



Elements

2018

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Emma Dayhoff

“Red Haired Beauty”

Her hair is red, like that princess from under the sea.
I love the way her eyes sparkle when she’s looking at me.
Blue and always moving, like the waves in the ocean.
I remain on the sand, watching her in motion.

Her hair is red, like the cherry on top of a sundae.
Everyone wants her on a warm summer’s day.
Her skin is as pale as vanilla ice cream.
When her lips touch mine, we are one team.

Her hair is red, like the blood in my veins.
There are so many feelings that I cannot contain.
She is warm, she keeps my heart pumping.
Like when we’re dancing, the music thumping.

My red haired beauty, I cannot lie.
I would do anything for her, even die.
But she, she cannot see.
She cannot see that she is the only one for me.

My red haired beauty, what does she do?
She holds my hand, and I hold hers, too.
The freckles on her face have been stained with tears.
Her unhappiness is one of my greatest fears.

My red haired beauty, can’t you see?
You have entirely all of me.
But if you have to go, you do as you may.
I will be here, even when you are not okay.

Emma Dayhoff

“Guilt”

She is the first thing I think about when I open my eyes in the morning.
Her green glazed eyes are all I see when I shut mine for the night.

Now it is me who is running out of fight.

Moments throughout the day I feel that nothing ever changed.
As if she never left this world, never took herself away.

And I am here without her today.

I can't stop thinking: *It's all my fault! It's all my fault!*
Why did she leave me? What did I do?

I am left behind without a clue.

The guilt consumes me, plaguing me with a darkness in my heart.
I should've seen the signs, should've prevented her death.

Guilt overtakes my undeserving breath.

If I hadn't seen the life leave her beautiful pale face, this trauma would not be real.
Yet I see her in a crowd of strangers when I know she is not there.

Life is getting harder for me to bear.

Eventually my grief will become a tolerable buzz in the background.
But I know the guilt, the guilt will always be loud and clear.

I can't even look at myself in the mirror.

We had a connection, her and I, stronger than I ever thought.
When she cut her wrists red, she bled me out with her.

Beside me lies an empty bottle of liquor.

The abyss of guilt I feel in my chest keeps growing deeper, darker.
Her smiling face was all just a ruse for me to ponder.

I guess it was her who I was fonder.

Rage seeps into my veins and despair sits like a pit in my stomach.
There is nothing I can do to focus, nothing to be rid of this pain.

All I want to do is run, but I know I must refrain.

No one can tell me how long this cycle will repeat itself.
Was this her plan? To make me feel such sorrow?

I don't know if I can make it until tomorrow.

I can't remember the last time I slept since that night.
The days are a blur, the nights are a rewind.

It turns out the world is not so kind.

Guilt follows me around, unshakable, a shadow at my side.
Again I ask myself: *What did I do?*

How do I go on without you?

The only thing I can do is live with this debilitating guilt.
With her untimely death, there was no reprieve.

Living is the punishment I must receive.

Emma Dayhoff

“Virtual Reality”

The bright, radiation induced light burns my retinas,
As I stare endlessly at the screen too close in front of me,
Forgetting where I am, who I am, and why I’m even here.

Running, shooting, fighting, dying, reviving. Repeat.

The slick controller clasped tightly in my sweaty palms,
I don’t blink, I don’t think, and I don’t eat or drink,

For as long as I can, I am immersed in my virtual reality.

Sophia Gawron

“Sassed and Harassed”

“Why’d you just smack my ass?” I say.

“Why’d you assume it was me?” His gray-green eyes are glaring down at me as I confronted him of his action.

“I saw you do it.”

“It’s not like you didn’t want it. I know how you’ve been looking at me while we’re working. You’re lucky that’s all I did.” His smirk sends a cold chill down my spine as he turns away from me to go back to making the pizzas. “Maybe next time I’ll give it a nice *squeeze*.”

I didn’t want it.

I’m sixteen and this is my first instance of being sexually harassed. I don’t know exactly what had happened, all that I know is that I did not want it to happen again. I had told friends of mine about the instance that had occurred at the restaurant I was working at and they had acted like I should of been happy it had happened. I didn’t want the attention of the eighteen-year-old boy that had violated my space as if it was nothing, I wanted to hide to make sure it never happened again.

**

I’m at a party with my best friend and it’s freshman year of college. I’m eighteen and it’s first time really drinking while I’m away at school, never having been the party-type at home. After taking a myriad of selfies in the bathroom mirror, we are scrolling through the pictures, trying to find one to post on our snapchat story. My chubby cheeks are pink from the cold, and my curly short dark hair frames my face in a way that accents my glasses, my outfit consists of a

lacy-white crop top that resembled an antique table cloth, red high-waisted jeans which accents my curves in a positive way. My black jacket is tied around my waist, just in case.

It's not too long into the evening when I feel my waist get grabbed. I turn to see two tan arms and white tee looking back at me. I look up to see dark eyes staring at me with a hunger that seemed much more than desire.

“Hey, beautiful. Can I get you a drink?”

Now, if I were to remember anything that movies and tv shows told me about parties, it was to never accept a drink from a stranger.

“No, thank you. I'm good for now.” His hand is still lingering on my waist and I shift to try to get him off of me.

Instead, he took that as an invitation to lean closer and whisper, “Well, I'll keep an eye on you and get you one when I see that your cups empty.” He flicks my cup and walks away from me.

My best friend and I are speechless as to what had just happened. Throughout the night, I feel his carnal stare pouring into my exposed back, and I feel violated. I look down at my outfit to see if there is anyway that I can try to be less noticeable, only finding out that I can put my jacket on, which doesn't do much. I try to pull my curls into an updo of some kind but fail as it hasn't grown long enough, just long enough to be an annoyance. Periodically, I make a side glance to see if he is still watching me. It's a small house so there isn't too many places to go.

I make sure that I don't finish my drink the entire time I'm there but that doesn't stop the “kind” stranger from approaching me again, this time placing a hand back on the lower part of my back, trying to reach around to the front of me. He pulls me to the side, away from my friend, who had just entered the bathroom.

He slurs this time when he speaks, “You’ve had that glass for awhile now. Are you suuuuuure that I can’t get you something a little better to drink? The jungle juice can be a little lame.”

“Yes, I’m sure. Let me get back to my friend.”

“Playing hard to get? I like that in a girl. We can go upstairs if you’d like, I live in this house.”

“No. Back off!” I shove him out of my way as I try to get back to my friends when he grabs me once more.

“I don’t give a shit if you take this drink or not, you’re coming with me and you’re going to let me fuck you upstairs.”

The next thing I know, my best friend grabs my arm and pulls me away from this guy, “Get off her man, she doesn’t want you.”

“Who are you? We’re having a conversation that doesn’t concern you.”

“It does concern me, she’s my best friend and she obviously hasn’t been wanting to talk to you at all tonight so if you could, back the fuck off.” Her slightly-tanned skin has a red hue to it from being mad.

“Whatever, I’m not going put up with two bitches and work this hard for shitty sex. Get out of my house.” The guy stalked off to seemingly find another prey to stalk.

My best friend saved me from what could of been the worst night of my life.

**

I’m sitting in a cheap, worn-down, donated leather chair in the hallway outside my class. I always tend to show up a little early just to make sure that I can get there on time, living by the motto “If you’re not ten minutes early, you’re five minutes late.”

I'm going over all of the notes for the upcoming quiz for my math class and in the background I am hearing students, professors, and janitors walking up and down the steps in the doors that lay beyond the chair I have placed myself in. The door opens and I glance up to see my professor walking through, he gives me a polite nod in my direction and says:

“It always makes my day brighter whenever I see your face.”

And walks off to our classroom.

I find it a little odd in my gut at his wording, but nonetheless I shake it off, amounting it to him being a nice guy. I gather my things and walk towards the class.

Once I'm inside, I take one last glance at the clock that sits on the tan wall behind me, pull out my swivel-ly blue chair and sit down. As I'm pulling out my polka dotted planner, my glove falls from my lap into the row in front of me. I go to get up and retrieve it, but my professor beats me to it, picking it up and handing it back to me.

“Thank you Professor.”

“Not a problem Sophie. Now, would you mind keeping an eye on the clock for me? I want to make sure that I have enough time for the quiz and all the material I want to cover.”

“I mean, sure, but wouldn't it be easier for another student whose chair is facing the clock? I'd have to twist around nearly completely to see it.”

“Ah, yes. It would be, but you see,” he leans onto my table and whispers, “you're a student that I trust.”

I lean as far back as my swivel chair will allow and just say okay. Wanting him to get out of my face as fast as possible. I never tell him when there's twenty minutes left to take the quiz.

The following class, I showed up earlier than usual, having met a friend for breakfast and walking with her to class. I walk up the steps to my classroom, realizing I took a different route than normal so I end up lost once I reach the second floor. I spot a new chair, much more worn-down than the first one, but in a spot that my professor won't see me before he enters the class.

I map out where my class is before sitting down, then I proceed to take off my black coat, scarf and my beanie. I place my backpack next to the chair and sit down. I get on Instagram to check my notifications, seeing how many likes I've gotten on my most recent post. It's of me with some friends at the bar, celebrating my twenty-first birthday. I notice that my clunky, big framed glasses are sliding down my face more than they should of and my dark brown hair is all over the place, with one single chunk of my bangs pointing directly down my forehead. Being the tallest in the photo, I was subjected to being in the back, but my arms dangled over my friends in a way that showed we were comfortable with each other, even without the alcohol that pulsed through our veins.

I glance at the clock at the top of my screen as it reads "8:54 A.M." meaning that it's time to go into class. I gather my things and just as the day before, place them down and pull out my planner and have a seat.

I'm writing down my daily to-do list as my professor approaches me again. We don't have a quiz scheduled for today so I'm assuming it's to pass back homework assignments that we had worked on.

