” She whispers back, her voice cracking. “I guess so.” She covers her face with her hands, I expect sobs, but she shows us her face, sniffles, and says, “Yeah. I did.”

She wraps me up in a tight hug, so tight I can hardly even breathe. Meg slowly wraps her arms around the two of us, Hena gives Winifred and Meg a tight squeeze from behind, and Finn slowly joins the group.

“You guys are losers,” he whispers. We all laugh an honest laugh again.

We walk back down the stairs, all of our legs equally shaky, Finn limping from his encounter with the Delebmag, I have to walk down the stairs with him, his arm around my shoulder, hopping down each step.

“Finn, I honestly thinking you’re just faking it,”

“I could literally be bleeding to death right now and you guys are being super insensitive and-

“We all know how much you love the spotlight Finn,” Hena chimed in. His leg is still bleeding and there are bruises around the knee, but Meg informed him that he’d otherwise be fine.

“No need for amputations, or anything?” he asked her.

“Nope,” she answered.

“What about shots?” he asked. She let out a small chuckle and said,

“I can’t be certain, but to look on the bright side, he could’ve bitten off you leg, which is much worse than a couple of shots.”
The crowd’s large, and it’s quiet. Everybody in it is either staring at the Delebmag’s body, or Winifred. Cinnamon starts the clapping. Some boy starts the cheering, soon, it sounds like rugby match. People are chanting Winifred’s name, cheering for her, praising her, some are even crying. Winifred smiles brightly, the rest of us are left to disperse into the crowd. Winifred sees us dissolving.

“May I have your attention please?” She shouts to the crowd. The crowd continues cheering. “MAY I HAVE YOUR ATTENTION PLEASE?” She shouts again. The crowd hushes.

“All though I am the Chosen One, I did not defeat the Delebmag by myself.” She pauses, glancing at the crowd. For a person who’s never given a speech before, the girl’s got talent. “If it weren’t for the help of my dear friends, Hena Abdela,” She puts her arm around Hena, who’s within her reach. The crowd gives a small cheer. “Finn Tachauer,” She pulls him by the arm, making him stand in front of the crowd.

“Cinnamon-” Cinnamon has to mouth something to her. “Cinnamon Jones,” Cinnamon walks up there by herself, and the crowd claps again. “Meg Ferry,” Winifred takes Meg’s hand. Though I doubt nearly anyone in that crowd knows who she is, they still cheer. “And my baby brother, Winston Redwell.” The crowd cheers again.

As I stand next to my sister and friends, my school cheering, some of them even singing “Ding dong the witch is dead!” I smile. My face hurts because I’m smiling so much, and everything seems to be okay.
“Here’s a good sucky morning to a good sucky monday of a good sucky new week,” I say into the intercom. Secretary Greta gives me a side eye. “Oh, I’m only teasing. Lunch will be served in the dining hall, but what else is new? The lunch ladies will be serving intestines with red sauce and a side of mashed eyeball. For appetizers there will the chalk used to trace bodies at crime scenes.

“In very excitable news, the girl’s football team won last week against Watford’s team. A special announcement to Hena Abdella, the midfielder of this team. I knew her strong arms had other uses than strangling me after maths class!

“Another thanks to Cinnamon Jones, who started the fundraiser to get new arts supplies for both the art club and the Student Co. to make posters for prep rallies and other announcements, etcetera, etcetera. I personally, am very proud of her for staying in the hot sun of the park all day without once using a cooling spell in front of Normals.

“Our student of the month award goes to Meg Ferry, who in case you forgot, has been voted student of the month more than any other student in the past ten years of this school. The person who broke the record before her was her dad, Michael Ferry, who also happens to be really hot.

“I’d like to wish a happy birthday to Secretary Greta, Robin Dhew, and our famous Winifred Redwell. First years, in case you don’t know her. . . Crack a book! She’s been prophesied for years! You could be dead without her!

“Today’s word of the day is; Contract killing. Though it’s technically two words, the definition of contract killing is basically when you go to a dude and go, “Hey, will you kill this guy for me?” And the guy goes, “Yeah. . . if you sign this contract.” At least I think that’s what it means. I kinda forgot. To use it in a sentence you could say something such as, ‘I’m now open to contract killing on the account that my dormmate, Winston Redwell, continues night after night to eat crisps when he thinks I’m sleeping then going on the sweep the crumbs between our bed. Winston, those are creepy to step on in the middle of the night. Stop.’

“And that is it for today, folks! Have a wonderful day a Wellbelove! Education at its most tolerable!”
I turn off the intercom. Ever since my battle with the Delembag, they just gave this job to me. Was it really that apparent that I wanted it? I didn’t even know I wanted it. Secretary Greta glares at me, she opens her mouth to say something.

“Greta! Greta! I know, I know. But, I’m always on the last straw? Aren’t I?”

She glares at me again, then looks back to her computer, which I know she only uses for solitaire, something only I know and therefore keeps me in the position of doing the school announcements.

I spin out of the office, imaginary music playing in my head. I can’t tell what it is, but it sure is a bop. Music’s been playing in my head ever since I beat the Delembag. Does that make sense? I feel like I should be traumatized but- I beat it. I beat the Werewolf, the Delembag, it’s gone forever.

Right before summer started last year, we went around in a circle telling each other why the Delembag looked like he did for us.

“I was watching this documentary with my dad about 9/11.” Hena begun. “There was this shot of this boy, this little boy, maybe 5 or 6, crouched over the rubble. He was only in the shot for about 2 seconds, and I didn’t even see his face, but I kept on thinking about how different his life must be now. His parent could’ve been in that rubble, you know? He’s haunted me for forever.”

Meg was scared of the dark. That’s why she saw a shadow. She said her greatest fear is of a face popping up in her room in the middle of the night and walking towards her slowly. She said that nightmare started when she got sleep paralysis when she was 6.

I told them why I was scared of Werewolves, why they haunted me. I told them about Florence. It was nice to get it all off my chest for once. It was nice to tell them how it manifested in the fact that I wanted someone to talk to, and I was surprised I even said that. It was like the words fell out my mouth.

Winifred went next, she told us about how Nicodemus Turned her as a kid, but this time she got into more detail. She told us about how Nico held her accountable for everything that went wrong in the world, and every time she argued back, he would say that chilling phrase, “You owe me everything.”. She said he took advantage of the fact that she was young and dumb, and now she couldn’t escape. She said she’s never seeing him again, and all of us, Meg included, believed her. She said she considered filing a restraining order, but was still contemplating the whole ordeal.

Winston told us about Winifred’s ghost.

“I was so scared, Winifred. I didn’t want to be the Chosen One. I didn’t want you to be dead. I didn’t want my sister to be dead.” He kept on talking about the cold feeling that swept over him, like a bucket of cold water being poured over him. He talked about the blood dripping off her foot haunted him. Winifred kept on chanting, “I’m sorry, I’m so, so, sorry. I didn’t know, I didn’t know.”
I think we’re all better for talking about it. Winston doesn’t seem to hold his grudge against Winifred and Meg any more, Winifred’s completely cut off contact with Nicodemus, and Meg and Hena are even able to joke about the stuff that haunted them. Now I feel able to open up to people, since I always wanted someone to talk to. I was too scared to really ever open up to them, I didn’t have any friends, because I had that diary, and I had the mentality that I could talk to Florence. Over the summer I threw out the diary and all it’s little secrets, and opened up to people, specifically Winston, who stands outside the office door.

“Hey, Whine-ston,” I say, punching him on the shoulder. After I do the announcements, he walks me to class. It’s a ritual of one of the worst cults ever. I’d like to believe I replaced the diary with him. We talk more now, and I consider him something much more closer to a best friend than an arch nemesis. Both of our grades have improved ever since we started helping each other with our school work and Meg Ferry studied with both me and him in the library. His panic attacks have dispersed throughout this school year and he rarely uses his inhaler. I still keep one in my pocket for him though, just in case.

“Trashmouth Tachauer,” He says back. His face doesn’t look stupid anymore, now he always looks handsome in that boyish way. Over the summer he got taller (not taller than me, thankfully) and he fixed his poster. He looks more grown up now, but his crooked nose always reminds me of when we were just little kids pushing one another down stairs. We begin our walk down to our first class, which is boringly close.

“Did you like my callout to you?” I ask him, grinning and adjusting the strap to my bookbag. His cheeks flush a little bit, and although he’s glaring, his mouth curls up likes he’s laughing and his eyebrows raise in a happy gesture.

“I-Finn-I-” He stammers, his mouth tripping up on his words. I laugh quietly.

“Use your words,” I say with that same grin. He smiles a stupid smile, but a nice kind of stupid. A comfortable kind of stupid.

“Shut up.”
Oddities

Title Sequence

The drawings fade into the environment as the audience views the credits of the movie while a short montage of the camera reveals the setting of the story. A rickety old house is still filled with many items and necessities. Pan over to the window in which a group of humanoid bugs crawl over the sill and enter the kitchen area. Freeki is at the second in line with Sarge leading. Like a SWAT team they scourge the area until Freeki finds a cup containing sugar cubes.

Freeki - “Hey Sarge! I found something!”

Sarge - “*exclaim* In all my days in the land of House, I’ve only heard tales about this ambrosia before!”

Sarge examines objects

Sarge - “Sugar cubes! All right men! Single pattern! You! with the scratch! get at the bottom of the wall!”

Scratch falls to the bottom of the ground with the cart waiting for them. the rest of the ants start hauling the sugar cubes back to Scratch. All of a sudden, a bird swoops down and proceeds to attack the ant squad.
Freeki - “LOOK OUT!!

The bird pecks furiously, but the ants are able to escape the bird and distract it. The ants then retrieve the rest of the cubes and climb down the wall. They go into the secret passageway to their little village. The camera sweeps over to establish the detail put into the construction of the village. The ants start setting the sugar cubes into the Queen’s pulley system to be delivered to her castle. Freeki starts heading back to his home.

Sarge - “Hey, Freeki!”

Freeki turns around, and Sarge tosses a sugar cube bit to him. Freeki fumbles but catches it. He looks questioningly at Sarge.

Sarge - “You tell that Pappy of yours that you worked hard today. You hear?”

Freeki - “Thanks, Sarge!”

Sarge salutes him and enters his house. Pappy is reading over his document when the door opens and his pulley basket drags him over to Freeki.

Pappy - “Well it’s about time you got your sorry bum back in here, Freeki. What did you bring home today?”

Freeki then unceremoniously throws the sugar cube bit over his shoulder to the delight of Pappy.
Pappy - “Well, I see you brought something of worth back here! Our bloated beetle we call our queen won’t spare us a bread crumb let alone a sugar bit. I’ll be able to make something sweet for supper for once.”

Freeki - “Say uh, Pappy,”

Pappy - “WHAT?”

Freeki - “Might I ask why you’re planning on eating supper here instead of at the Queen’s ceremony?”

Pappy - “I refuse to support that sorry swine we call our queen! Don’t you ever wonder why we can’t eat more than a full stomach’s worth? She runs the kingdom of House like it’s a secondary option. All she ever does it eat and overpopulate the village.”

Freeki - “Isn’t that her job as queen, to populate our village?”

Pappy - “Feh! She uses her pregnancy as an excuse to stuff herself silly and lie on her bed while everyone else works tirelessly long to harvest! I swear, when the great king Behemoth was in charge, everyone had a fair share. But then he ran away, probably to get away from Beatrix.”

Freeki - “I see, but can we still go to the ceremony just to socialize? I haven’t met anyone outside the army scouts in over two summers.”
Pappy - “Freeki! I said no! You’ve worked hard enough today there’s no point in wasting a good night’s rest to meet with a bunch of judging residents.”

Freeki - “Is it alright if only I go? So you can escape the…”

Pappy - “For the last time, I said no! Go to your room to get some rest before tomorrow!”