"Where were you today? I really missed seeing you when I came down the steps this morning." He winks at me and I feel a lump in my throat.

"I, uh. Was running late."

"Oh, well. Maybe I'll see you back there before the next class."

I can't make eye contact as he places my assignments down in front of me and turns to walk away.

For the rest of the class, I am checked out mentally, and creeped out as his lecture goes on.

**

I'm sitting cross-legged on my dorm bed across from my friend, it's Sunday morning and we aren't too keen on working on any of our homework because of having gone to a party the night before. I'm scrolling through Facebook looking at videos of dogs being reunited with their owners that return home from the military as she is telling me some meaningless story about a guy she fucked the night before.

"He was so good though, like I thought I was gonna die from how good it was." her fiery-red curls from the night before are now pulled into a messy-bun, honestly making it look she's done copious amounts of cocaine throughout her lifetime.

"Uh-huh. That's good?" I reply, not being to sure on what kind of response she wants.

"Do you even care? It's been the first time I've gotten dick in awhile, we all can't be you and have a dude on speed-dial. Let alone the SAME dude."

"How do you expect me to take that?"

Her cackle is so loud and high pitched I feel as if my ears are going to bleed, "You KNOW I'm just messing with you. What's up your ass? Are you still butt-hurt about what that guy said to you? He thought you were hot, let it go. You totally overreacted."

"I overreacted? How do you think I overreacted? He was grabbing me!"

"Yeah, and?"

"And?!?"

“Yeah, and. Like I said, he thought you were hot, you shouldn’t be offended because a guy thinks you’re attractive. Honestly I think you made a huge mistake not going with him, you probably lost your only chance.”

“Too bad I don’t care about that. Why should I feel anything other than offended? I made it clear that I wasn’t interested.”

“So? He said you were hot and wanted to -”

“So that means I just should let him have his way with me even though I didn’t want it and made it explicitly clear? Because he fucking thought I was *hot*?” I say that last word with such rage that I’m practically yelling.

“Listen, Soph. You’re blowing this completely out of proportion, I’m not saying that. What I’m saying is that maybe you shouldn’t of ended it so fast and actually talked to him...”

“No. Save it. I’m not going to give some random fucking creep the time of day because he offered to get me a drink I didn’t want and gave me copious amounts of disgusting compliments that I again did. Not. want. I’m also not going to be guilted into entertaining some creep who decides that in their free time they enjoy trying to force women to be with him. Don’t fucking try to fight me on that either. Get the fuck out of my room.”

Tim Bradish

“The Pasture”

Jack’s fork clinked against his plate as he finished the last of his scrambled eggs. He scooped up one of the last mouthfuls as he listened to his mother say,

“Don’t take too long getting that tractor up and going again. Your father needs you to take care of the front yard before lunch.”

“Ok, momma.”

Jack said as he grabbed his last piece of bacon and stood up to put his plate in the sink. He snatched his worn out red hat off the counter and gave his mother a quick sideways hug.

“She broke down on the far side of the field up on top of the hill. It’ll make for a solid morning walk.”

Jack slipped out of the kitchen door and squinted as the sun beamed across his freckled cheeks. Gravel crunched under his boots as he walked across the driveway. The toolshed had been one of Jack’s favorite places for as long as he could remember. The latch let out a long creak and light flooded in and illuminated one wall of the shed. He picked up the wooden tool box that his grandpa had given him and started to throw everything he thought might be handy to get the old tractor running again. Jack was looking for a screwdriver when a loud crash came from the door of the shed. Jack wheeled around to see a dopey looking Australian Shepherd panting and seemingly smiling from the door way.

“Dang it Creedence!” Jack exclaimed as he laughed and reached down to pet the dog.

“You scared me half to death boy. Come on pupper, let’s go get Big Bertha breathing again.” The dog sped up ahead of the boy and kept looking back as Jack latched the door shut.

Jack and his dog headed out across the back yard which led into a field, the first field of many that Jack and his father farmed in Southern Illinois.

The bottom of Jack's pants were damp in no time as the morning dew accumulated with each step. They never planted this field or the pasture beyond it because of the giant hill that rolled up steeply at the end of it. Every year if there was a big rain parts of these fields would be under water, so why bother planting them? Jack made his way into the pasture as the sun came out from behind a low hanging thin cloud. He could hear birds chirping and his dog panting excitedly as he ran around with a stick he had found. The sun warmed his face and he could feel the warm buzz of the morning around him as he made his way across the pasture quickly and started to take long strides to get up the steep hill as fast as possible. Once at the top he could see the tractor a way off in the distance and he strode off with his objective in sight.

Jack had always been a hands-on kind of guy. He was no mechanic just yet, but for a boy of thirteen he had some skills with a wrench and hammer. The tractor was dark red and looked as if it had been teleported out of the fifties. His dad used newer stuff to do most of the work, but Jack didn't mind using the old tractor to take care of business. He hopped up into the seat of the tractor and ran his hand along the wheel.

“alright girl. Let's see if you'll just start up.”

Jack cranked the key in the ignition, but the engine just choked and sputtered until he quit.

“She's strugglin' for air Creedence!” He called to his dog who was now laying down in a patch of shade. Jack jumped down off the tractor and rummaged through his tool box. Tools rattled together as Jack cast everything from one side to the other and back again.

“shoot!” he exclaimed as he ran his hands over his pockets.

“I didn’t bring a stupid screwdriver, why don’t you go get it boy? I forgot it cuz of you.”

Creedence gave Jack a long lazy look before exhaling and putting his head down.

“fine, looks like its back-tracking time.” Jack muttered to himself as he started back toward the tool shed.

Jack was about to start back down the big hill when he heard a sort of whistling carrying on the wind. He took long strides down the hill and the whistling noise became louder and he could make it out more clearly. At the bottom of the hill it was clear to Jack that he was hearing an instrument being played. He looked across the knee-high grass of the pasture and saw a girl spinning around joyfully as she played a violin. It was odd, seeing a random girl in the middle of his family’s land, but the music was inviting and Jack felt awestruck as he listened from a distance.

She looked a little older than Jack with long dark hair. Jack watched her as she swayed back and forth with the slower pulls of her bow and skipped around lightly whenever the pace quickened. She spun faster and faster her bow a blur before she came to the end of the song and ended on a long slow pull across her violin. Her hair swayed behind her head as she released the violin from the nook of her neck and Jack felt a shock of terror as she yelled over to him

“I haven’t played for anybody in a long time, but from what I recall its proper to applaud at the end of a performance!” Jack’s face started to turn redder than his hair and he started walking toward her because he didn’t know what else to do.

“That was great! You’re beautiful, I mean the way you play, it’s beautiful.”

Jack stammered as he got within talking distance. He reflexively put his hands behind his back to grab his old hat out of his pocket, and decided to wring it in his hands as he watched the girl put the violin back into its case.

“Thank you. I don’t get to play very much anymore. It’s good to know I still sound good.” The girl was all smiles as she stood up and faced Jack straight on.

“Hi, by the way, I’m Abigail.” She stuck out her free hand and waited for Jack to take it.

“I’m Jack...” He liked how calm she looked as he shook her hand, but he found himself struggling to think of anything to say.

“umm, Abigail, how exactly did you end up in this field?” She laughed and gave him a sideways glance

“I could ask you the same thing, but my dad had to visit the guy that lives here, and I came along. Figured I had some time to kill, so why not find somewhere to play?” Jack explained who he was and where he was headed and Abigail and Jack started off toward the tool shed.

“So why don’t you get to play for people anymore?” Jack asked as they strode together side by side.

“Well my school shut down the music program and there arnt really any places around here to perform. Sometimes I play for my family, but overall my violin collects more dust than anything these days.”

Jack felt a pang in his stomach as he thought about the amount of people that had not been able to hear the beautiful sounds that this girl made. The walk back to the tool shed seemed to go by ten times faster than it normally did, and Jack was annoyed when he saw it getting bigger and nearer. The pair had laughed and chatted the whole way back and Jack was sure he wanted to spend more time with this girl.

He stopped along the side of the shed so that he could continue to chat before Abigail went back to the garage where her dad was visiting with Jack’s father.

“I would listen to you play anytime that you want to come over here. I don’t have a cell phone, but I bet your dad has my parents number.” Jack said as he shuffled awkwardly from foot to foot. She always seemed to have a smile on her face, but it looked a little brighter after hearing Jack say that. She eyed the red headed boy from head to toe and stepped in toward him so that they had very little personal space.

“I would really like to play for you again. You make for a good audience... just to make sure that I come back, I’ll just keep my hands on this!”

Abigail quickly snatched Jack’s tattered hat out of his back pocket and placed it on her head with both hands as she started toward her dad’s truck. A little disconcerted, Jack was unable to think of anything to say for a moment, so he just smiled as she walked away. He unlatched the lock on the tool shed and started toward a screwdriver that he thought would work. He stood for a moment in the shade of the closed door and realized that Abigail was much more interesting than a tractor.

Jack closed the door and heard the latch snap shut as Abigail’s dad’s truck fired up behind him. He looked over at the truck and saw a smiling girl looking back at him. The wheels started to turn and the girl took the hat off her head and let it wave in the wind as the truck went down his driveway. He wanted his hat back, but more than anything he just wanted to spend time with that girl again.

Alexander Lounsberry

“Circles”

The end is only the end,
Until the next beginning comes
Wise men and fools alike,
Flee these dying suns
Flee what is to come

Circles are complete,
Everything, thus, is as one
Brave men and cowards alike
Scared of what's to come,
And flee these dying suns

The lion's flesh is to the earth
As the gazelle's to the hunter's gun
Savages and animals alike
Embrace the cold agony of the run,
Yet flee the warmth of these dying suns.

Sleep of sleeps, gentle grace passionately
Takes her daughters and sons
Even they can't grasp the circles,
The inevitability of what's to come
Nor the dying of those fair suns

Circles are complete,
Everything sprouts from endings
The only true end,
Comes from these beginnings
And is the end of all endings

Alexander Lounsberry

“Road of Infinite Time”

Chariot of salvation
Mirror to reflect those bound
Shackled by heart's desires
A poisoned life to be drowned
Destruction and death lift thy crown

Echoes of greed call forth
Deadly speed these wheels turn round
Circles to both end and begin
Misdeeds lost and never found
Red rose of life lift thy crown

Road of infinite time
Carry those that might be bound
Passengers of damnation
Sinners without a sound
Gods of redemption lift thy crown

Smoothest is the road traveled
Clarity that may astound
Innocence: an abstract meaning
Upon a chariot they crown
Now buried beneath the ground

Chariot of salvation
All that's happened falls to time
Mistakes and errors matter not
The spokes of rebirth lift these crimes
Lost upon the road of infinite time

Alexander Lounsberry

“Rage Against the Esteemed”

Attacks of rage will withstand the net force
To win or destroy—sentenced to greed
That burns away anthills with a sizzle
Lost in the fire of a survivor’s sun
Such a cycle is heartless Zen

Before the cold aftermath can rectify
A recipe of your jury yet assigned
Align intentions to that of the perceiver
Wolf among the flock to extinguish
A devil’s gaze they will counter you with no longer

Vent your nerves to bend under open eyes
Soon they jest you no longer on intent,
But rather on delivery driven by hate
They are merely a flood to barrel downstream
This is the source of your yearning

Terrorize
 Destroy
 Pulverize

They wander an ill land of excellence
A journey that qualifies them your superior no longer
A trance full of solution can bury them
Eyes that can detach to do your bidding
Excel to hit them at their base

Anger—a tender sword of bottled drive
Perhaps fragile in their hands
Yet in yours in cuts their chunky, esteemed flesh
They flop in a polluted river of their own excrete
It serves to besiege them indefinitely.

“Mother”

Crisp water holds me
Rocking me like a newborn
A baby smothered

Kurt Messenger

“Clock of the Gods”

In many cases,
the earliest designs are quite complex.

As time progresses,
simplicity is engineered into place.

Where does inspiration originate,
for the common analog clock?

It resides in the universe around us,
our solar system in particular.

The earliest used the sun to tell time,
and through progress,
the sun now sits upon the wrist.

Our system has thousands of objects,
revolving around a large singular sun.
But just like time, size is only relative.

The relationship between our planet
and the largest of the celestial bodies around us,
is much the same as the hands of a clock.

The sun is our center axel,
each planet is the tip of a hand,
and gravity acts as the gears that drive it all.

Be they batteries, springs, or a pendulum,
all our clocks eventually lose their driving force.

I wonder then,
when will the great first clock do the same?

Kurt Messenger

“Infinity Measured by the Teeth”

Three columns move in relative unison,
One in the shadow of the First,
and the First in the shadow of the Second.

The Second is the fastest,
followed by the First,
while the One is quite slow.

Always joined at the hip,
the Second is small but pulls the other two.
The First is stronger,
but requires guidance from the Second.
The One is fat and heavy,
and cannot step on its own.

one to three,
one to four,
one to five.
In sixty steps the Second moves the First.

one to three,
one to four,
one to five.
In sixty steps the First moves the One.

one to three,
one to four.
In twelve steps the One reunites the columns.

Three hundred and twelve,
the number of teeth required,
to move three columns,
for all eternity.

Shelby Davin

“Riley”

You did it again.

Perched high above the bathroom sink
sat your pearls of pleasure,
pearls of pain pushed to the past,
pearls of broken promises.

The bright orange canister read caution,
but you did not.
Spilling over with ambivalence,
you took that tainted maraca.

Why did you do it again?

Pop the top,
the click clack as the pearls cascaded into your palm
you stood frozen,
as stale and chilling as the night he took your innocence.

Looking through yourself in the mirror,
you began to crack at the surface,
insides trembling,
freckles fading.

I'm sorry you had to do it again.

You pushed the pearls past your lips unapologetically,
your red hair radiated and turned to flames
as the bitter embers enveloped your mouth,
they engulfed your entire throat and set your body ablaze.

Like a furnace of fear,
You melted into the floor.
They found you morbidly mangled,
one part Riley, one part pearls.

Please, never again.

Shelby Davin

“Coercion”

I've heard of liquid courage,
but somewhere along the line
someone turned that into liquid entitlement.
They mixed you a drink that refashioned your no to please,
your trust and intuition became fuzzy and forgotten,
they started to collect your innocence
like a child collecting lightning bugs
your vulnerabilities on display for their pleasure.
Don't forget to poke holes on the top of the jar,
you don't want them to suffocate.

Shelby Davin

“Untitled”

Clams of calamity
Clams of catastrophe,
their plastic orange skins
produce antidepressed grins.

Sullen with sin
we let the monsters win,
monsters of calamity
monsters of catastrophe.

The clams open wide,
see the shiny pearls inside,
wipe away your tears, paint your tainted smile,
this feeling won't last but a short while.

Throw them down the hatch,
but only the allotted batch.
The monsters can't win,
the pearls burn their skin.

Kaylee Gundling

“Orange Streetlights”

You probably should have been at home.
You were supposed to go home
when the streetlights came on.
But you didn't go home
and the streetlights came on
and they were orange.
That's the detail you remember most vividly,
the color orange.

You're never quite sure
how to tell the story.
You have a whole script
in front of you but
your line delivery is always off.

You realize storytelling
from the second person helps,
you can put some distance
between yourself
and the story now.

This way, the people in your story
become objects,
set pieces.
You arrange them just so,
and don't forget to get
the lighting right.

You're in a fire station parking lot.
Make sure it's dark,
but not too dark.
And for heaven's sake
don't forget to
make the streetlights orange!
Audiences notice
that kind of thing.

The audience is the most important
performer in any show.
The actors on stage,
you're all secondary.
The audience laughs when it's supposed to,

cries when it's supposed to,
hems and haws on cue.
They're impeccable.

You,
the players on stage,
you give the audience
a standing ovation.

The audience bows
and the lights go down
and only then do you realize
you never told your story.

Kaylee Gundling

“The Feast”

Gather around the table, it's time for a feast;
they were so kind as to set the table

for us, the full spread is here. It's time
to eat. Don't look at me like that.

The food is perfectly edible, that is if you
can get over the smell. They say if you hold your breath

you can't taste the mold that has spread
across the hardened plane of the loaf of bread;

if you hold your breath you won't smell
the rotting meat. If we devour it quickly we

might get to it before the maggots appear;
you may eat around the blackened patches if you must.

The flies, I'm afraid, are a permanent fixture,
there's nothing to be done about it except swat

at the filthy things, if they land on the browning
core of the apple on your plate it hardly should spoil

your dinner. Please, don't be a stranger.
Take more from the fruit bowl, try the grapes.

You like grapes, don't you? They're shriveled
and browning, but if you just close your eyes

it's just like eating a raisin, or you can eat
the discolored peach, if that's more to your liking.

Depression is a bit of an acquired taste,
but dig in, my friends, we'll get there someday.

Kaylee Gundling

“Entropy”

I am never the first to leave the party,--
I can't stand the thought
of anything continuing without me,
of not knowing what comes next.

I am never the first to leave the party,--
I'd hate to miss out
on the best part of the evening. And that is why
I am so afraid to die.

Tyray Ratliff

“Swallowed in the Sea”

The profound waters embrace my body
as I begin to descend like a sinking ship

I try to fight it off,
kicking my legs desperately, flapping my arms frantically
as I shriek at the top of my lungs, “**Help!**” with the little energy I have left..

But it’s no use.
My arduous efforts are no match for the waves.
I start to lose consciousness
as a cascade of water goes through my nose,
flooding my helpless lungs.

I can’t move a muscle,
my body is solidified like a statue in the sea.

This pain burns like *hot lava*
and it’s inevitable.

This is it,

my last stand.

Tyray Ratliff

“Beach Peace”

The thirst quenching breeze zooms
smoothly through my hair as I lay on my
chaise lounge beach chair.

My body rests in the shade while my sunglasses
protect me from uv rays.
The wind lifts up the sand and sends it gliding leveled across the surface.
Next to me is a long glass of lemonade on the rocks
with a colorful bendy straw.

I relax and listen to the sound of the blue waves
pushing back and forth on the shore like it's nagging for attention.
My body has desired for this stress free sensation.

I cherish this moment and savor it
participating in every second
because I know it won't last long and will
soon be only a memory.

Morgan Cusack

“Shadow”

A dark copy
Forever stuck moving
But never where she wants to be

Gliding over earth
Weightless, yet forever grounded
She burns to be free

To stand on her own
To feel the rain and count the stars
To smell the summer breeze

She cries with no tears,
She screams with no voice

Morgan Cusack

“Calla Lily”

She has her sleeves rolled up
Flour covering up to her elbows
Her strong fingers kneading the dough with precision
I barely remember how to speak

Her soft brown hair pulled into a tight knot
A streak of white across her cheek
And a smile gracing her lips
I barely remember how to breathe

She speaks of home, lost to ash and flame
She speaks of snow, a kind of fond longing in her voice
She speaks with a gentleness I haven't heard in a while
I look at her and I can't think of anything but calla lilies

Morgan Cusack

“How Not to Cope”

Michael flexed his sore knuckles, watching as blood slowly oozed out of his broken skin. In the moment, punching that idiot Jack Torren in the face had felt like a reasonable reaction. Michael knocked Jack on his ass and he should have left it at that. He should have just walked away, but the thing was: he didn't want to. He wanted a fight. So he stayed, he let Jack get back to feet. He felt elated when Jack rushed at him and threw a sloppy punch.