Freeki - “Yes Pappy, I’m sorry.”

Pappy - “Feh”

Freeki goes up to his room defeated and sits down on his bed. He gazes out the window and lays on the bed until he hears the march of the other villagers going to the ceremony. He checks up on Pappy, who is proofreading a document he wrote. Freeki then quietly sneaks to the door…

Pappy - “You must think I’m really stupid, don’t you Freeki.”

Freeki - “Well…”

Pappy - “GO TO BED!”

Freeki makes a mad dash to his room, petrified with the close encounter. He gets into his room and falls on the bed. Pappy then comes up and locks the door.
Pappy - “Your disobedience has made my distrust in you go deeper than the roots of this house! Oh, and don’t bother attempting to exit your room again, because like the house, you’re also grounded.”

Freeki - “You’ve already grounded me!”

Pappy - “Feh”

Freeki sits on the bed and contemplates his situation. Pappy on the other side, makes a disgruntled but depressed sigh as he turns around and heads back downstairs. Freeki then lays on the bed perturbed until he remembers that the roof isn’t structured that well. He jumps on his bed until he grabs the roof frame and passes through a secret hole in his roof. He crawls out and runs to the remaining crowds. Freeki stops near the outskirts and observes the castle in the sky as the camera shifts there to the view of Queen Beatrix. The disgustingly fat Queen Beatrix is sitting on her lounge bed ordering servants around to her bidding.

Queen Beatrix - “You there! Get me more of those sugar cubes! My children demand it! And you there! FAN HARDER on my backside! My children can’t be born into this putrid world with the intense heat you’ve all cursed me with!

Servant #1 - “Yes, your malevolence.”

Queen Beatrix - “Where’s my favorite child? I wanted her down here minutes ago!!”
The princess Mothra then walks down the hallway into the queen’s bedroom.

Princess Mothra - “May I ask the questionable request of my presence at this hour? I must get ready for the ceremony tonight.”

Queen Beatrix - “Mothra, you haven’t gotten dressed up for the ceremony! Your servants have slaved endless hours preparing your dress and you haven’t even obeyed my first command!”

Princess Mothra - “The dress is much too revealing, Mother! I don’t want to attract a mate at this age! I want to focus on my political education on how to run the colony.”

Queen Beatrix - “To heck with your so called education! You have no use for it in my line of work! What you need is a worthy mate, plenty of food and a wide belly to further our population!”

Princess Mothra - “I refuse to seduce myself to gluttony and lust to become ruler, Mother! The people want someone to trust and follow, and they definitely don’t do that with you.”

Queen Beatrix - “You stupid girl! Why can’t you do what I ask the first time?!!”

Princess Mothra - “Because your illogical demands don’t make an ounce of sense!”
Queen Beatrix - “Don’t question my authority, Mothra! Now put on the dress and change your attitude!"

Princess Mothra - “Gah! To heck with you!”

Queen Beatrix then adjusts herself but then has a spasm of birth pain, the nurses rush over, before realizing it was just a scare.

Queen Beatrix - “Despicable brat, she is the only competition in my superiority on the colony. Heck, she’s getting too smart for her own good. If Mothra realizes that she will never take my throne, she could challenge me and I couldn’t stand up to her. ‘Eh,’ she’ll never find out, I will rule supreme forever there isn’t a thing she can do to stop my—”

Princess Mothra then walks down the stairs in her dress. A moment of awkward silence follows.

Queen Beatrix - “Oh darling! You look absolutely lavishing! Let me get a good look at you!”

As Mothra walks closer, the queen starts to moan and her gargantuan body gurgles and quakes. The nurses tend appropriately as Mothra looks in disgust.

Princess Mothra - “Will I be able to congregate with the townsfolk this ceremony?”

Queen Beatrix - “Absolutely not! You won’t be socializing with commoners. I made that mistake in my
youth and I shan’t have you be with some mediocre mongrel!”

Princess Mothra - “It doesn’t matter who the heir is mother! You’re just going to have the guards throw him into jail until I’m older! Why will it matter?!!”

Queen Beatrix - “Why do you continue to question me Mothra? Go to your room and do not return until the ceremony begins!” (rebellious teenager)

Princess Mothra angrily walks up to her room. She picks up her political novel written by her father, Behemoth, and reads it a little bit.

Princess Mothra - “A good leader knows his entire legion by name, he takes the time to know each member personally to understand how each member will benefit the community.” “I shall do just that! And nothing will prevent me from doing it.”

Princess Mothra then observes the situation of her captivity, she eats off the bars on her window and crawls out under the tower. She then surveys the long drop and quickly scurries down the castle wall into some shrubbery. It is at this time when the ceremony is about to begin when Freeki joins the others in the crowds of people. He recognizes Sarge and politely greets him.

Freeki - “Evening, Sarge!”
Sarge - “Quiet you...Oh hey! Freeki nice to see you here at the ceremony!”

Freeki - Yeah I was able to sneak out and...

Sarge - “Hang on a minute, it’s about to begin,”

The salute of the majesty is played by the guards at the top of the castle and Queen’s bed is rolled out in unison, she is then reclined to face the audience. She then begins her speech.

Queen Beatrix - “Dear villagers of the kingdom of House! Today is the 237th ceremony our humble and blooming colonies, and I’m happy to say that we have established ourselves as a beneficial society.”

Sarge then abruptly asks the Queen which surprises Freeki and causes an uproar amongst the class.

Sarge - “Beneficial? Then why haven’t you dispersed the food my team has been collecting evenly with the rest of the colony?

Crowd - <uproar>

Queen Beatrix - “I can assure you dear citizen that we have experts preparing your worthy supplements as we speak!”

Scratch - “Prove it! My entire scout troop is starving to death because of you!”
Queen Beatrix, at a loss for words, then signals the trumpeter to restore order to the crowd as she stutters the rest of her presentation

Queen Beatrix -
"Without-further-ado-I-announce-your-princess-Mothra!

The light fixture then goes to her tower but is revealed to be empty.

Queen Beatrix - “Come on sweetpea, come on out, <angry growl> Gone Again!”

A murmur of concern goes through the crowd.

Sarge - “If we can’t trust that your daughter is out there, why should we assume you can control our society’s poverty status?

Queen Beatrix - “Since most of you are CLEARLY in need of stuffing your faces, I present to you, your dinner!”

The hidden doors of the wall then open to unleash a long table which lengthens to the extent of the crowd. A conveyor belt then pathetically rolls out: two bowls of tomato bits, one bowl of cabbage bits, and two sugar cubes to the gawking but silent crowd. A servant then comes out and grinds cheese onto the cabbage.

Cheese Joke Servant - “Just tell me when to stop.”

Awkward silence as the servant grinds the cheese.
Random Villager - “Is that all?”

Random Villager #2 - “You greedy hoarding maggot!”

Scratch - “Out of way you lot! Free food!”

The crowd then turns to chaos as the entirety starts swarming to try and get a share of the food. Sarge tries to make himself heard as he and a majority of the group stays to look disgusted at the queen and at the desperate selfishness brought up by the crowd.

Sarge - “This is your best attempt to resolve the colony into a beneficial society?”

Queen Beatrix then shuts herself back up in the castle.

Queen Beatrix - “Well that escalated quickly, I mean that really got out of hand out there, those peasants are simply too malicious and wrathful to think of anyone above themselves.” <groan from birth again>

Sarge - “Get back out here you maggot of no virtue! Do something about the damage you’ve caused! What else could demonstrate your lack of control over our colony?!!”

On cue after that phrase, the ground begins to shake like an earthquake. Everyone notices as some structures begin to crumble and a crack in the ceiling becomes bigger.
Freeki - “What madness is this?”

The crack in the ceiling then lengthens up to unleash swarms of the Horned Roaches. The entire village begins to react to the incoming monsters.

Random Female Villager - “What in heck are those?!’’

The masses of Horned Roaches begin to hurriedly scuttle downwards to the village, some even dropping from the sky to attack the poor town.

Sarge - Freeki. Listen to me, get your Pappy and get out of here as fast as you can you hear me?!’’

As more Horned Roaches evade the village and literally fall from the sky, they begin to attack and eat people. Sarge then defends himself by skewering one with his spear.

Sarge - “Go on, get out of here!” <concern> <confident grunt>

Freeki then runs out but not before looking back to see Mothra fighting with the guards and helping the civilians. They make eye contact for a brief second. Freeki then sprints back to his house. Camera then cuts back to the fight. Guards also rush from the castle to defend the villagers. Two noticeable roaches then descend carrying a wooden masked freak on their backs.
Sarge — “By the giants!”

The wooden masked character then reveals himself as the Necromancer and starts destroying the village with a flame-throwing green-glowing sceptre.

Sarge — “Hey you! Cease at once!”

The masked man then zaps Sarge and walks over to him.

Necromancer — “Who dares stand up to me? Don’t you know it is unwise to stand before a necromancer?”

Sarge — “Who are you?”

Necromancer — “I was once known as <noise blocks out word> but I am now the nefarious Necromancer! The Destroyer of Races! The Chaotic Corruptor! And would you like to know something, my brave knight?”

Sarge — “What?”

Necromancer — “I’m going to let you go. Go and run away, be sure to tell all your pathetic little friends my name and intentions.”

Necromancer then loosens his grip as Sarge runs away.

Necromancer — “Run, run, little maggot, because you’re the only one in this dungheap I’m leaving alive!”
Sarge runs away as the Necromancer begins to enflame more of the village. Two Horned Roaches then step out behind a building to corner the coward.

The Necromancer - “Oops, I lied.”

As Freeki runs back to his house, he encounters a Horned Roach attacking a civilian with her child. He then draws his spear and attacks the beast. It puts up a good fight, but Freeki wins by stabbing the creature in the head causing a green mucus-like substance to ooze out. Freeki finds his house ablaze and rushes in to help his guardian.

Freeki - “Pappy! Pappy! Where are you?!”

Pappy - “Get your sorry-no-good-lying-backstabbing-backside in here and help me out of this!!!

Freeki - “Are you alright?!!”

Pappy - “YES I’M AS PEACHY AS ORANGE JUICE NOW GET ME OUT OF HERE FREEKI!”

Freeki runs out with Pappy on his back, and they rush into the secret outside area. At the castle the servants are barricading the doors as the Horned Roaches swarm the castle. Not caring about the situation at hand, Beatrix is shoveling food in her mouth like a pig.
Servant #1 - “Your malevolence! We can’t hold them much longer! We’re doomed!”

Queen Beatrix (between mouthfuls) - “Please! Please! You’re frightening the children! Please keep it down my spawn can’t breed in conditions like this!”

At this, the window burst open with flames as the Necromancer enters the scene. He takes off his mask to reveal his face to the queen. (But not so that the camera sees it.

Necromancer - “Do you remember me Beatrix?”

Queen Beatrix - <gasp> “Get away from me you monster!”

The Necromancer snaps his fingers and another swarm enters the room. The Necromancer then climbs down the tower with the screams of the victims above. Mothra meanwhile is seeing this disorder and is hiding in fright. She helps more victims find shelter and tries to hide because she has no weapon. Meanwhile, Freeki and Pappy take refuge in a broken flowerpot. They hurriedly make themselves hidden as they finally rest from the chaos. The next morning, Freeki walks back with Pappy strapped onto his back surveying the damage of the Roaches. The village is mostly desolate as they venture into the burnt and broken landscape. Overcome with grief and anger, Freeki breaks down.

Freeki - “No no no no no No NO! They destroyed everything. The entire village, it’s all gone!”
Pappy - “You don’t say! What else is there to observe, Freeki?”

Freeki depressedly walks around observing the wreckage. He jumps in fright every time something makes a noise. He journeys through the torn village until he sees a limp body among the wreckage of the castle.