Michael knew how horrible it was—how fucked up he must be—but it felt good. It felt so good to hit something. To let out all the rage and frustration that had been boiling under his skin. To see the blood and feel the bone crack beneath his fist when he broke Jack's nose. For one fleeting moment Michael felt better.

Now he was here: sitting on one of the impossibly uncomfortable plastic chairs outside of the principal's office, waiting for his dad, Sam, to finish talking to the principal and the guidance counselor. Jack's parents had already been there, shouting about their poor son's face and demanding Michael's immediate expulsion. Principal Carth tried to calmly explain to them that he wanted all sides of the story before he made any decision about punishment. They stormed out, taking Jack with them, offended that anyone would think it could be their precious Jack's fault.

Michael pressed an already bloody ball of tissues against his knuckles, letting the blood seep through and bloom across the bright white. Suddenly the office door opened and out came Michael's father. His face was stony, his eyes hard as they landed on Michael.

“Let's go, son,” was all Sam said as he passed Michael, heading straight for the door. Michael sighed and trudged after his father.

The whole walk across the parking lot Michael was holding his breath, waiting for the yelling to start. Sam didn't say word, didn't so much as glance in his son's direction as he climbed into the car and started the engine.

When Sam finally spoke, they were already half-way home. The car slowed to a stop at a red light. Michael started out the window, watching the trees sway with the breeze. The leaves were starting to change orange and flutter from the branches. His eyes were drawn to a little family walking down the sidewalk. A mother and father both holding one of their little girl's hands. They were all smiling and happy and perfect.

"What the hell is going on with you, Michael?" Sam said softly, as if Michael was a wild animal he didn't want to spook.

"Nothing," Michael responded. He didn't look away from the family. The little girl was talking, telling her father something with the same excitement as Eden when she told Michael butterfly facts. The father laughed, a big laugh that shook his whole body, while the mother covered her smile with her hands and the girl smiled proudly.

"Nothing?" Michael's father scoffed. "You started a fight on school grounds; you *broke* a kid's nose."

"Not my fault he doesn't know how to protect his face." The family kept walking, the little girl was giggling for some reason. Michael couldn't hear her laugh but he imagined it sounded like Eden's.

"That's not funny, Michael." The light turned green and they start moving again. Michael looked in the side mirror, catching one final glimpse of the little family. The mother scooped the little girl up into her arms and the girl pressed a kiss to her cheek as the father looked on fondly. Sam took a turn and the family was gone.

Michael could see his father take a deep breath, his hands tightening on the steering wheel. Sam was gearing himself up for the big lecture. “You need to take this seriously, you really hurt someone today—” Sam started but Michael cut him off.

“Jack Torren is some asshole bully,” Michael sneered, Jack’s hateful words still ringing in his ears, the kids’ faces burned in his mind. The freshmen boys had been minding their own business, laughing and holding hands, when Jack started spewing his homophobic bile. The boys looked so scared; it was the same look Eden got when she woke up after a nightmare. Michael couldn’t make himself walk away. So he punched Jack and kept punching him until he finally stopped talking. “He deserved a hell of a lot more than just a broken nose.”

“Michael!” The astonishment on his father’s face almost made Michael laugh; instead he just shrugged his shoulders.

“What? He does,” Michael watched the road as it rushed by outside the window. He thought about what would happen if he just opened the door and jumped out of the car. They weren’t moving that fast; he would probably survive hitting the road.

Michael’s fingers curled around the door handle. If he jumped out—and survived—then he wouldn’t have to deal with this conversation. He could just escape and never look back. No more school or stupid Jack Torren. He wouldn’t have to lie to Eden about why their mother was always yelling and their father was crying. He wouldn’t—

Eden. His baby sister was at home, waiting for him. She was probably curled up on the couch with one of her books, eyes darting to the door every few pages. Maybe she was practicing her ballet, wanting to get the moves just right before she showed him the whole dance. She expected Michael to come home to her.

Michael let go of the door handle.

“I just don’t know what’s going on with you.” Sam was talking, seeming to not have noticed Michael’s lack of attention.

“Right, can we just skip the lecture?” Michael sighed. He was so tired and not at all in the mood for a long talk. “I get it, you’re disappointed in me and I should have known better and set a better example for Eden. I’m grounded and I should never start a fight again. Did I cover everything?”

“Michael, please,” Sam begged softly. “I’m just trying to understand.”

“What’s there to understand, Dad?” Michael huffed, exasperated. “Jack was being a dick, I got angry and I hit him. That’s it. End of story. Nothing else.”

“You need to talk about what happened Michael,” Sam said beseechingly. Sam was completely out of his depth and he didn’t know how to move forward if Michael wasn’t going to let him in. “Principal Cath can’t do anything if you don’t tell him. *I* can’t do anything. There is something going on with you. You’re so angry all the time and you’re letting your schoolwork slip. I haven’t seen you with any of your friends in a long time. Now you’re picking fights. I know there’s something wrong but can’t help you if you don’t tell me what it is.”

Michael scoffed hotly, “Like you care.”

Sam eyes jumped from the road to Michael, the shock and hurt evident on Sam’s face. “Of course I care! You’re my son, I love you and I want you to be happy.”

Michael was practically seething, the rage bubbling up in his chest. “Then why *the hell* has it taken you so long to fucking divorce her?”

“What?” Sam flinched, startled by the sudden anger directed at him. Michael took a breath, clenching his aching fist to try and calm himself. Getting pissed off was not going to help him right now.

“The walls are a lot thinner than you think.” Michael muttered, staring at his hands in his lap. “I can hear you guys fighting. Mom said she wanted a divorce.”

“You heard that?” Sam asked softly, shame and guilt washing over him.

“Yeah, and a lot more.” Sam could only imagine what else his son had heard through the walls. Nothing good.

“I’m sorry, Michael. I didn’t want you to find out this way.” There was so much he wanted to tell Michael, so many things he had to explain. The boy was so young and the last thing Sam wanted to do was drop more on his shoulders. “It’s going to be hard, a lot of things are going to change. It’s better this way though, I promise.”

“Dad, I know it will be,” Michael rolled his eyes. “Things will be a lot easier without her around. If she wants to leave us, then fine. Good riddance.”

“Michael!” The spite and bitterness in his son’s tone made Sam’s heart twinge. How could he let this happen? How did he let Michael become so hard and angry?

“It’s true and you know it,” Michael accused harshly. “All she does is work, come home pissed, and yell at us. She’s never around and never has been.”

“That’s not fair,” Sam said half-heartedly. “Your mom works hard to provide for you guys.”

“*That*, that right there is why I’m pissed!” Michael pointed his finger at his father. “Why do you keep making excuses for her? You say you want me and Eden happy but then why have you stayed with her for so long? Can you not see how she’s destroyed my childhood? I’ve been bending over backwards trying to salvage Eden’s.”

Every missed play and lonely parents’ day and long nights sitting up listening to his parents scream. All the mornings he missed the bus because he had to get Eden ready. Coming home to

his father sobbing on the couch and having to pick up the pieces. All the fake smiles and lies he had to tell Eden to save her innocence. All the resentment and anger and misery came bubbling to the surface in Michael's mind. It left Michael blinking back tears.

"It hasn't been that bad...has it?" There was his son, nearly in tears in front of him and it was all his fault. Sam let himself live in denial for so long in some vain hope he could hold his family together. Now it was all crashing down and Sam was left with nothing but rubble.

"Yeah, it has." Michael sighed heavily, "Why did you let it get like this?"

"I love her, Michael. I still do, for all her faults. Even though she doesn't love me anymore." It still knocked the breath out of Sam, knowing that his wife didn't care about him anymore. Apparently twenty years didn't mean as much to her as they did to him. "You'll understand when you love someone."

"*Love?*" Michael parroted, saying the word as if it had personally offended him. "If that's love, I don't want any part of it."

What could Sam say to that? How could he explain to Michael, who was still so young and full of so much turmoil, that even imperfect love was worth it? Sam and Hope were happy once, they had had a few good years. They had Michael and Eden which Sam wouldn't give up for anything.

Sam didn't even get the chance to try. They had just pulled up to the house and Michael was out of the car as soon it stopped moving.

Michael was more than ready to be finished with that conversation but he stopped, his hand on the front door. He couldn't go into the house angry. Eden would see it in a second and Michael knew that would upset her. Taking a few deep breath he tried calm himself, to will his pulse to slow and the rage to disappear.

Calm down, he told himself. Eden can't see you like this.

Michael could feel his father's eyes on him, he was giving the Michael the minute he needed and for that Michael was thankful.

When he finally felt like he could fake a decent smile, Michael opened the front door. He didn't even make it a few steps in before there was Eden, in her tutu and ballet shoes, with an impossibly bright smile.

"Mikey!" She squealed, wrapping her arms around his waist.

"Princess!" Michael replied, forcing himself to match her enthusiasm. He knew how to play the part of happy big brother well. Giving the best smile he could muster Michael scooped Eden up in a big hug that left her giggling. "How was your day?"

"It was great! I saw a butterfly today at recess. One of the orange ones that fly to Mexico for the winter. A m-m-something." Eden scrunched her noses as she tried to remember the butterfly's name.

"A monarch," Michael supplied gently.

"That one! It was so pretty." She got this dreamy look on her face whenever she talked about butterflies. It warmed Michael to see her so happy and carefree.

"You have to come see my dance!" She was already tugging on his hand, leading him to the stairs. Michael could hear his father walking through the house, heading for the kitchen by the sound of it. He dimly wondered where their mother was. "Miss Lorn said I was learning really fast and—"

She stopped her rambling suddenly and turned Michael's hand over to look at his scraped knuckles. She looked up him with big, worried eyes. "What happened to your hand?"

Michael knew she was going to ask at some point. The last thing he wanted to do was tell Eden that he lost his temper. He hated lying but he hated the idea of telling her the truth more. “There was this nasty dragon at school today. You should have seen it, E, it was big and ugly and spitting fire! It was going to eat everyone in the school; so I, being your brave and awesome big brother, fought it off.”

Eden gave him a look; that one all little kids give adults when they know they are being talked down to. “Dragons aren’t real Mikey. Everybody knows they’re just a fairytale.”

“Well everyone is wrong, because I totally just fought a dragon.” Michael puffed out his chest, playing the part and getting a giggle out of his sister.

“No you didn’t!” Eden challenged with that sunshine smile.

“Yes. I. Did!” Michael started tickling Eden stomach making the little girl burst into fits of laughter.

The siblings’ fun was interrupted by their mother’s loud voice. “What the hell happened?” She yelled, they could only assume, at their father. “Why did I have to leave work early to get Eden?”

“I had to talk to the principal at the high school about Michael.” Sam started but was quickly cut off.

“Michael? What did he do now?” She sound exasperated.

“He got into a fight. There was this bully—” Sam started again, trying to explain before his wife completely lost reason.

“He’s fighting now! What is *wrong* with him?” Michael felt himself shrink at his mother’s words. The way she talked about him as if he was some malfunctioning computer program that she was getting tired of dealing with.

“Hope, if you would just let me talk—” Sam was fighting to keep himself calm and his voice even.

“This is your fault,” Hope accused. “You’re too soft with them. They think they can get away with anything!”

“Right, because everything that goes wrong in this house is my fault!” Sam, done with being talked over, raised his voice to match his wife’s. Both the children flinched at the anger in his tone.

“They’re fighting again.” Eden whispered, clinging to the sleeve of Michael’s shirt.

“Don’t listen.” Michael turned his back on their parents and herded Eden to the stairs. “Go put on your shoes Princess, we’re gonna go for a walk okay?”

Eden nodded and ran upstairs. Michael sighed, he expected them to start fighting, they always did, but he thought they would at least wait until after dinner.

“He’s your son too!” Sam yelled, it was thunderous, practically shaking the house. “I am not the only one that fucked this up. Take some responsibility!”

“You’re his father, he’s supposed to learn how to be a man from you. Obviously you’re failing at that.” Hope shouted back and Michael couldn’t take this. She was really trying to pass the blame off on his father, as if they didn’t have equal parts in ruining him. Michael wanted to charge in there and scream at them both, curse them for all that they had put him through. But then Eden came down the stairs, clutching her bear and looking close to tears.

“Mikey?” The fear in her voice nearly broke him. Eden was his priority, above everything else. Michael gave her a forced smile, like they couldn’t hear their parents tearing into each other in the other room.

“Sir Bear is coming with us?” He asked as he led his sister out of the house. She nodded, giving the bear a tight squeeze.

“He doesn’t like it when they fight.” She mumbled into the bear’s fur.

“Well, it’s good he decided to join us. We’re going to need all the knights we can get for this quest,” Michael declared, playing up the part again. Eden’s eyes went wide and he could see excitement creeping into her face. “I’ve heard there are trolls in the woods, someone has to make sure they don’t start terrorizing the town.”

“There’s no such thing as trolls!” Eden huffed but Michael knew she was only saying it to get a reaction out of him. If that’s what she wanted then that’s what he would give.

“You wound me, fair princess!” Michael pressed a hand to his chest, playing up the dramatics. “You doubt that I fought a dragon and now you doubt when I say there are trolls. Don’t you trust your knight’s word?”

“Alright, I trust you, Sir Knight.” Eden said in what Michael liked to call her princess voice. “We can go to the woods and look for these trolls.”

“Then let us be off!” Michael took Eden’s hand and started walking to the woods.

“Oh!” Eden said suddenly and stopped. She set down her bear and grabbed hold of Michael’s hand. With utmost seriousness she pulled out handful of bright pink Disney princess and Dora the Explorer band aids. She started applying them to his knuckles, taking special care to cover every scrape but still leaving the princesses and Dora visible.

“Well thank you, my lady, now let’s go find us some trolls.” Keeping Eden distracted was like second nature to Michael. He took Eden into the woods not that far from their home and they spent a few hours exploring and troll hunting. Every time Eden started to look sad or scared

Michael would start telling her a story or chasing after imaginary trolls. He wanted to stay out of the house as long as possible, giving their parents plenty of time to fight it out and cool off.

The sun was just beginning to set when Eden started to complain that she was tired. That's how Michael ended up carrying his sister the whole half a mile home. Almost as soon as they left the woods she fell asleep on his shoulder, her arms tight around his neck and her head pinned between her chest and his arm.

She was still asleep when Michael walked up the driveway to see their father packing things into the car.

"Dad? What are you doing?" Michael saw his father flinch before he slowly turned around to face his children.

"Michael! We were starting to wonder where you guys were." Sam couldn't seem to meet Michael's eye and Michael knew that something wasn't right.

"I took Eden out. She doesn't need to hear you guys at each other's throats." Guilt flickered across his father's face before it was gone. "Why are you packing the car?"

"Your mother—" Sam sighed, struggling with the right words. "We've decided that it might be best for us and for you two if we separate for the time being."

Michael stared at his father for a long moment before it finally clicked. "You're leaving us."

"No!" Sam said quickly, "Just because I'm not living here doesn't mean I'm abandoning you or Eden."

"Then take us with you." Sam's heart lurched, Michael sounded so hurt and Sam knew what this was going to do to his boy. *It's better this way.* That's what Sam kept telling himself.

“Son, I—I can’t do that.” Sam forced the words out as if they physically pained him. He watched as the last little spark of hope fled from Michael’s eyes. Michael nodded, his face hard and expressionless.

Michael wanted to fight. He wanted to scream about the injustice of it all. Their father was supposed to be on their side. He was supposed to protect them from the monsters, not leave them alone with one. Their father was supposed to be the one that stayed. Michael wanted to curse both his parents, to pack all of his things and just walk away from them both forever. The only thing that stopped him was the girl sleeping in his arms.

Michael tightened his hold on Eden and turned his back on his father. It looked like it was just going to be him and Eden now. That was fine, Michael was more than willing to look after his sister alone. He started walking to the house, throwing a simple “Goodbye,” over his shoulder to his father.

“Michael!” Sam tried to call after him but Michael didn’t spare him a glance.

Eden began to stir against Michael’s shoulder. “Mikey?”

“Shh, it’s okay Princess,” Michael soothed. Eden mumbled something sleepily and put her head back down. “Everything is just fine.”

Patrick Page

“The Agony and Joy of Hunting”

The morning started differently from other hunting mornings. I had only had four hours of sleep. If I had only drunk one less beer, I would have slept better. The alarm barked at me through the darkness, jolting me awake, causing me to look for whatever emergency it was that happened to not be there. I reached to shut off the alarm on my phone and looked at the time; it was 4:15 in the morning. Not ready to get up, I laid there in my warm nest for about five more minutes, with my dog resting between my legs looking at me with sleepy eyes, asking me why I had disturbed her dreams of chasing rabbits. I cautiously got out of bed, trying not to disturb the spoiled princess that is my dog, and moved my way toward the door so I could start my ritual of cleansing the stench of the human world off me.

After shutting the door to my room, I started to move with a little more urgency because I was running behind the timeline set in my head. I grabbed towel from the basement that had been washed with my hunting clothes with a special soap the night before, so I would not acquire any unnatural scent. I walked upstairs, jumped into the shower, and began to clean myself. After standing in the shower for a few minutes allowing the water to warm me, knowing that I was about embark on a cold hunt, I dried myself and walked back downstairs where I had left my clothes in the dryer and started to get dressed in as few layers as possible. I double checked the weather to be sure to bring the right clothing to keep me warm. Checking my gear one last time, I loaded my car and pulled away from the curb. This day, the day that would leave me with a nauseous feeling in the pit of my stomach, was under way.

As I drove the thirty-five-minute journey, I visualized my approach to my tree stand. Along the route to my hunting grounds, I was scanning the sides of the road for any signs of the

elusive White-Tailed deer. Seeing nothing, I started to question my instinct that this morning's hunt would be a good. Then, like the universe and mother nature had read my doubting mind, on the second to last turn before my property, there they were, a herd of does eating in a freshly picked cornfield. Their eyes reflected the light from my headlights back at me like stars that had fallen from the sky and landed on the ground. This raised my hopes and reassured me that I knew what I was doing. I sat there and watched them for a few minutes through my binoculars, admiring the beauty and grace with which they moved. This elegant side of nature is why I love hunting White-Tailed deer.

I parked my car, shut off the engine and sat in the silent movement of the darkness around me thinking of my possible encounters on my walk into the woods. A few moments passed; as I opened my door to exit, I was immediately met with a force that nearly ripped off my door. I took a step and forced my door to shut quietly, then moved to the rear of my car. As I opened the rear hatch and started to remove my gear, I heard the sighing, creaking, and moaning of trees straining against the wind, which sounded like a young man being dragged onto a dance floor by his mom. As I meticulously donned my gear, like a soldier getting ready for a patrol, I once again started to doubt my endeavor. The sight of the herd of does just seen flashed through my mind's eye and filled me with the resolve and hope to continue my journey. I double checked my and shut the door, stepping away from the poll barn light and into the stillness of the darkness, letting it surround me.