Freeki - <gasp> “Are you ok?

Mothra slaps him before he can finish his sentence. This angers him so much that he frustratedly tries to get out of his carrier.

Pappy - <incoherent LOUD ramblings and grumbles>

Freeki - “Excuse my guardian, miss, what is your name? I believe we’ve met before.”

Mothra - “<curtsey> My name is Mothra”

Freeki - “You mean Princess Mothra of the castle?”

Pappy - “Oh course you twit!”

Mothra - “Well seeing that the queen is no longer in duty bless her soul I’d say I’m the new queen of the colonies.”

Freeki - “I have the incredible honor, your worship,”
Freeki bows to Mothra to the distaste of Mothra and Pappy.

Pappy - “Don’t bow to her! I’m getting dizzy!”

Mothra - “It’s all right, I don’t deserve such loyalty.”

Freeki - “But whyever not, my lady?”

Pappy - “Because she let the village go to compost!”

Freeki - “Pappy! Quiet-Please!” “I saw you defending the villagers! You definitely showed morality then!”

Mothra <beginning to cry> - “But I wasn’t able to save most of them.
<flashback>
I managed to hide a majority of the population, but I couldn’t save anyone.
<flashback>
I had to hide like a coward because there were too many.”

Freeki - “That’s not cowardice! You helped a lot of people…

They shift in silence while Mothra gets a hold of herself.

Freeki - “Well, If it makes you feel any better, we hid like cowards too.”
Pappy - “Smooth kiddo.”

Mothra - <sniff and chuckle> “I guess I’m not the only one.”

Freeki - <laugh> “So what should we do now? Those monsters could still scoping around.”

Pappy <mumbling> - “Feh, if they were, they’d be here by now.”

Mothra - “How about we look around for more villagers?”

Pappy <sarcastically> - “Great idea! None of us could have thought of that!”

Freeki - “Oh knock it off, Pappy.”

Pappy - Feh.

Freeki and Mothra scourge the village but can’t seem to find anyone until they venture into the castle.

Freeki - “I’ve never been inside the castle before.”

Mothra - “Believe me when it isn’t as luxurious as it sounds... I’ve lived here all my life. I know every single part of the castle by heart.”

They enter Mothra’s old room.

Mothra - “They didn’t take my things!”
Mothra then swoops to gather her books and items into a bag.

Freeki - “Can I hold something for you?”

Mothra - “No, no, you’ve got quite a heavy load already.”

Pappy - “HEY! What’s that supposed to mean?!”

Freeki picks up a noticeable book.

Mothra - “Oh, that’s my history book! Can I have it please?!”

She attempts to stuff the last book in the bag, but it is so full it bursts.

Mothra - “Doh, I’ll pick that up.”

Freeki - “I’ll go find another bag for you.”

Mothra - “Oh. Thank you.”

Freeki walks downstairs and looks around the bedroom. He finds a few bags before he notices the outside.

Pappy - “Freeki! Just what are you hoping to accomplish?”

Freeki - “I’m trying to be helpful... Here’s a good one.”
Pappy - “You’re helping a schoolgirl with her books, what use is that?!!”

Freeki - “At least I’m being productive.”

Pappy - “Feh, If I had arms, or legs, I’d be... Freeki! The window!”

Freeki - “Pappy, just can it.”
Pappy - “No I’m serious, look!”

Freeki - “Monsters!”

Monsters scuttle outside area looking for more prey. They don’t see our heroes.

Pappy - “What’re we going to do?”

Freeki rushes back up to Mothra’s room.

Freeki - “Mothra! I have a bag, but the monsters are back.”

Mothra - “How many?”

Freeki - “I think just two.”

Mothra - “We can take them. There are some supplies in one of the lower rooms downstairs!”

They then run down to the lower rooms of the castle and find some worthy weapons.
Freeki - “Shouldn't we get some armor too?”

Mothra - “The armor is useless against those beasts, I noticed the guards were easy to be defeated because they were too slow and easy to manipulate.”

Pappy - “Why are you using knives instead of a spear or sword?”

Mothra - “I’m more skilled with throwing knives than the other weapons because I had more access to them.”

Pappy - “When did you ever have time to do that?”

Freeki - <shush> “Quiet down, Pappy, be on the lookout.”

Pappy - “Why me?”

Mothra - “Because you’re strapped to his back!”

Pappy - Feh

Mothra - “Whenever I was bored with reading but didn’t want to go downstairs, I practiced throwing knives at random targets.”

She demonstrates by throwing a knife on the wall close to Pappy.
Mothra - “It gets awfully boring once you’ve memorized the use of politics.”

They walk around the desolate ghost town before they notice one of the incoming Horned Roaches. Mothra uses her throwing knife but only wounds the beast. Freeki then attacks, misses once, then successfully thrusts the spear into the roach’s head puncturing it. They see another one, and Freeki wastes no time in attacking, but Mothra hits the beast square in the eyes before Freeki does.

Freeki - “Darnit, I was ready for another fight.”

Mothra - “Well, I’m too quick on the draw.”

Both characters laugh.

Pappy - “Well what should we do now?”

Freeki - “I think we should hike back to the other hiding place and set up camp before nightfall.”

Mothra - “I’m down,”

So the three amigos go back to the flowerpot and we cut to them snacking on some dinner.

Pappy - “I haven’t had sugar cubes in ages.”

Mothra - “Yeah, sorry about that,”

Pappy - “Eeh, I’m not angry at you, loosen up.”
Freeki - “So I’ve been looking at one of your books and I found somebody of interest who could help us.”

Mothra - “Who might that be Freeki?”

Freeki then opens a book and gestures to the image of the author, The Hermit.

Freeki - “The author says he’s a wizard and expert over the numerous societies that have inhabited House in the past few winters. His name is... Kermit,”

Pappy - “Kermit? Like The Hermit? I know him! We used to be best buddies!”

Mothra - “What do you mean? He was exiled two winters ago.”

Pappy - “Well, yeah, but when we were partners in the army. We would talk about the creatures we saw and the fights we had and he’d record them in all his little journals. But sometime after something went awry with the Queen, he became very... odd and controversial. He would rant in the streets about the selfish antics of the Queen and the various ways of our impending dooms as a colony. Heck, he was right, but that definitely didn’t stop the queen from banishing him from the land on regards of a ‘disturbance in the community’. That book you hold in your hand could very well be some of the surviving texts of his work.”

Freeki - “What makes you think he’s still alive? ”
Pappy - “Well he’s my age for one thing. Secondly, he always told me that if he were to ever settle down, he would do it in the Garden area. He’s mapped out the many lands, territories and boundaries of House. Anyways, I agree. Let’s try and see if he ventured in the areas of the Garden.”

Freeki - “Alright, we’ll go in the first break of dawn.”

Mothra - “I’ve read his manuscripts and he does seem to be a bit on the bad end of the cuckoo clock. Are you sure we can trust him?”

Pappy - “I can’t guarantee your safety, but what I do know is that if I’m there you’ll definitely be safer.”

The three amigos then partake on a quest through the garden to find Kermit. They are admiring the scenery when they see a collection of mushrooms and toadstools that have been arranged to form a cottage around a grotesque rotting tree stump.

Freeki - “There’s a lot of vegetation here, how’s this possible, nobody farms out here!”

Pappy - “Yeah, the forest is completely over our heads!”

Mothra - “It seems like we’ve been hiking for days, where in the hay is his hideout?”
Pappy - “Well unless Freeki could walk backwards or you can mysterically regenerate limbs, navigating Kermit’s house will be a bit difficult on my behalf. I do know that we are in the right direction.”

Pappy - “In fact, we should be approaching it right about...n”

Freeki - “Could that be his house?”

Mothra - “There seems to be a light coming from one of the windows.”

Freeki - “Well do we just knock on the front door?”

Pappy - “Turn around Freeki, let me handle this!”

Mothra - “This is a nice porch,”

Pappy pulls a lever on the door which activates a doorbell that also propels them to a mechanism that entraps them and escalates them to the third story window, in which Kermit is extremely annoyed.

Mothra - “So I suppose we just wait...”

Freeki, Pappy, and Mothra - <scream>

The Hermit - “Who are you?! WHO ARE YOU AND WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?!!”
Freeki - “We come seeking advice and help from Kermit!”

Pappy - “Shut up!”

The Hermit - “There is no Kermit here, so have a happy holiday!”

Pappy - “Wait! Kermit! It’s me!”

The Hermit - “I know that voice…”

Pappy - “From the army! I lost all my limbs to a giant? I accidently pushed you into a bird’s nest, but you fought your way out of it?”

The Hermit - “How old am I?”

Pappy - “3 summers and 2 winters just like me!”

The Hermit - “Who in our failing colonies fits the exact definition of scum on earth?”

Pappy - “The queen”

Mothra - “HEY!”

The Hermit - “What is the speed and velocity of an unladen firefly, my liege?”

Pappy - “You know as much as I do that I don’t know that!!!”
The Hermit - “Hahahahaha! Oh, my dear old friend it is you!”

Then releases them to which they land uncomfortably on the ground. He then scurries down and opens the door to them.

The Hermit - “SORRY ABOUT THAT!!! Please excuse my behavior, wait, who are these people?”

Pappy - “Well, this is my apprentice, caretaker, and the closest thing I can call a son, Freeki”

Freeki - “Charmed.”

The Hermit - “Indeed,”

Pappy - “And this is his acquaintance, the luscious princess Mothra.”

The Hermit - “It would be a true honor to greet your majesty personally.”

Mothra - “Oh, thank you,”

The Hermit - “If your mother wasn’t a repulsive swine who banished me from House two summers ago!!! But I am willing to let the past walk right on down the road behind us so let’s do that shall we?!!”

Mothra - “Okay...”
The Hermit - “So what be your quest, strangers and friend?”

Pappy - “Well Kermit, you know all those prophecies about the end of the colony and how the queen was bringing doom to us all?"

The Hermit - “Yes, and why the comeuppance of this matter?”

Pappy - “Well I have some bad news and some good-um-bad-um-contrasting news!”

The Hermit - “Well what’s the good news? I’m a glass-full kind of guy!”

Pappy - “You were right about the doom and destruction of the colony.”

This information strives To get up, dance, and rant about that he was right.

The Hermit - “I. WAS. RIGHT! YEAH! I. WAS. RIGHT! YEAH!”

Pappy - “Sort of…”

The Hermit - “Ay?”

Pappy - “Well you see, the colony was destroyed not by a falling sky or the giants, but rather an invasion of mindless creatures led by a masked man.”
The Hermit - “Eh, close enough, what kind of monsters were these that attacked you? Any distinct features or behavior traits?”

Mothra - “The monsters were about Pappy’s height…”

The Hermit starts rummaging around his cabinets for drawings.

Pappy - “FALSE!!!”

Mothra - “They had around six limbs, a hard metallic backside, they had large horns, and they had a green fuzz oozing from their heads.”

The Hermit - “Well, I haven’t heard a description like that in a long time, Here we go, the monsters you speak of are called Horned Roaches.”

Freeki - “What?”

The Hermit - “This particular breed of monster that I call Rack-nids, act more like a mindless disease than a living organism. The Horned Roaches lived in the boundaries of Attic many summers ago. They move in a group and they used to be a huge threat in society, however, they all died of starvation and cannibalism when they ran out of food to feast upon.”

Mothra - “So there used to be villages in Attic?”

The Hermit - “Oh yes, they used to inhabit the entirety of House before the Giants came, anyways, the
Horned Roaches were prone to an appetite of smaller insects such as yourself and myself, and when they’re really desperate, larger insects like each other or the manti outside!"

At that moment, a herd of Manti walk past the Hermit’s hut. One crows particularly loudly.

The Hermit - “Speak of the devil.”