The walk-in was as slow and methodical with a pace of careful excitement. The rain the night before allowed me to move quicker than normal for the fact that my foot falls impacted the wet ground with soundless precision. Noticing the sights, sounds, and smells of the immediate area that surrounded me, I was developing a picture of my environment and the organisms that

inhabited it. The smell of wet corn, the earth from which it grew, and the worms that feed on the nutrients filled my nose as I trekked through the maze of darkness and sound. Finally, with the relief of a warm bath after a cold challenging work day, I was at the steps of my tree stand without scaring any deer or other animals along the way. With the stealth of a cat tracking a mouse, I slowly moved up my ladder the twenty feet to my stand, clipped myself to the safety strap, and waited an hour and a half before sunrise.

Sitting there in the abyss, I started to slow my heart rate and began to prepare for the show that comes every morning when the world awakens from the long hibernation while the sun is on the other side of the planet. First to be heard would be the movement in the grass as nocturnal mammals head back to the safety of their hides. Just as quietly as it starts, the movements give way to the predatory wings that flap and glide through the night after their prey. Among the chaos can be heard the cry of a Bard owl asking” Who cooks? (pause) Who Cooks? (pause) Who Cooks for yooooooooou?” and the repeat call from the mate. Like a light shining through a cracked door, the sun’s first rays of life start to blanket the earth, awakening the birds, creating an orchestra of songs and movement that make it hard to hear a thought on a quiet day. This however was not a quiet day; the trees’ agony and the wind’s fury drowned this morning’s song.

Just after the sun illuminated the clouds with enough light for me to use my binoculars, I started to glass the corn field and woods in front of me like a ship’s captain looking for land, searching every movement and every hole in between the leaves and stalks, making sure nothing went unnoticed. As I glanced to my right, there she was, a doe, no more than fifteen yards from me, walking into the woods. How had I missed her? From what direction had she come? Those were the questions that ran through my mind as she slowly blended into the surrounding woods

like a drop of rain blends into a puddle. Trying fruitlessly to call her back, I realized that I had missed my chance; she had to have walked so close to me that if she were a snake I would have been bitten.

Sitting there in disbelief, I started to glass the field again, this time a little more cautious of my surroundings and paying closer attention to the last spot I had seen her disappear. Then it happened again, as I dropped my binoculars from my eyes to give them a rest, there she was, another doe, no more than ten yards from me on my left. She had come from behind me, traveling southwest with the wind, walking slowly, looking behind her every four or five steps. “I got her,” I thought, as I started to get in position to harvest her. I slowly stood like grass that rises to greet the warmth of the sun in the morning. The sorrow-filled rush of adrenaline and excitement flowed through my body while I prepared to draw my bow for the ambush. “Oh, fuck!” I thought, “I almost missed him.” I was so focused on the doe that I had not seen the six-point buck slowly walk into my view from the same direction that his prey had come. With his nose to the ground and then in the air like a blood hound tracking an escaped convict, he was following her about ten yards behind her.

A new rush of adrenaline-filled excitement flowed through me causing me to shiver like I was nearing hypothermic levels. I was starting to lose my composure. I slowed my breathing, trying to control any involuntary movement, I watched him as he froze, looked around the area, sensing something was amiss. Squatting his rear legs low, after a few heart beats he reared his head like a dog thrashing with its favorite toy, and continued to follow the doe. I quickly made a deer bleat to stop him again, taking aim while simultaneously drawing my bow with the ease of years of practice. I prepared to take my shot. To ensure he would fall quickly with relatively little pain, I made certain that I was aimed toward the right area of the buck’s body—just a few inches

from the back of his shoulder blade and up about an inch. Slowly, I worked through my check list: make sure my bow is not canted left or right but level; make sure my grip is correct; make sure I am relaxed; take a breath and release it, applying pressure to the trigger on the release. Then, just as I was about to loose my arrow, the wind, which I had forgotten about in all the excitement, forced the tree to which I was attached to move, causing me to become unbalanced and lean, sending the arrow forward deep in the ground just under the bucks belly startled the deer toward cover. I sat there in a sorrow-induced haze contemplating what I could have done differently and how I could have changed the outcome of the situation. Licking my wounded pride like a defeated wolf after a fight for leadership, I descended from the tree stand and made my way to my car.

Once there, I removed some of the layers that I had been wearing, changed my shoes, packed my gear, and started my car. Disembarking the woods in a melancholy mood, I paid less attention to the drive home, only consciously focusing on what was required to drive safely home. Once at home, I sluggishly moved about the house, let my dog outside, and rewashed my clothes. After a quick nap, I showered with a little more vigor than what I had felt before resting. After getting dressed for a second time, I departed for the second half of the day that would inevitably land a solid kick to my stomach and leave me gasping for air.

Arriving at the property for the second time that day, I pushed all that had happened that morning out of my head and, like before, donned my gear, checked and rechecked it, and then set off. Taking more care this time to pay close attention to the damp ground of the path I was on, I looked for fresh signs of the ungulates that may have passed by in my absence. Once I reached the bottom section of my ladder, I looked up to see that the sun was trying to come through the clouds that had worked feverishly to hide it. Sitting in the stand again, I hunkered down and

began the eternal four hour sit until the sun would lay down for the day. Scanning my surroundings, I noticed that the wind's temper tantrum had diminished to just a sob. Glassing the field and woods again, searching for that hint that my prey is nearby, I heard the movement of an animal, to my right, this time twenty-five yards up the hillside from me, walking in my direction.

She had stopped behind a cluster of trees, only exposing her body from the front legs back. Slowly rising from the seat, I prepared my bow for the draw, the second time of the day, and I waited to see what her move was going to be. After what seemed like two eternities, she moved slowly down from behind the trees and began to work her way down the hill toward where I sat. Ten yards out, I tried to stop her so I could get a shot, but the power of her thirst was stronger than my attempt. She stopped five yards from my stand with a picture perfect broad side shot, if you were sitting in a blind. I drew my bow, took aim, and, once again, went through my check list. Preparing to send the arrow in her direction, I paused to make sure I did not have a repeat of the morning, depressed the trigger on my release, and watched as the arrow soared through the air as an eagle soars down to catch a meal. With a thud, the arrow hit the deer, passed through, and stuck in the mud as she ran off.

Excitement quickly filled me; I had just made a shot that felt great! This made up for that morning's debacle, thus filling my freezer with meat for part of the year. Sitting there, waiting the appropriate time before getting down, I glassed the arrow, looking for the signs of a clean hit. At that moment, as I looked at the arrow through my binoculars, my stomach fell the twenty feet to the ground from my stand. There was blood on the fletching of my arrow, but nowhere else. The shaft was covered in a white substance that looked greasy if touched. Quickly, I started to scan the ground in the direction that she took off, looking for signs of a blood trail. There, in the deep green grass, was blood, good in color and plentiful. I got down from my stand after the

thirty-minute wait and walked back to my car. After shedding my harness and layers, and grabbing my rope, light and knives, I headed back to where I had shot her.

Starting at the first sign of blood, I followed every drop and every hoofprint in the search for her. Along the trail, about 50 yards from the shot, I spotted a pool of clotted blood. This was a great sign, I thought, this means that I did have a well-placed shot and she would be close and I could start to field dress her. The sun was dropping fast, and light was getting scarce. I needed to find her fast or be forced to dress her by flashlight. Scanning the area looking for where she laid down, I noticed that the blood continued in the direction I was moving. Following the trail about a hundred yards more, the blood seemed to have evaporated into the cold night air. On my hands and knees, wishing that my eyes would turn into microscopes and my nose would turn into a blood hound's, I painstakingly searched for the next sign of blood, hoping that the trail would turn into the deer I had shot not more than an hour and half ago. The darkness tried to force itself on me as I worked, my head lamp keeping it at bay. My stomach twisting deeper and deeper in to a pretzel as each excruciating minute passed as I searched.

While working to find my prey, the wilderness around me became alive with the chatter and purring of a family of raccoons. The chattering of the group sounded as if they were two rows of corn away from my location, just outside of the reach of my light, and growing closer, as if at any moment they would bust into my sanctuary of light. Continuing my work, I searched for signs that would point me in the direction of travel the deer had taken. There was a feeling in the air that I was being hunted, like every eye that was cloaked in darkness was watching my every movement, looking for a weakness to exploit and capitalize on to win the upper hand. After about twenty yards of a drop here and a fresh print there, the chattering seemed to grow closer and closer at a rapid speed. Quickly, I turned towards the noises and illuminated eight sets of

eyes shrouded in darkness, that were wide with surprise. After I shook some stalks of corn and kicked the ground the eyes disappeared and reappeared as the calls of retreat were sounded while they ran away.

Realizing that my trail had grown cold about thirty minutes ago, I frantically searched in all directions for 200 yards from the last spot of blood for a sign of the deer. Four and half hours had elapsed since I loosed the arrow that had sent me on this fool's errand. As my light grew dim, so did my hopes of recovering the deer. As I stopped my search, my stomach was knotting like a two-year old's shoelace, as it moved toward my throat. With the smell of defeat and regret in the air, surrounding me like a fog, I realized that my shot was not as well placed as I initially thought. The shot was too steep, I wounded her badly (the blood was evidence of that), the arrow could have bounced off her ribs, gravely wounding her but not enough to drop her quickly enough for me to find her, or worse, she is still walking around with a gruesome wound on her side.