Mantis - <screech>

Freeki - “So if their breed is extinct, then how could they have been the same monsters that destroyed our village?”

The Hermit - “Didn’t you say that monsters had moss in their heads?”

Mothra - “Yes, why is that important?”

The Hermit - “Well, Mothra, the darkest magic out there is bringing back the dead, and there are many methods to do that, but one of the easiest ways is to grow a special fungi known as ‘resurrecting moss’.”

Pappy - “Resurrecting moss?”

The Hermit - “You see, this type of moss, will grow on dead bodies and attach itself to the host. It then finds the brain area and grows, taking control of its mind and attacking other bugs.”
Freeki - “Is this how the Necromancer took control over the monsters?”

The Hermit - “It seems the most logical, but in order to do this, this... figure must have been able to control them with other dark magic, the moss can last a certain time, but eventually the moss dies, and its host along with it. So this wizard of sorts must’ve been able to keep the moss alive along with the bugs as well. What else did this wizard possess in terms of power?”

Freeki - “He had a sort of sceptre that shot beams of fire.”

The Hermit - “Flame throwing... Also dark magic. Freeki, I believe this figure is a Necromancer who resurrected the Horned Roaches to demolish cities?”

Pappy - “Thanks Captain Obvious,“

The Hermit - “The only mystery now is why?”

Mothra - “He didn’t leave much behind, he took all of our food, tools, and water.”

Freeki - “If I didn’t know any better I say he was trying to create a colony of his own.”

The Hermit - “That wouldn’t make any sense, he would’ve needed a spouse in order to actually start one. So his intentions should be far more sinister. Whatever the case, if we want to recreate our home, we
have to defeat the necromancer and his army in order to survive.”

Pappy - “It’s not like we have anything else to do.”

Freeki - “Well Kermit, do you have any…”

Scene cuts to show the Hermit plunking the maps on the table.

The Hermit - “In my days in the army, I cartographed every territory and boundary of House. This is where we are at now. The giants referred to it as “Basement” and it’s where our community thrived in. You all found the Garden which is my lovely hovel is located. This is the next area, the giants call it the “Keech-een” this is one of the most dangerous parts of House.”

Freeki - “I’ve gone to that area yesterday. What should we know about it?”

The Hermit - “Well, Freeki, this area has giant canyons that can swing open at will. There is a vast metal lake complete with a deadly whirlpool, hazardous chemicals, and a metal waterfall that will shoot out water at will with no warning. It even has a white machine that may look inviting, but will freeze any occupant unlucky enough to stay in there for more than a few minutes.”

Mothra - “What’s this place for?”
The Hermit - “That my friend is a place the giants call the Closet!”

Mothra - “What’s a closet?”

The Hermit - “It’s a dark and scary place, We can’t go anywhere near there!

Mothra - “Why not?”

The Hermit - “But don’t you know? You could get trapped there!”

Pappy - “Turn around, so where exactly do the Horned Roaches live?”

The Hermit - “That would be up here, the attic. An enclosed area that would be harmless had it not been for the hostile creatures that lived up here.”

Freeki - “So how are we going to get there?”

The Hermit - “There are secret metal catacombs throughout House that I have noticed, we should be able to go through the Kitchen area, then escape into this vent here and make our way through the tunnels to the Attic no sweat.”

Freeki - “What about these areas over here?”

The Hermit - “These areas don’t interact with the mission at all so we shouldn’t worry about it.”
Mothra - “Why can’t we just climb up the walls of House to the Attic?”

The Hermit - “Because it is a more perilous journey and according to the weather machine...”

The Hermit then scrambles around looking at one of his machines.

The Hermit - “It calculates that there is a storm brewing from a mile of two southeast, so it’s best to stay indoors.”

Freeki - “So when should we begin our journey?”

The Hermit - “I should gather my supplies and some food for the journey but I believe we should start as quickly as possible. In other words, TOMORROW!”

We then show the two Horned Roaches which had been looking over the tree stump hut for the majority of the time as they retreat back to the Attic. They hurriedly scuttle up the roof as thunder booms overhead. They reach the top window and enter the disgusting attic. The entire floor is littered with inanimate corpses of the Horned Roaches. The Necromancer is prancing about bored while making fun out of animating the Horned Roaches to perform for him.

The Necromancer - “So number 237 and 55, you finally came back. What were you two doing the entire time while Daddy was working?”
The Necromancer - “What’s that you say? Survivors of the crusade? Well what did you do to them hmm?

The Necromancer - “Oh I see, you came back to report to me, hmm, you know, there was another option that was available to you in that certain circumstance. So could you explain to everyone WHY DIDN’T YOU DO WHAT I BROUGHT YOU BACK FROM THE DEAD FOR AND EAT THE ROTTEN MAGGOTS?”

The Necromancer - “No you’re not going to do it now you useless automatons! There’s a storm outside and I can’t have you deteriorating in the downpour!”

The Necromancer - “No you don’t get a promotion, but, you do deserve... THIS!”

The Necromancer then zaps the bugs, taking the souls animating them out into his sceptre.

The Necromancer - “Now what should I do, it’s so boring being a ruthless dictator with no friends! Hmm... I KNOW!!! Let’s have a tea party!”
He then zaps three other bugs danimating them for his roleplay pleasures.

The Necromancer - “Alright, 47, 52, you two will be responsible for entertainment in the background. 17, you’re going to be responsible for music to set the romantic mood, and 69 insert joke here, you shall join me for the night of your life at the feast of 112’s decaying body!”

Number 52 - <whining chirp>

The Necromancer - “BECAUSE I TOLD YOU TO DANGIT! ENTERTAIN ME!”

Number 17 - <angry chirp>

The Necromancer - “I don’t care if you’re a boy! Re-identify dangit!”

The three bugs then awkwardly act out the roles given to them accordingly.

The Necromancer - “That’s right, 152, It’s time for cake! <Laughter> Yay, depressing memories acted out by zombie heathen. Ah, bliss, now about those other heathen downstairs in the garden, I wonder how I shall vanquish the likes of them, but first, I have to find out their location, then I strike.” <escalating cackle of laughter>

We cut back to our heroes waking up and getting ready.
Pappy - “Kermit, what are you doing?!! We could have left by now!!!”

The Hermit - “Wait a second, a giant tossed a moldy peach over here the other day. It has enough morsels to last us a few weeks!”

Freeki - “Want any help with that Kermit?”

The Hermit - “I’m quite all right, thank you.”

Mothra - “Hey, Freeki,”

Freeki - “Yes, m’lady?”

Mothra - “Do you mind if I walk with you?”

Freeki - “Yeah sure, I don’t mind.”

Pappy - “Hurry up you lot! I can smell the rain from here!”

Mothra - “How does he have so much power and yet have little authority?”

Freeki - “You’d be surprised, Mothra.”

Mothra - “I’ll take your word for it.”

The Hermit - “Alright guys, we might have to make a run for it.”
Pappy - “There is no way in heck we’ll be able to hike back to house with this type of weather in our midst. It’s pointless!”

Thunder cackles overhead.

The Hermit - “True, but we can use these!!!”

The Hermit takes a flute out of his pack and blows three loud deafening notes to which the gang all cower in pain.

Freeki - “ZZZT Ow! What use did that do?”

Three Manti start crawling out to the cry. The Manti act as horses. They bend their necks to help the travelers cross their path.

The Hermit - “I’m glad you asked fellow colleague!”
(Whistle)

The Hermit boards a Mantis. The others follow suit.

Mothra - “Are these creatures...tamed?”

The Hermit - “Ah yes they’re quite domesticated! Just a quick nudge with your foot and...”

The Hermit kicks the Mantis’s hide

The Hermit - “Wooo you’re off!”
As The Hermit rides away, Mothra has a glint in her eye

Mothra - “Race you?”

Freeki - “Challenge Accepted, m’lady”

Mothra - Three...

Two drops of rain hit the ground next to them.

Mothra - “GO GO GO!”

They race as rain plummets down next to them. Mothra and Freeki both have flirting competitive racing manti as they notice Kermit zooming past them. As they reach the opening, the Manti start to run out of breath. Freeki’s trips on arrival and Freeki is flung to the wall. The Mantis walks away pissed.

Mothra - <laugh> are you ok?”

Freeki - (dazed) “A potato flew around the room, before you came,”

Mothra exits the Mantis. It joins its friend as it walks away in the thundering rain.

Mothra - “By the way, I won.”

Freeki - (regaining control) “Oh, heck no, I did!” They playfully bicker not annoying each other.
Mothra - “Nuh-uh”

Freeki- “Yuh-huh”

Mothra - “Did not”

Freeki - “Did too!”

The Hermit - “You lovebirds are both wrong! I got first, boy! Hahahaha”

All - <laugh>

The Hermit snaps making the Mantis lower its neck.

The Hermit - “Shall we proceed?”

Freeki - “Indeed, Onward!”

Mothra - “Wait a minute, we forgot Pappy.”

<Awkward silence>

Freeki - “Who’s going to go get him?”

<Apprehensive silence>

All - “Rock Paper Scissors”

We cut to Freeki retrieving Pappy with a leave over his head. As for Pappy, the feeling of anger is an understatement.
<Awkward silence>

Freeki - “So, uh…”

Pappy - “I WANT KERMIT TO CARRY ME!!!”

Freeki and The Hermit - “Ok.”

Pappy - “Look, I know none of you like me that much. I’m a bit of a jerk, and I’m grumpy, and bitter as dark chocolate, I’m sorry that I’m such a burden on you guys. You have to carry me everywhere like a satchel because I have no limbs, and I know you’re sick of it and annoyed as all heck. But I can’t help it. But please, don’t forget about me like that again. That really scared me and I don’t appreciate it. I will try not to be so much of a sourpuss from now on. Ok?”

Everyone inclines in agreement.

Pappy - “Alright Kermit, let’s proceed into the unknown.”

As they walk into House the camera focuses back to reveal a large spider web on the ceiling corner. The trio walk into the hallway and survey their surroundings. The Hermit gestures to the opposite wall at the opening of an air vent

The Hermit - “Alright, the opening to the catacombs begin right there.”
They all walk over to it.

Freeki - “It’s welded shut.”

The Hermit - “Not quite, the structure is fasten by these mechanisms here, there is a device in the kitchen area that can open into the tunnels.”

Pappy - “Why can’t you just use your sorcery to unlock it?”

The Hermit - “There’s no way I can get rid of the connectors without destroying the only means of entry into the tunnels. Magic can’t solve ALL of our problems.”

Pappy - Feh.

Mothra - “So where can we retrieve the device you speak of?”

The Hermit - “Unless my memory betrayed me, it’s in the kitchen area.”

Pappy - “Well, this ought to be a jolly holiday.”

They all walk into the kitchen and climb up the cupboards.

The Hermit - “Oh... Which one, which one, WHICH ONE IS IT?”

Mothra - “You don’t remember where it is?”
The Hermit – “No, no I know it. (eeny-meeny-miney) You!”

The Hermit then uses his staff as a crowbar and opens the drawer. (contains silverware)

Freeki – “Which one is it?”

The Hermit – “Wrong drawer!”

They proceed to open another drawer. It is filled with miscellaneous items.

The Hermit – (pointing at drill bit) “This one will do just nicely.”

They start to pick it up with little effort. But then all of a sudden the giant starts to come downstairs.

Old Lady Giant – *Thump* *Thump* “Timothy! Is that you rattling around with the silverware?!!”

The Hermit – “Oh no no no no no no no no no no no no!!! Not now! Not now!”

Pappy – “Not the giants, not the giants!!!”

The Hermit – “HIDE!”

The gang then hides inside the cupboard door as the giant shuffles into the kitchen.
Old Lady Giant - “Oh, must’ve left the drawer open again. I’m so sure I closed it.”

The giant becomes distracted with her phone as the bugs try their best to stay hidden.

Old Lady Giant - (muttering) “Symptoms for Alzheimer’s... Nope, too young, anyways, I might as well get supper ready.”

Freeki - “Oh-no”

The giant opens the cabinet door and is oblivious to the bugs in the cabinet. She reaches for spaghetti noodles, pasta sauce, and various spices narrowly missing Freeki and Kermit. The giant turns on the stove and sets two pots onto it. Mothra loses hold on the open cabinet door and she falls into one of the pots.

Mothra - “Oh-no”

Freeki - “Mothra!”

Mothra - <yell> <grunt from falling down>

The giant washes her hands and then attempts to open the pasta sauce jar. Meanwhile, Mothra is trying to get out of the pot. She hears the giant nearing the pot and tries her best to hide. The giant pours pasta sauce into the pot...next to the one Mothra is trying to get out of. As the giant walks away, Mothra climbs out of the pot and hides behind a flour jar as the
lady picks the pot up and fills it with water. Freeki and Kermit join her there.

Mothra - “Oh goodness, I could’ve drowned!”

Pappy - “Well, keep your wits about you and we might just survive this.”

The Hermit - “Let’s not waste any more time, let’s skedaddle downwards.”

They all descend down the fridge door, but then the giant walks over and opens the door, flinging them outwards.

Old Lady Giant - “Now where did I keep those onions?”

Freeki, Mothra, Pappy, and The Hermit - <scream>

The bugs all end up in the bathroom area. Freeki grabs the towel just in time and slides downwards, Mothra grabs the handle on a cabinet door and lands on the sink, and The Hermit smacks into the toilet falling onto the lid.

Pappy - “What should we do now?”

Mothra - “Guys! There’s an opening right here! Kermit, does this lead to the tunnels?”

The Hermit - “What, what? Yeah, yeah! That goes to the tunnels!”
Mothra - There aren’t any screws either! It just...

Mothra lifts it slightly making a clank

Pappy - “What are we waiting for?”

Mothra - “C’mon I need help!”

Mothra and Freeki both lift the vent up and slip inside.

The Hermit - “Wait for me!”

They lift up the vent again and the Hermit wiggles through.

Mothra - “It’s darker in here than I expected.”

The Hermit - “Hang on a second, Mwanga!”

The Hermit’s staff glows a faint light blue color.

Pappy - “Never once in the years in the army you thought to perform that spell for us?”

The Hermit - “Well, that’s because I hadn’t perfected it yet.”

The light flickers and sputters.

The Hermit - “See? I’m not nearly as powerful to light our way!”
Mothra - “We’ll just have to stay close.”

As they descend up the tunnel, the camera pans back to show more webs and four pairs of glowing red eyes. All of a sudden, they hear a faint echoing voice in the shadows.

Fillion the Firefly - “Turn back!”

Freeki - “The hey?”

Fillion - “Turn back!”

Freeki - “Is that a light up ahead?”

Fillion - “Turn back from whence you came!”

As they walk toward the light, they start to notice that their surroundings have become sticky with webbing.

Freeki - <disgust> “What is this stuff? It won’t come off my hands!”

Fillion - “You’re all doomed!”

Mothra - “Who are you?!!”

Fillion - “Do names matter? I’m going to die anyways.’

Freeki - <surprise/disgust> “It’s like an adhesive!”

The Hermit - “Oh-no, I was such a fool.”
Pappy - “What’s the matter Kermit?”

Mothra - <grunt> “I’m stuck to the wall! I can’t move!”

Fillion - “A monster which cannot be stopped, he trapped us, and took us back to his lair, he’s eaten almost everyone you know, I’m the last one.”

The Hermit - “What monster you fool?”

Fillion - ‘See for yourself. He’s already here.”

At this moment, metallic clanks can be heard as a colossal, monstrous scorpion-spider climbs up.

Freeki - “What is it?”

The Hermit turns around with the staff and illuminates the hallway to reveal the gigantic beast.

Pappy, Mothra, and The Hermit - <terrified scream>
Freeki - <slightly feminine scream>

Gargantua the Spider - <snarl/hiss/roar>

Gargantua lunges at Freeki, but he dodges and Gargantua grabs Pappy instead.

Pappy - <scream> “Help me!”

Gargantua bites Pappy sending him into a deep sleep. (For comedy’s sake, this spider’s bite side effects

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include a LSD trip instead of poison) Gargantua then
scuttles away wrapping up Pappy in webbing. Freeki
getting over his shock grabs his spear and lunges at
the spider.

Freeki - “Let him go you savage!”

Freeki begins stabbing the spider.

Gargantua - <painful roar>

The Hermit then joins the fight and starts zapping the
beast with magic. They all continue battling for a
good few minutes or so, then they near the vent to the
bedroom. Gargantua and Freeki battle relentlessly
until the vent pops open and they fall into the
giant’s bedroom.

Old Lady - “Oh, that blasted vent, always blowing too
much air, if only I could screw it back in!”

The Hermit - “I’ll come back for you!”
Old Lady Giant - <horrified scream> “Spider!”

Freeki continues to battle the beast as he notices
another floor vent. He make a mad dash for it.
Gargantua chases after him, but as the spider begins
to strike again, the old lady smashes the spider
repeatedly with a soccer cleat.

Old Lady Giant - “Oh, confound it, I’ve gotten spider
guts all over the carpet! I’m going to have to get
some stain buster for that!”
Freeki makes a final stab at Gargantua before darting into the vent.

Freeki makes his way toward the vents until he finds Mothra and the Hermit. They use Freeki’s spear to cut away Mothra and Pappy’s sticky prisons.

Mothra - “Thanks, I was beginning to feel a bit dizzy.”

Pappy - (a bit drunkenly) “Which one of you is my grandmother?”

The Hermit - “That was a rare breed of Rack-nid that just attacked us. I’ve never seen a side effect occur much like what’s happening to Pappy. Let’s just let him rest and he’ll come around eventually.”

Mothra - “Should we save this little guy?”

Fillion - “Why bother? My life cycle ends in a few hours or so, there’s no point in living.”

Freeki - “What’s your name?”

Fillion - “It doesn’t matter, but if you must know, I was known by my colleagues as Fillion. My light was the brightest out of all of them.”

Freeki - “Hold still.”
Fillion - “Even if you did untangle me, I wouldn’t be able to fly. My wings or so mucked up with webbing they can’t move an inch.”

Freeki then snaps him off and sticks him on his spear head.

Freeki - “You’re now our personal flashlight.”

Fillion - “I see.”

Mothra - “Well, light the way, Fillion.”

Fillion - “All right,”

They all begin to climb upwards toward the attic. They near the top level when they all become fatigued.

Mothra - “Fillion is beginning to dim a little bit, is he sleeping?”

Freeki - “Yeah, he’s simmering down, we should probably find an area to rest at.”

The Hermit - “There’s an area up here that we can set up camp at.”

Cut to them all setting up camp. Freeki is setting up hammocks, Mothra hands things to the others, and The Hermit is making a fire. As they work, Mothra flirts with Freeki with winking and pretending that she hasn’t noticed him. This continues until the Hermit finishes cooking.
The Hermit - “Soups up!”

The Hermit then pours everyone a cup of soup.

The Hermit - “Why the drowsy mood? Hang on, I brought something to lighten us up a bit.”

The Hermit then pulls out a musical instrument similar to a lute.

Pappy - “No way, you kept that after all these years?”

The Hermit - “Heck yes! I’m a little rusty but-”

The Hermit strums the lute,

The Hermit - “I’ve practiced as much as I can.”

The Hermit then performs “Over the Rainbow”

As they all finish, the Hermit puts the lute away and declares...

The Hermit - “Well, that was fun, I’m turning in.”

The rest all sit in awkward silence before they all one by one enter their hammocks.

Freeki tries to sleep but is unable to. He fiddles with his fingers and listens to the old men snore.

Mothra - “Freeki,”
Freeki - “Yes?”

Mothra - “You awake?”

Freeki - “Never been more so”

Mothra - “Come with me, I need your help with something.”

Freeki - “uh, ok.”

Mothra and Freeki then walk away by the edge of the vent.

Mothra - “I need your help with my back real quick,”

Freeki - “Your back?”

Mothra - “Yes, around my shoulder-blades. I think I might be growing wings.”

Freeki - “Wings?”

Freeki feels around her back until he notices two leathery/metallic spike poking out beneath her shoulders.

Mothra - “Ouch,”

Freeki - “Sorry,”
Mothra - “It’s not you, but it really hurts, are they actually there?”

Freeki - “It looks like it, but they are just little stubs, but why are you growing wings?”

Mothra - “When our species roam outside of a colony to start a separate one, the outcasts, usually female, will sprout wings to better locate another area.”

Freeki - “Wow, do they ever come off or do they-”

Mothra - “The wings come off when they have settled down and started a colony. The wings just... fall off to make room for... babies. Which I’m never going to do!”

Freeki - “But we’re the last of our kind! Unless we find another colony, you might be the only female to keep our kind from becoming non-existent!”

Mothra - “I know, but... I don’t want to end up like my mother did.”

Freeki - “Well, what I’ve seen from you in the past, I’ve seen courage, perseverance, intelligence, and most of all, unselfishness. I can guarantee that with those virtues, you can make yourself much different than your predecessor.”

Mothra - “Thank you, Freeki.”

They hold hands.
Mothra - “Freeki,”

Freeki - “Yes?”

Mothra - “I know it’s just the two of us that will inherit a new colony, but, even if there were other mates lying around, I’d still want to make you my king.”

Freeki - “Really?”

Mothra - “But there’s something you must know about what royalty was like back in the colony.”

Freeki - “Oh?”

Mothra - “When the queen decides who will be the king, the unlucky captive is shoved into a hole until the queen decides she has a use for him. Sometimes if the victim is resistant, the queen becomes cannibalistic, eats the poor fellow, and then chooses another villager. Freeki, I don’t want that to happen to you. You will be my king, and you will be consecrated for it. I promise.”

Freeki - “Mothra, I would be honored to join your hand in marriage.”

Mothra - “Really?”

They turn their heads ready to kiss when a bright light begins to shine on them from above.
Fillion - “Oh, don’t mind me, love-bugs, I’ll keep my mouth shut.”

Mothra - “We should get back to bed.”

Freeki - “Yeah.”

Fillion - “Not my usual preference, but still a delight to see...”

They get up and walk back to their hammocks.

Freeki - “Um, Mothra?”

Mothra - “Yes?”

Freeki - “I love you.”

Mothra - “I love you too.”

Fillion - *teasing noise*

Freeki - “Shut up!”

The fireplace eventually cools, and goes out.

The next morning, The Hermit wakes up, stretches his legs, walks around a bit and shouts...

The Hermit - “Alright people! Let’s get up! We have lands to discover! Sights to See! Monsters to conquer!”
Pappy - “Well preferably we’d all like to seize the day, but we’d like to do so when IT ISN’T THE EARLY MORNING!”

Freeki and Mothra wake up and enter the scene.

Freeki - “Pappy, you can sleep on my back ok?”

Pappy - “Feh, whatever.”

Mothra - “Hey, where’s Fillion?”

The Hermit - “He’s still on the staff I believe... Fillion?!”

Fillion is still on the staff, but is now limp and weak.

Fillion - “My impending doom is upon me now. Take me now, Reaper!!!”

The Hermit - “Not so fast, you coward, don’t you leave us now!”

The Hermit then takes a pouch from his belt and grabs a small berry. He then offers it to Fillion.

The Hermit - “Here take this.”

Fillion - “No, my time is up, so long! Farewell!”

The Hermit then squishes the berry and shoves the pulp into Fillion’s mouth.
The Hermit - “Eat you fool!”

The firefly swallows the juice disgustedly and falls silent.