Shutting off my headlamp, I gave myself to the darkness. Sitting there, waiting for my eyes to adjust, I noticed the night sky for the first time. The gloom of the day had dissipated and was giving way to a cloudless sky with the Milky Way full of stars stretching into the abyss and beyond. As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, more and more stars appeared in the ceiling. I started to go over the events of the last five hours in my head. Knowing all this heartache and agony that the wounded deer and I had both felt, I obsessed over how it could have been avoided if I had been a little more patient. I could have let her drink the water that she had craved, letting her walk a few more yards away from me. This would have allowed me to make a better, more ethical shot on her. The feeling of accomplishment as I packed my freezer with the harvest could have been mine if only I had waited a few more yards. The shot I could have taken at that point

would have caused her less pain. Hunters do not start to hunt because they enjoy hurting animals; they start because they want to become one with nature, admiring it, appreciating it, respecting it, and sharing it, not damaging it or causing it harm. After losing a deer, I often contemplate hanging up my bow and gear and never going out in to the woods ever again. Knowing that my actions harmed an animal that I did not recover so it could provide for my family and I makes it hard to return. The one thing that lessens the sickness and allows me to continue, is knowing that even though I lost her, she is still providing for nature. The coyotes, eagles, crows, and other natural scavengers and hunters will enjoy the fruits of my spoils. With the fact in mind that the harm or death I was part of still provides, I still wake up early, year after year, day after day, and sneak in to the woods to experience nature at its most pure state.

Joionna Brown

“Inside Out”

Outsides worn like a played out suit
Too loose
Not bulletproof
But it's see through
Inside out
I am beneath you
I am tainted waters
Like a tattoo
predominantly black
Wear the ink, but it wears you
Cracks in society meant for poverty to bleed through
Outside worn like a played out suit.
Outsides skin deep
Razor blade to wounds cut deep
Not me
Slept on, no sleep
What's beneath we don't see
Unable to fit into
Too loose.
Outsides worn for no reason
Society has spoken
Inside, like battling demons
Enslaving ourselves
Treason
Black on black, we still lose
They kill us
We kill ourselves
Not bulletproof.
Society too loose
lethal
Racism back like a sequel
White supremacist
Trump says they're not evil
Quoting “They are good people.”
Society too loose
But it's see through.
“Be Unique”
Past due
You wear yourself, the world tells you not to
SHOUT
“All people are worth it”
But we kill what's different not preserve it

Society
Inside out.
Recycling old habits, like we're meant to
We are different
Don't destroy what's not you
Sameness
Past due
I am beneath you.
I am beneath you
Inside out
But it's see through
Not bulletproof
Too loose
Outsides worn like a played out suit.

Joionna Brown

“Simple”

Implications are nothing to hold onto

Onomatopoeia?

Sound a thing makes

silence defies you.

If glass could shatter

If glass shatters, like paint splatters

broken pieces could gather

platter holding like a bladder,

rather

space and matter,

full of water no splatter.

Implications are nothing to hold onto.

If glass could shatter?

If glass shatters, life would be simple

Like a smile with an unforced dimple.

White walls speak in silence.

If glass shatter, things could be simple.

Glass shatters.....life is simple.

Joionna Brown

“Alone and Broken”

“This is a broken story, with missing pieces. This is a broken story left shattered and scattered. Everything has disappeared and reappeared, but for the sake of this story I will let it stay gone. People like reruns, repeating actions and old habits until their tired or life expires, and they stay gone.

Who knew snow could kill. Taking a part of him away from her, from me, from us. He would play in the snow until he went numb. Until his brain went lame, until his body could no longer feel pain. His brain cells subside, choking more of internalized fear. His senses would grow vivid and his vision would blur. The more he would inhale the less he was in hell. However, snow would kill taking away his soul only to leave his body living.

She gave him the gift of life, if he didn't want it, then she didn't want it. So her body would self destruct day by day. It will squash her organs, making her weak. The Pigment in her skin will be washed away. No one is disposable, but the man who breathed a life under fluorescent lights gave her an expiration date as if she was. His words splintered inside me. Equivalent to the blade of a butcher knife rammed forcefully into my stomach, as it seizes the deepest depths of me. I cried. Cried until my eyes ran dry, until my chest heaved violently.

Words have the tendency to fall out the mouth and die at the feet, but these words took me with them. Melancholy hung over me like a black cloud, drenching me in my personal sorrows. My heart felt as if it were tar making it hard to keep a steady beat. Who knew that words could turn into pain? It was taking me and didn't have the common decency to leave anything more than skin and bones.

Every human life in this mortal plane, but death would be longer than any life and more painful than it had to be. It's not dying that will scare, it's the pain. The pain I was living. The pain I am living. Souls wither away every day, forgetting to tell our bodies that decided to hold on just a while longer.

Feet pounding like a sack of wet concrete. The blistering cold air scrapes my throat as I inhale deeper, faster. My heart and lungs are pumping blood, but air didn't seem to be enough. Suddenly my perception of time distorted, everything slowed down until there was nothing. Nothing left. Nothing left in me, or this empty cycle we call life. I don't want to be anywhere, I just don't want to be myself anymore. I sit in class and look blankly off into space, surrounded by people every day, yet I'm alone. I run, and I run, and I run until I realize that I can't keep trying to escape myself.

So I cry. I breathe in the grayness that sits as if it's the backdrop of my life. And I cry, breathing in the rain that falls from my eyes for no reason at all. I cry, because I am choking, struggling to hold my breath. I cry as my lungs fill with water. I cry as my entire body begins to burn, trying to find the surface. I cry because I am tired of gasping for air. I struggle no more. I cry, my lungs cry and I resign. Resigning from life and everything in it. Resigning from the things not yet mastered. Resigning farther away and faster.

So I cry. Breathing in the art of losing that I've not yet mastered.

Ken Speegle

“David’s Chamber”

“Sometimes a kiss is just a kiss.”

Those seven little words shattered me and is the reason I’m risking what’s left of my marriage, my family, and maybe even my career – not for healing but for simple, brutal revenge.

Friday starts like any other school day. The hours teaching high school social studies pass quickly, followed by a few hours coaching my high school boys basketball team as we lose a nail-biter to the team from the next town over. I get home just as my wife of nine years is returning from her job at the 9-1-1 Dispatch Center in nearby Nauvoo, Illinois.

Relaxing in front of the TV as we fill each other in on our days while we scarf down Chinese takeout, Sarah’s eyes light up as I tell her how close we came to knocking off our archrivals, and how proud I am of my boys.

“You almost got ‘em this time, Travis. Keep working the kids like you have been. I sense a huge Regional victory in your future. I hope your kids realize what a fantastic coach they have!”

I snuggle a little closer to her on the couch and sigh. Even though she hates all sports other than gymnastics, she plays along for me, and I love her for it. She even manages to make it to some of our games when she’s not working.

“I sometimes think they’re doing good to find the gym. Other times, they make me feel like the smartest coach in Illinois, especially when they run the plays the way I draw them up. When things click, they’re good together. I just don’t know if they know how good they can be. Enough about my day, tell me about yours, gorgeous.”

Sarah tells me about a few emergency calls and a big accident outside town that day, then asks how my kids did on their pre-SAT exams. This is her way, constantly shifting the focus back to me. After once again building my self-esteem with an outsized sense of my importance and accomplishments, and how well she thinks my students will do when they take the real SAT in a few weeks, I lean down and gently kiss her.

“I don’t deserve you. Beautiful, talented, and you can see into the future.”

As we talk, Sarah begins running her fingertips up and down my arm, with those little feathery, circular strokes that always drive me wild. She grows quiet before asking, “Do you know *your* future?”

Knowing this is just a tender moment and not a prelude to sex – I misjudged her intent repeatedly the first three years we were married until I learned to scout the signs – I’m content to just be close. I’m more than a little surprised when Sarah mischievously runs her hand up my thigh and says, “Whaddya say, Trav? You wanna?”

Not the most astute guy when it comes to not-so-subtle hints, I catch on pretty quickly for once and take her hands as she walks backward with catlike grace up the steps towards our master bedroom. Three kids into ‘til death us do part, workday sex is out of the ordinary, but is welcome. It’s been awhile.

Sarah pulls me close and kisses me on the steps, then pushes me away so she can pull her shirt over her head, revealing breasts mostly undaunted by the passage of time. As we stumble up the stairs, our hands begin caressing each other, touching, teasing, pleasing, as we desperately try to make it to our bedroom before we give in to our rising passion.

Making our way into the darkness of our bedroom, we help each other undress the rest of the way as only two people who know each other so intimately can. I try to push Sarah onto our

bed when she suddenly spins me around and gives me a hard shove that knocks me off balance. I land hard and she falls on top of me.

“On your back, boy.”

I begin to protest when she covers my mouth with her hand and says, “Shh, don’t talk. Give me the silent treatment.”

Sarah begins moving, slowly at first, then faster. With our racing hearts beating out time, we lose all sense of time and place as we alternate speed and rhythm, letting the moment take over until eventually, too early yet much too late, Sarah cries out as we peak together. She collapses onto me, breathing heavily.

Running her fingers through the hair on my chest, Sarah reaches over me and pulls the blanket from the mostly still made bed over us. Enjoying the closeness of the moment, I can stay this way all night, but my lovely wife has other plans.

Sitting up suddenly, Sarah says, “I have an idea.”

“What’s that, sweetheart?”

After love, I’ll agree to anything. Hell, I’ll break into the Federal Reserve to see if it still has gold if that’s what she wants.

“I’m going to the bathroom to drain. When I get back, let’s throw some clothes on and go for a drive. Just like old times.”

This is weird. I shrug.

“Works for me.”

After a traditional after sex sugar fix that replaces the cigarettes we used to smoke early in our marriage, we’re screaming down the highway in my jet-black Buick, ZZ Top blasting out of the speakers.

A cloudless, crisp night, I drive aimlessly, following the twists and turns of the river road that connects Hamilton and Nauvoo. Content to be serenaded by thoughts of *Legs* and *Cheap Sunglasses*, my thoughts wander.

It begins to dawn on me that Sarah must have planned this night in advance because Chris, Taylor and Paul, our three kids, are spending the night with Sarah's mom. In retrospect, I should have known something was off. I'm blissfully content to enjoy this moment for what it is, though. With three stairstep kids not quite old enough for Junior High, we only occasionally get to steal moments like these for ourselves.