Freeki - “Is he”

The Hermit - “Wait for it…”

Fillion then jumpstarts from his slumber. His light burns brighter and he starts spouting out hurried speech.

Fillion - <random ramblings and hurried speech>

The Hermit then promptly slaps the firefly across the face to get his brain straight. He shakes his head and states...

Fillion - “Howdy-Doody my comrades! Where will we be off to today?”

Freeki - “Well Fillion, we’re on our way to take back our homeland.”

Fillion - “That sounds like fun can I come?!!”

Mothra - “You most certainly may!”

Fillion - “Alrighty then, let’s go!”

Pappy - “Yes, let’s.”
They start packing everything and begin to start climbing the walls.

Pappy - “What was in that berry, Kermit? It wasn’t ground up reseurecting moss was it?”

The Hermit - “Oh, no no no. I found it in one of the cabinet canyons once, I think it’s called... Tes-toss-terone-may anyways it doesn’t matter, he’s kickstarted and upbeat and that shouldn’t bother us at all.”

Fillion - “Are you my grandmother?”

The Hermit - “There it is! The Attic!”

They reach the attic and dismantle the gateway, entering the room. As they climb downwards, they come across the maze of boxes and containers. They pass by a jug of bleach and a shirt.

Freeki - “This is the perfect place to create a new colony!”

Mothra - “But what should we call it?”

Freeki then walks over to the nearest box and wipes off the dust at the label. The box shakes a bit, almost toppling over the box they climbed up on.

Mothra - “Woah! Careful!”

Freeki - “This territory is called... Baby-clothes...”
Mothra - “The perfect name! This place will not just be a colony Freeki, we will become a thriving city with lights, tall buildings, and the perfect government! The city of Baby-clothes!”

Pappy - “Don’t count your larvae before they hatched Mothra. There are still monsters we have to face.”

Mothra continues walking with Freeki all the while holding his hand and side-hugging him. They then walk into a disturbing sight. Thousands of Horned Roach carcasses are strewn about on the floor.

Freeki - “What the hey?”

The Hermit pokes a corpse
Mothra - “They’re all dead. Did we win?”

Pappy - “I wouldn’t be too accepting, Mothra,”

The Hermit - “Something wicked this way comes.”

A huge burst of flame erupts from the ceiling as the Necromancer falls from the ceiling.

The Necromancer - “Hello fellow heathen, it is I. the Narcissistic Necromancer! Destroyer of Races! The Chaotic Corruptor! I see you all come to make yourselves wiped off the face of the House? Well wish be granted, heathens!”
The Necromancer attempts to zap green fire at our heroes, but the Hermit steps in and deflects it with his blue-shielding staff. The Necromancer is taken aback at another magical foe.

The Necromancer - “I see we, um, have another wizard in our midst.”

The Hermit - “Give it up, Necromancer, you are not the only one who can wield magic.”

The Necromancer - “Yes, I noticed. Well, then prove your worth!”

The Hermit approaches the Necromancer.

The Necromancer - “Well then, you have sacrificed yourself and your friends to my disposal as a worthy opponent. Let’s duel, wizard, show me your real power.”

The Hermit - “Challenge Accepted!”

The Necromancer - “Oh but wizard...I’m keeping your friends occupied.”

The Necromancer then gives the Horned Roaches the will to live and has them fight the heroes. The Hermit notices how The Necromancer summons the monsters.

The Hermit - “Defeat the Necromancer and you defeat the Horned Roaches!”
The Necromancer then plants a new attack formation in the bugs' brains as they begin to swarm together creating a giant being of bugs.

Freeki – “What the...”

The Necromancer – “Arise my improvised behemoth! Defeat the lower heathen!”

Behemoth – <ROAR!>

The behemoth stands up and starts to try and step on Freeki and Mothra. As it stomps on them, Freeki manages to stab its feet with his spear.

Behemoth – <Anguished roar>

Freeki then takes off Pappy and hands him to Fillion.

Pappy – “What. What are you doing?”

Freeki – “Fillion, take Pappy and find the best hiding place for you to, you got that?”

Fillion – “You can count on me, Freeki!”

Meanwhile, The Necromancer and the Hermit are fighting each other with magic.

The Necromancer – “What’s wrong old man? Can’t stand up to the bully?”
The Hermit continues to fight The Necromancer and even get the upper hand.

Mothra signals him to show that they can escape the ground by climbing up the boxes.

Mothra - “Up there!”

It swings an arm at them as they climb up onto a box that is at the behemoth’s arm level. Freeki topples a christmas ornament that crushes the behemoth’s hand.

Behemoth - <Louder painful cry>
The behemoth tries to remove his hand as Mothra runs across his arm slashing everything in sight with her knives. She then brutally stabs the behemoth repeatedly in the face.

Behemoth - <angry painful cry>

The behemoth breaks off his hand to swipe off Mothra from his face.

Freeki then finds Christmas lights and chases the behemoth with a long string. As he manages to catch up to the Behemoth, he starts surrounding the Behemoth entangling its legs. The Behemoth struggles, then falls over, crushing some of the bugs, but still allowing the other bugs to scurry around. Freeki and Mothra then focus their attention on the Necromancer and try to get near him. The Necromancer and The Hermit are still battling on the top of the boxes.
The Necromancer – “Be sure to tell the Giants I said Hi old man, I won’t be seeing them for a long time.”

The Hermit then notices Freeki and Mothra approaching

The Hermit – “I wouldn’t be so keen on that dear fellow!”

The Necromancer – “And why is that old man?”

Freeki then konks the Necromancer on the head with the spear, not knocking him out, but irritating him. Freeki – “Because his friends are more smarter than you think!”

The Necromancer – “Gah! Imbeciles! Prepare to meet your, what the…”

Mothra shows up with his staff and throws it like a javelin

Mothra – “Say goodbye to your power!!!”

The Necromancer – “NO!!!”

Freeki – “And say goodbye to any hopes of victory, Necromancer!”

The Necromancer – “You idiots! You just destroyed your one chance of defeating my army!”

Freeki – “Save your lies! You know you’re as good as dead!”
The Necromancer - “The Horned Roaches’ hive mind can only be controlled by the resurrecting moss, which is controlled my sceptre, which you just threw to who knows where!!!”

Mothra - “Well, Kermit, why can’t you kill them with your magic?"

The Necromancer - “Only my sceptre can defeat all of the resurrecting moss at once!!”

Freeki - “The Horned Roaches are still regrouping, we can devise some traps to hold them off while we find the sceptre!”

The Necromancer - “How are you going to do that, imbecile?”

Freeki - “With a little help from my friends.”

The Horned Roaches begin to swarm as the team begin to search for the sceptre while also making ways to defeat them. A group of Horned Roaches round a corner, and Mothra pushes the shirt over the edge confusing the monsters, but not stopping them. Another group rounds a different corner as the Hermit prepares his trap. The Roaches descend through a tight squeeze between the boxes, as The Hermit pushes the bottle of bleach over into the canal. The bleach travels quickly washing away the Roaches and disintegrating them. Freeki and the Necromancer are both searching for the sceptre. Things get more intense as the Necromancer is
uninterested in Freeki’s well being. Freeki climbs up the containers as the last group of Roaches descend down their corridor. Freeki pushes a box over, squishing most of the bugs beneath. After he does this Freeki spots the sceptre and sprints toward it.

Freeki - “There it is!”

But as he nears the staff, the Necromancer hurries toward it, grabs it, and whacks Freeki atop the head with it.

The Necromancer - “Foolish boy! You think you’re the prince of the future?!! Only I can prevail in this universe!!! Say goodbye to your friends and say hello to your doom!”

The group of Horned Roaches that Mothra didn’t kill round around the corner and descend upon Freeki, but just as all seem lost...

The Hermit - “Kumwita wafanyakazi!”

The Necromancer still holding onto the staff is hurled into the air as the staff flies toward the Hermit. The Necromancer falls in front of Freeki, his mask cracks, as he gets up with his identity revealed. This realization only lasts a few seconds though as the Horned Roaches, not recognizing him, rip him to shreds. Freeki runs to the Hermit’s side as The Hermit uses the Necromancer’s staff to murder the Horned Roaches once and for all.
The Hermit - “Kufa Riddick!”

The Horned Roaches stop dead in their tracks and all fall dead. They dissolve into a fine powder, to which, The Hermit blows with all his might.

The Hermit - “Well... That’s that. No more monsters, we have an entire frontier to discover.”

Mothra hops down from the boxes followed closely by Fillion and Pappy then flutter down to greet the trio.

Mothra - “You know that was a terrible hiding place right?”

Fillion - “That was AWESOME! We watched the whole thing! The Giant made out of roaches, the wizard fight, the climax, that was just totally radical!!!”

Pappy - “Hey Freeki,"

Freeki -“Yes?”

Pappy - “I’m proud of you. You’ve definitely surpassed my deeds in life. Can you forgive my bitterness?”

Freeki - “Of course, Pappy”

Pappy - “By the way, I don’t think I need limbs anymore, Fillion can just fly me everywhere!”

Fillion - “I don’t mind! It’s like carrying a little larvae!”
Pappy - “Why you little!”

Mothra - “It’s a delight they’ve gotten quite attached.”

Freeki - “I know a better one,”

Mothra - “Oh, really?”

Freeki - “Indeed.”

Freeki then plants a light peck on Mothra’s cheek. To which Mothra thrusts at Freeki making a passionate kiss.

The Hermit - <chuckle> C’mon you love-bugs, we have a city to create.”

Freeki - “Baby-clothes will be the most thriving city for generations to come!”

Mothra - “We’ll make sure of it.”

Freeki - “Mothra, I love you.”

Mothra - “I love you too, my king.”

Pappy - Do we really have to call it that?”

The Hermit - “I think it has a good ring to it!”

All - <laugh>
And so our heroes descend into the mazes of boxes, ready to build a city. The camera then pans out to reveal yet another spider-web. BOOM! Credits.
Coming Home

“Whack!” I heard a fist connect with someone’s head. I winced. I’d been there, I’d felt their pain.

Later, when I looked over again, that fighter was on the ground. Everyone cheered. Except me. I never knew why I decided to get into fighting. I was just good at it.

The fights almost always take place in alleyways, where the cops never came. I see another fight start to assemble. The fighter from before emerged while trying to stem the flow of blood from his nose.

There were dark, abandoned buildings on either side of me. Despite the mass of huge, warm bodies, I have never felt more alone. The metallic smell of blood is ever present in my nose.

The temperature is cold and brisk, perfect for a fight. Practically everyone here is dressed in tight, black, ripped clothes.

Including me. The only light is coming from a streetlight flickering as if it were a firefly, over the alley.

Then, my fight is up next. I’m never ready. I am against the only other girl, but she is very easy to beat because she’s the newcomer.

Basically, I grew up here after my mother died and my father left me. I feel tough, but also nervous.

*I’m gonna beat her.* I think to myself.

*I will beat them. I can do this.* The current fight is now over, I have 30 seconds to mentally prepare myself. I tie my dark, thick hair back with a black hair tie. I crack my knuckles and my neck.
Finally, I see the girl, alone, doing the same as I. She has blonde hair tied back in a braid. She looks muscular and tough, but I can see the fear in her eyes. Still holding the grudge from when I beat her last.

“Better hope you’ve been practicing, Blondie.” I taunted meanly. Her eyes narrowed.

“I’m going to beat you this time, just watch me.” She growled. We walked under the dim light of the streetlamp, and took our fighting stances. One of the fighters blew a whistle.

“Fight!” He grunted. We circled each other for a while, like hungry predators. It was a constant guessing game of “Who’s going to strike first?” I decided that I should.

I faked her out, darting to one side but doubling back to give her a hard uppercut to her chin. Her head bounced back, but she quickly regained her composure.

She tried to do the same fake-out, but I was too smart and spun her around with her back facing me. I twisted her arm up higher and higher, then kicked the back of her knees and watched her sink to the ground. I expected her to stay there, but she got back up, favoring her right arm.

I mentally cheered, because she was a right-handed puncher. She decided to stop using her arms all together and tried to kick me in the ribs. I turned at the last minute, her kick catching my hip.

I gritted my teeth. This was going to end, once and for all. I dove between her legs, wiggling out and catching her arm again. She gave a yelp of pain.

Then, I forced her to the ground, and she struggled hard. Finally, after what felt like an eternity, a different fighter declared me the winner. I took my weight off of the girl. As I stepped out of the alley, I was grabbed by my shoulder.

I whirled around, ready to punch someone. My attacker was a man of about 5'6, barely taller than me.
He had a decent build, but nothing spectacular. I could take him. As I wound up to punch him in the nose, he held up a hand.

“Please don’t hurt me. I want to help you.” A familiar voice said. I didn’t lower my stance.

“Step out into the light where I can see you.” I said, my voice like steel. The man complied, and I got my first good look at him. He was wearing round spectacles, tennis shoes, jeans, a t-shirt and zip-up hoodie.

He looked fairly normal, but I still didn’t lower my fighter stance. He looked familiar, but I couldn’t place it. After about half a minute of looking him up and down, I lowered my fists and stood up.

“Make one wrong move and I’ll break your ribs. I swear it.” I ground out.

“I’m not here to hurt you,” The man said. “I know where your mother is. She’s not dead.” My breath hitched in my throat, but I regained my composure.

“You- you’re lying,” I growled. “My mother’s dead.”

“No, she’s not, and I know where she is,” The man went on earnestly. “Come with me and I’ll take you to her.”

“I’m going to ask you some questions first,” I said warily.

“What’s your name?”

“My name is Andrew Banker. I was a good friend of your mother’s,” He replied. “Could we maybe take this back to my car? It’s below freezing, we can’t have you catching a chill.” I didn’t want to, but it was freezing and I was shivering.

“We’ll take it back to my apartment.” I said.

“Okay, whatever gets you out of the cold,” He replied.

“You’re not my dad. Stop acting like you care about me.” I snarled. He sighed.
“Very well, lead the way.” He urged. I started with a brisk pace. As much as I didn’t want to admit it, I was in a thin jacket and jeans and I was freezing.

As we walked back to my apartment, I dug my keys out of my pocket and jammed it in the lock. I let myself and Andrew in. “Wait here,” I instructed.

“Very well,” He replied. “I’ll be right here.” I walked down the short hall to my room. I grabbed my knife off my bedside table and stuck it in my jacket pocket in case he tried anything funny. I pulled out my hair-tie and tugged it on my wrist. I walked back downstairs to Andrew standing in the same spot. I collapsed on the couch and gestured to the armchair. Andrew complied and walked over to sit down.

“Alright, talk.” I sighed. Andrew did. He told me all about how he knew my mother, what he did as work, and everything in between. At the end of it all. It was about one in the morning.

“Okay, provided you are telling the truth, you seem trustworthy,” I admitted. “I want to sleep on it.”

“Take as much time as you need,” He replied, “I’ll be back here at precisely 10:30 AM tomorrow morning.

“Yeah, whatever.” I yawned.

When I woke up the next morning, I felt horrible. Then I remembered Andrew was coming at 10:30.

“Ugh!” I screamed into my pillow. I really did not want to go with him. I guess I would though. Andrew was kind of right, about fighting in 25 degree weather in just a jacket, because I felt like crap. My throat was scratchy, my eyes were watery and burning, I could barely breathe, and my head was stuffy and pounding. I forced myself out of my warm bed and into the bathroom to throw on black sweats and a black hoodie. I splashed water on my face, hoping to cure my burning eyes. It didn’t work. I braided my hair back into its usual style, and
decided against any makeup besides from last night. Then, I stalked down the stairs and collapsed in my recliner downstairs. At precisely 10:30, my doorbell rang. I winced as my head throbbed with the noise. I got up and shuffled over to the door.

"Why, hello darling," Andrew said cheerfully. "Lovely morning, isn't it?" I rolled my eyes.

"No, not really." I replied.

"Well, why not?" Andrew asked.

"Why do you care? You just met me last night." I responded

"Not really, I met you when you were two years old, darling." Andrew corrected.

"Okay, when are we leaving?" I asked, changing the subject.

"Well, I assume you haven't eaten, judging by your disheveled state." Andrew hinted.

"Hey!" I snapped. "At least I got out of bed and got dressed!"

"Okay, you win," Andrew laughed. "Make yourself some breakfast and then we'll be on our way." I didn't reply. I shuffled into the kitchen and grabbed a granola bar. I opened the wrapper and took a huge bite, even though I'm not hungry.

"There, happy?" I asked.

"Yes, that's better," Andrew declared. "I'll meet you in the car." I went back upstairs to throw on some shoes.

After that, I walked back downstairs and back outside to a sleek, low-to-the-ground sports car with heavily tinted windows. Andrew was sitting at the wheel. He gestured for me to get in on the passenger side. I was suspicious, but opened the door anyway. The door slid upward, like all the fancy sports cars in the movies. I slid into the seat, and the door soundlessly closed behind me.

"So, where are we going?" I asked. Andrew laughed.

"I'm afraid I can't tell you darling, at least not yet," He finally said.
“Okay,” I said awkwardly, “When can you tell me?” Andrew just laughed.
“You’ll see soon enough, darling.” He replied.
I stared out the window for a long time. My mind started wandering to memories of my mother.
I furiously tried to shove them away, but they came anyway.

I am five years old again. I am on the swing at my favorite park, with my mother. I hear my tiny five-year-old voice.
‘Higher, mommy, higher!’
She complied, and I felt her soft hands push me higher, higher. I felt like I was flying. The hard seat of the swing was ever-present.
Until it wasn’t.
Instead of the rough seat of the swing, I felt air.
I was falling.
I was falling for what seemed like an eternity. Then, the hard ground.
I heard someone cry out. I wasn’t sure if it was my mom, or me.
Then, pain. Blossoming in my left arm. I was too stunned to even cry.
My dad’s strong arms underneath me.
The smell of trees and mulch.
The feeling of pain in my arm.
The sound of my mother crying.
The sound of my dad comforting her.
I feel myself be set down in my car seat, which I hated so much. But now, I don’t even struggle.
The pain.
So much pain.
We drive to the hospital, at least that’s what I think it is.
The smell of antiseptic burns my nose.
That's all I remember before I am back in the car with Andrew.
I pull myself out of the memory. I am surprised to find tears in my eyes. I usually don't cry.
I shake my head, blaming the tears on my watery eyes from this morning. We've been driving for close to three hours now. After lots more driving, we come to a stop.
“I need gas,” Andrew explained.
“Okay, I'm going to stretch my legs,” I replied.
I walked into the convenience store, and purchased a drink.
I sucked on the straw, and the sweet, bubbly, liquid burst across my tongue.
I walked back outside, and Andrew was sitting back in the car.
I handed him a bottle of water.
“Thank you, darling. We have a few more hours of driving to go,” Andrew said.
The next three hours flew by. I fell asleep and we woke up in a desert.
“Woah, what happened?” I asked.
“This is where we walk the rest of the way,” Andrew explained apologetically.
“What?! Through a desert?!” I exclaimed. Andrew nodded.
“You're tough. You can make it.” he stated simply.
“Okay, maybe, but I'm not happy about it.” I sighed.
“I'm not either, but I can't drive this car through the desert, darling.” Andrew replied.
“Well, I'm staying the night close to the car,” I said. “I'm not sleeping on the sand any more than I have to.” I got back in the car and reclined the seat all the way back.
“Goodnight,” I called to Andrew.
“Sleep well, darling.” I heard his reply.
The night flew by, and when I woke up, I still felt like crap, and I had a crick in my neck. I sighed. Oh well. Then, a piece of paper caught my eye. It was a note from Andrew. In delicate script, he wrote,

*I went to get food. I'll be back soon. -A*

I sighed. Where is he going to get food in the middle of the desert?
I decided to go back to sleep while waiting for Andrew.

Later, when Andrew came back, I wasn't hungry, so he ate and we abandoned the sports car to walk.
We walked in silence for what seemed like an eternity.
Finally, Andrew spoke.
“Are you excited to find your mother?” He asked. The question caught me off guard, so I didn’t respond for a while.
“I’m excited, yeah, but also nervous,” I confessed.
“I completely understand, I feel the same. I haven’t seen her in ages,” Andrew replied. I didn’t reply. Eventually, we stopped for a rest. I sat down in the sand gratefully.
“We’re going to have to find shelter soon, darling,” Andrew sighed.
“There’s a rock shelf over there,” I pointed.
“Ah, that will do nicely,” Andrew began walking over toward it. I pulled myself up and dragged myself over to where Andrew was spreading the picnic blanket he produced from his backpack. He sat down on it and gestured for me to do the same. I shook my head and grabbed my blanket out of my own pack.
“Goodnight, darling. Sleep well,” Andrew whispered.
“Goodnight, Andrew.” I replied.
The next morning, I woke up and Andrew was gone again. I rolled my eyes and went back to sleep.
A few hours later, Andrew still was not back. I was worried. I pulled some dried fruit from my bag and munched mindlessly. After another hour, I decided to go look for Andrew. I walked for a while before I started to panic a little bit. After another 20 minutes, I was really panicked. After another 30 minutes, I was having a full-fledged panic attack. I dug in my bag for my anxiety pills and downed one dry. I decided to just wait.
I waited.
And waited.
Then waited some more.
Andrew never came. I ate more dried fruit, but that was all I could stomach.
It eventually became dark.
Andrew still was not back.
I slept restlessly. I was anxious to find my mother.
The next morning, I woke up to Andrew on the blanket beside me. I almost exploded with happiness. I had a million questions, but decided to wait until he woke up.
I pulled my phone out of my bag. No service. I sighed. An hour later, Andrew finally woke up. I attacked him with questions.
“Where were you?”
“What were you doing?”
“Did you get lost?”
“Did you-“ Andrew cut me off by holding up a hand.
“It does not matter where I went, but it matters that I am back now,” Andrew said simply. “Help me pack up, and I will tell you where I went while we are walking.”
I still had lots of questions, but I decided that was fair. I messily stuffed everything back into my backpack, eager to keep the journey going. Andrew took his time, folding everything neatly. I almost jumped out of my skin.
Once we started walking again, Andrew started talking again.

“Well, I'll bet money that you're anxious to know where I went the past few days," Andrew said. “I will tell you, but no questions until the end.”

“Okay," I agreed. And so he started talking.

“So I woke up in the middle of the night, and I decided to take a walk. Then suddenly, a dragon came out of nowhere! So I slayed the dragon and continued my walk." Andrew said. I burst out laughing.

“I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I couldn't hold it in any longer!“ I laughed.

Andrew smiled.

“I know. In all actuality, I just got lost," He explained.

“Oh. Makes sense," I said.

We walked in silence until nighttime.

We rested.

We walked.

We slept.

We walked.

For a long time.

Three days is a long time.

At least in my book.

Finally, Andrew announced that we could not go anywhere for a few days, because of an upcoming dust storm.

“Oh, just wonderful!“ I exclaimed.

“I'm sorry, darling. I understand it is going to be hard to not be able to go anywhere until the storm blows over,“ Andrew said.

The wind had already started to pick up, sending dust clouds soaring around us.

“We need to find a place to sleep for the night," I added.

“Lead the way," Andrew replied.

I found a cave, sheltered on three sides.
“We can always hang up a blanket over the opening. The cave should be fine,” I said. Andrew nodded.

We spread out our blankets and draped one over the opening.

“I hate dust,” I muttered.

But, Andrew was already asleep.

The next morning, I was awake before 6 am. I stared at the rock ceiling for what seemed like an eternity. Finally, I pull out my book from my bag and get lost reading.

A few hours later, I realize I’ve fallen asleep again, and I feel like death once I remember where I am.

“Andrew?” I whispered. Or, I tried. My throat was so dry I couldn’t swallow.

“Andrew!” I said more forcefully. All that came out was a wheeze.

I cleared my throat, which turned into unrelenting coughing, which woke Andrew up. Mission accomplished?

“Yes, darling?” Andrew replied, also sounding hoarse.

“When is this dust storm going to be over?” I asked.

“Soon, maybe a couple more nights?” He replied.

“Ugh,” I groaned. Andrew didn’t reply. He was already asleep.

The next morning, I woke up very early, and couldn’t fall back asleep. I wanted to look outside of the cave, but didn’t for fear of making dust blow into our little shelter.

I wanted to crawl over to Andrew and wake him up, but I couldn’t bring myself to. I fell back asleep and stayed that way for the rest of the day and night.

The next morning, even my bleary mind registered that Andrew had not been awake since last night, and it was very late. I pulled myself off my blanket and slowly crawled over to him. I shook him.

“Andrew, wake up!” I said. “I think the storm’s over!”
No response.
“Andrew?” I asked.
No answer.
“Andrew!” I halfway-screeched.
No reply.
“Andrew please!” I screamed. “Please wake up!”
No reaction.
I leaned down and put my ear to his chest. There was no steady thump of a heart beating.
No. I refuse to believe it.
I leaned down with the other ear.
I heard nothing. A single tear rolled down my cheek.
I furiously wiped it away. I would not cry.
I grabbed his wrist and pressed two fingers against it.
No pulse.
I couldn’t believe it. God only knows how long we’ve travelled, only for this? All for it to be abandoned? All this, and I have to find my way home? A thousand and one questions flooded my head. I curled up under my blankets, and cried.
I cried for a long time, over a man I don’t remember. Over a man I barely know.
A very long time later, I put on my game face and crawled out of our shelter. The dust storm had mostly blown over, save for a few gusts of wind here and there. I crawled back into the shelter.
I took Andrew’s backpack outside, as well as my own.
I shook the dust and sand out of them. I found a flat shelf of rock. I dusted it off and laid out all the supplies from both of the packs.
Three water bottles, all full.
Tins of dried meat.
A jar of peanut butter.
A knife.
A change of clothes.
A bottle opener.
A box of matches.
Sunscreen.
A mirror.
Toilet paper.
Lip balm.
Sunglasses.
A flashlight.
Extra batteries.
A whistle.
Toothpaste and toothbrush.
Duct tape.
Gloves.
Water filters.
Water purifying tablets.
Finally, Andrew’s notes on my mom.

I gratefully opened the lip balm and spread it all over my lips. I rubbed sunscreen all over my shoulders, and brushed my teeth for the first time in at least two weeks. I downed one of the water bottles. I put on the other clothes, and shoved my old ones back into my backpack, along with everything else.

I glanced up at the sky. It was only midday.
“Better get walking,” I said to nobody in particular.
So I did.
I walked.
And walked.
And walked some more.
I rested.
Then walked.
I walked until it was pitch black, and slept under the stars.
The next morning, I woke early, brushed my teeth, reapplied sunscreen, and began walking again.
It became a routine.
Wake up.
Brush my teeth.
Reapply sunscreen.
Walk.
Rest.
Eat lunch.
Walk some more.
Rest.
Eat dinner.
Walk.
Find a rock shelf.
Sleep.
Repeat.

The water was diminished in two days. According to Andrew’s maps, I still had a while to go. I had noticed that within the past few days, the terrain has changed.

The next day, I quickly found the desert morphing into a forest.
I was slowing down.

Walk.
Rest.
Walk.
Rest.
Rest.
Walk.
Rest.
My rests were getting more and more frequent. I cannot go on like this much longer.
My mind is fuzzy. I try to walk, but stumble and fall. I need water. I am so dehydrated.
I land in mud. I start drawing spirals in the cool, wet, mud.
I love mud, I thought to myself. This is an okay place to die. I inhaled deeply, and smelled pond lilies. I sat up with some difficulty.

Pond lilies? Mud? How could I have been so stupid?
I weakly crawled over to the clear water, and filled up my bottle, adding water purifying tablets. It was absolute agony to wait the allotted time, but I did. In the meantime, I stripped down to my underclothes, and slipped into the cool water. I washed my clothes with a bar of soap and laid them on the rocks to dry. I sipped water, and when that was gone, I scrambled to purify my other three bottles.

I ate crackers with peanut butter, and nibbled on the dried meat. After I ate, I thought to myself, I need a nap before I continue. After my nap, I am very refreshed and ready to start walking again.

It went on for days.
Walk.
Walk.
Walk.
Walk.
Rest.
Walk.
Walk.
Walk.
Walk.
Walk.
Rest.
Walk.
Sleep.
Wake up.
Repeat.
These were my days, morning to night. I hoped I was following the right path.
I craved human affection. I’ve been alone for so long.
I need to feel someone real.
I’m hallucinating.
I hear my mother’s voice.
Is it real? Is it fake? Am I hallucinating?
I'm hallucinating.
I hear Andrew.
I hear my mother.
I hear my father.
I hear my friends.
None of them are actually here.
My heart is slowing.
Am I going to die?
My mind is fuzzy.
Where am I?
What am I doing?
What is my purpose?
My purpose is to walk until I find my mother.
I pull myself off the ground and walk until I collapse,
sleeping until I am not tired anymore.
Finally, the terrain begins to change again.
It morphs into something of a town.
I speed up my walking. Is it real? Or just a mirage?
I walk up to a building and rub my hand on the rough stone. It is real. Tears begin to stream down my face. I run from building to building, touching them again and again.
I glance at the notes.

Place: Arizona
Town: Bisbee

I look at signs around me. They all say Bisbee, Arizona. I look at the notes again.
Block: block #9
Address: Exact address unknown.

What?! Exact address unknown? Impossible. Well, it’s a small town. I started walking toward a general store to ask where block #9 was. A bell chimed as I walked in the door. A smiling, elderly man greeted me.

“Welcome to Bisbee General Store, how may I assist you today?” He asked.

“I was just wondering if you could direct me to block #9? I’m supposed to be visiting family there,” I replied sweetly. The man blanched, but quickly regained his composure.

“Here is a map, have fun visiting!” He said.

“Thanks,” I replied.

“Actually, would you mind coming into the back with me for a minute?” The man said, stopping me.

“Uh, sure,” I said. He steered me into the back. He took out a remote and pressed a button. The security cameras flopped down and turned off.

I tried to back up, but the door closed behind me.

“I’m not going to hurt you, don’t worry,” The man said.

“I don’t believe you,” I replied.

“I need to tell you something about block #9,” The elderly man said urgently.

“Alright, talk,” I said.

“Now, I don’t know what kind of family would want to live in block #9, but there’s an escaped murderer running around in that general area,” He whispered, eyes darting around.

“Wait, seriously?” I said, my stomach twisting into knots.

“Yes, seriously,” The man replied. He pressed a gun into my hand. The weird thing was, the gun felt natural in my hand.
“Listen to me. I need you to forget you ever saw me, forget this store, forget this town,” He pleaded, “Take the gun, it will protect you,”

“Thank you,” I whispered, “I will forget everything. Be safe,”
“Now hurry! Go before it is too late!” The man begged.
I sprinted out the door. Before it closed behind me, I heard a gunshot. I whirled around in time to see the elderly man sink to the floor, a bloody hole in the back of his head.
I turned back around and sprinted out of the store. I sprinted in the general direction of block #9, and when I couldn’t sprint any longer, slowed to a brisk jog.
Before long, I entered the territory of the dreaded block #9. My heart was thudding.
The houses were squat, one-story houses. The shutters were cracked or broken off, and the yards were nothing but burnt grass. The road reflected heat, sending heat waves. The sun was so powerful on my shoulders, it was painful. The sky was as blue as the ocean. I came along a house with green grass, and flowers everywhere. The shutters were still intact, and the house was gorgeous, if small.
I smiled so wide my face hurt. My mother was always a gardener, coaxing life out of plants even in the blazing heat.
My heart slowed a little. I walked up the unfamiliar porch. I knocked on the door tentatively.
No answer. I knocked harder. Still nothing.
Suddenly, it came to me. She loved to garden in our backyard. I walked around the side, and opened the gate. There was my beautiful mother, on her knees as always, planting a beautiful hydrangea.
I let out a choked sound, and she whirled around. Her eyes lingered on me for a few seconds before she was on her feet, running toward me.
She pulled me into a tight hug. I could barely breathe, but it was okay.

“My baby, my sweet baby came home to me,” She whispered.

After lots of hugging and crying, she brought me inside. I took a much needed shower and got some new clothes. Finally, I sat down with her.

We talked about our lives, how I got here, why she came here.

She told me that she was an undercover spy, and her cover was blown, causing her to have to fake her death in order to move here and stop this escaped murderer.

Just then, I saw a shadow outside.

“Mom, don’t look now, but there’s someone outside,” I whispered. She nodded, pulling out a gun from the pockets of her jacket.

“On three,” She mouthed. I nodded.

“One... two...“ I mouthed.

“Three!” We shouted. We whirled around, facing the man who had just come in. We fired in sync. One bullet caught him in the head, one in the chest. He sank to the floor.

“We did it!” I cheered.

“We sure did,” She said, smiling.

“So wait,” I asked, “How did you learn all of this?”

“That’s for me to know, and for you to find out.” She winked.

I laughed.

We were interrupted by a rough knocking at the door.

“Police! Open this door or we will be forced to open it ourselves!” I looked at my mom. She beckoned for me to sneak out the back. I followed.

“Mom?” I questioned. She held her index finger to her lips.

‘Follow me!’ She mouthed. She sprinted across her yard and opened a gate. I heard the police break into the house, and
explode out the back door. Bullets rained down around us. One grazed my calf. I screamed in pain. White spots danced around my vision. I hear my mother’s voice.

“Run, Brooklyn! Run!” She yelled. I did. I sprinted. My calf was red-hot with pain. But I kept running.

I ran out the back gate, toward the street. I stopped to catch my breath.

I looked around and didn't see my mom anywhere. Until I heard the click of a gun’s safety coming off. I turned around, slowly.

To see the barrel of a shotgun pointed right between my eyes. The gun was in possession of my mother.

“Mom?” I asked, bewildered.

“I'm no mother.” She laughed evilly.

“T-Then, who a-are you?” I stuttered. She laughed.

“I'm her clone,” She said simply, “and your mother is dead.”

The word floated through my mind.

Dead.

Dead.

Dead.

Dead. Just as I thought her to be.

“Did she die in the car crash?” I asked, barely above a whisper.

“No,” She grinned, “I shot her dead myself.”

That did it. I lost it. I darted forward, snatched the gun from her grasp, and whirled it back around so I had the advantage.

“Oh, honey,” She smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes. “Did you think I wouldn’t come prepared?” She pulled out a gun from the back pockets of her jeans.

“Go ahead,” I snarled, “shoot me,” I didn’t think she would.

Boy, was I wrong. Everything seemed to go in slow motion. I heard the bang, saw the explosion of gunpowder out the nose of the gun. It was a brilliant shot. She hit me square in the chest,
piercing through my heart. I crumpled immediately, and didn’t get up again.

Now, I would go join my mother, wherever she was. Death. Such an ugly word.

Death.
Death.
Death.
The word had become my life.
Death.
Death.
Dead.

I was dead, as were my mother and Andrew, and lots of other people that I loved, and we are never coming back.

Death. Such an ugly word. Death.