After skirting Nauvoo and turning around by the Mormon Temple, I slowly head back towards Hamilton. Sarah points at an almost hidden scenic hideaway I've never noticed before and says, "Hey babe, pull into *David's Chamber*. I want to show you something."

"David's what?"

"David's Chamber. It's a historical site."

"Hmm, this is a new one to me."

I park in the darkness. Beginning to sense once again that something's a little off, I forget when Sarah says, "Put your seat back. You have to see this."

As I recline my seat, Sarah climbs over the console and slides onto my lap, our bodies intertwined, with her head resting on my shoulder. She points up at the sky. We marvel at how it seems like we can reach through the moonroof and lasso the stars, they're so close.

God, how I miss the carefree days of when we'd do shit like this all the time. We lie there and talk for what seems like hours, our words and the occasional passing vehicle on the highway just behind us the only sounds breaking the almost spiritual silence.

Sensing I'm on the verge of drifting off to sleep, I reluctantly suggest we head home. On the outskirts of Hamilton, Sarah wants me to pull into another pitch-black parking lot, this one a popular launch where boaters and fisherman ease their watercraft into the Mississippi River.

I'd like to say I know something is amiss, but I'd be lying. Something feels a little off, but Sarah is known to occasionally get quirky, spontaneous urges. I'm not a soothsayer and God knows I can't predict the future. I normally have to be hit right between the eyes with stone cold reality before I put things together.

As soon as I park, Sarah gently holds my hand. I look expectantly at Sarah, wondering if she's about to do that little thing she doesn't do very often, that happens only on the bluest of sexual moons.

The only light source is a streetlamp on the other side of the parking lot. It casts an eerie shadow over Sarah's face. Even in the pale light, I can tell she isn't in the mood for a midnight snack. She looks troubled. I begin to worry and don't know why.

"I want you to know how desperately I still love you. It's important you know this because what I'm going to say will hurt – a lot."

Not knowing what she's about to say, I steel myself for the worst. Just before she continues, it occurs to me I haven't asked Sarah about her mammogram earlier in the week. God, I hope she's OK. I don't know what I'll do if anything ever happens to her.

Suddenly fearing the worst, my mind is in a different place as Sarah begins speaking. It takes a moment for my mental gears to shift, from worry for her well-being to what she reveals to my disbelieving ears.

“Babe, I don’t know any other way to tell you this other than to just say it. Since Mark took over as Director of the 9-1-1 center, we’ve gotten friendly. Nothing serious, just smalltalk... at first...”

I listen intently as Sarah speaks, dying inside with each passing moment.

“...He’s funny, not hilarious like you but kind of sweet. A little rough around the edges. At first, I told myself I was just being nice. Before I knew it, we would share takeout lunches locked away in his office, chatting away like old friends. He asked questions about my life, what I would do if I ever found myself single and living far away from here. One day, he kissed me. I can’t explain why but I let him. I knew it was wrong but in that moment there was nothing I wanted more.”

Sensing my pain, Sarah pauses for a moment, tears welling up in her eyes. I don’t know why but I’m morbidly fascinated by her story. It’s almost as if I’m listening to a stranger tell me about her latest fling.

“After that, I kissed him several more times. Usually at work but not always. Mark lives over in Carthage. Sometimes after work, if we left at the same time, he’d follow me as far as Hamilton since it’s on the way. One time he flashed his lights at me. I thought maybe he’d forgotten to tell me something important at work, so I pulled off to the left, into *David’s Chamber*. That’s how I found out about that little spot. That was the first time he kissed me at that spot, after I got into his car to find out what he wanted.”

Shell-shocked by what Sarah is saying, I simply sit there, waiting to hear what other revelations she has to share with me. I’m heartbroken and angry, yet strangely stoic about it all. I’m also on edge, wondering how much more there is to this story.

As Sarah opens her mouth to continue, I brace myself for the inevitable. I don't know how much more my tortured mind can take. Knowing she's about to tell me how she has also been sleeping with Mark, my left hand grips the door handle until the pain gets through to my brain and I relax my grip enough to ease the throbbing I feel in my fingers.

"In case you're wondering, sweetheart, the answer is no."

I looked at her, confused.

"What do you mean?"

"No, I didn't sleep with him. I wanted to – but there's no way I could do that to you. Yes, he kissed me. I kissed him back. But that's about as far as it went."

Still reeling, I begin emotional damage control, struggling mightily to process everything she has said. Unsure what to say, my mouth alternately opens, then closes, several times. I don't want to reveal what I'm feeling but I want to scream in her face, to make her understand how I really feel and how profoundly she has hurt me.

Normally not overly emotional about anything, I struggle with cascading emotions and countless questions. Instead of asking about the details, lashing out at her, or screaming about how badly she's hurt me, I simply sit in silence, letting the dismal news permeate my being.

Sarah looks at me with tears streaming down her face and says, "Talk to me, sweetheart. Say something, anything."

I desperately want to shake her, to make her understand what I feel inside, how my will to live, to exist, is drifting into the night like cigarette smoke on a breezy night. Just when I think I'll be able to speak, I look into her eyes again and I see equal parts guilt and anguish.

Sarah's pain becomes my pain. Through it all, I remember the young lady I fell in love with more than a decade before. The one who once rescued a stray cat and hid it in her bedroom,

smuggling food up to it so it wouldn't starve to death or freeze to death outside in the bitter cold.
I want to absorb her pain like an airbag does the force of a car crash.

I'm overcome with love for my wife, not animosity or hatred. I want nothing more than to forget this night ever happened. So, I do what feels right, right now.

I lie.

"It's OK, babe. I think I understand. I don't like it, but I understand."

Seeming relieved at my understanding, Sarah rests her head on my chest, sobbing uncontrollably, clutching me like she does when she sometimes wakes from a nightmare and needs to be held. Every convulsion of her body cries out to me for absolution.

I don't understand, not yet. There's time for that later. Right now, my wife needs her best friend. There's time to learn details and unsort my convoluted emotions later.

Most of my residual anger is gone as Sarah looks at me through tear-soaked eyes reflected by the streetlight and says, "Sweetheart, can you ever forgive me? I am so sorry... more sorry than I've ever been about anything in my life. If you forgive me, I swear to you, I'll live the rest of my life making this right – making you believe in me again. I've learned why I love you and what I have to lose. You, the kids... our life together..."

She trailed off.

The truth is, I *don't* understand. None of this makes any sense. Before the anger and hurt can bubble up again, the rational part of me that works overtime to maintain an even keel takes over. It'll take some doing but I think I can handle this.

Beginning to sob again, she simply said, "I love you."

If Sarah needs me to be her rock, then by God that's what she'll get. We've invested everything in each other, clinging to each other when everyone said we married too young and

that we were a train wreck waiting to happen. I hold her tight to let her know that nothing between us has changed, that I'm still the same man she married, that I'll protect her from her pain – and if necessary, from herself.

Seeming relieved that I understand, Sarah then opens her mouth and says something that haunts me to this day: “Sometimes a kiss is just a kiss.”

My mind recoils from Sarah's words. A kiss is just a kiss but not when you're married. Especially when it's with someone else.

I'm emotionally spent and overwhelmed by the day. As we start home, my mind drifts from Sarah and the pain she's feeling, to my pain, then back to Sarah again. Just before pulling into our driveway in Hamilton, I realize something.

Mark is walking away from this, a winner. He's a lucky man, getting through this unscathed.

Everything isn't OK after all. No indeed.

Things may never be the same again between my wife and me. In fact, I'm nearly convinced. It's not every day a man learns that his seemingly perfect wife is anything but. If you've ever been down Infidelity Road, you understand how treacherous navigation is. I quietly adjust my narrow six-foot frame in my seat, and I begin to plot my revenge.

Not against my wife, the most obvious person I should be pissed at. Even though this may change later on, right now, I see Sarah as a sympathetic figure, the hapless victim of an out of control, sex on the brain, Don Juan coworker.

I can almost feel the pain Sarah felt as she shared some of the details of what's been happening with Mark McIntire.

Even though I've never had such a visceral response to anything before, above all, I want to make everything all right for Sarah, to absorb some of her pain and make our family whole again. Because this is what I do.

For this to happen, I need an outlet for my emotions. This demands something primal, a down payment on my healing process. I need this if there's any way I can salvage my life.

It is in this moment I have an epiphany. Mark will be the target of my frustration.

I have to heal, too. Just a little differently than Sarah.

A kiss might be just a kiss in the end.

But Mark will pay dearly for my wife's sweet kisses – and for convincing my loving, faithful wife to temporarily forget her marriage vows and risk her marriage and my happiness.

Mark and I will get to know each other well – much better than he has probably ever considered.

Because vengeance is mine. And I will have it.

Sarah and I silently walk into the house and begin getting ready for bed.

* * *

After the day I've had, I expect sleep to come easily. It doesn't. Instead, with Sarah fitfully sleeping beside me, I lay in bed, mulling over everything I've learned tonight. My beautiful, dutiful wife has done something I've never considered possible.

Struggling mightily to think dispassionately about Sarah's relationship with Mark, I suddenly remember an article I read recently. I mentioned this strange new creation, the emotional affair. It's strange how fast my perspective has changed. When I read the article, I

laughed to myself about how silly it is to get upset over something as simple as a kiss. On this side of the article, I feel differently.

Sharing one's innermost feelings, things they ought be sharing with their life's partner, and swapping spit but not bodily fluids is supposed to somehow make me feel better. It doesn't. Angry, bitter, painful tears well up. I swipe them away. I can't afford to let weak emotions interrupt the task at hand. I'm angry and I will be for a little while. I need to feel deeply, to let my heart scream out for revenge, to know what it's like to live on the edge of vengeance.

I keep getting sidetracked by questions. Has Sarah told me everything? Has she actually screwed the guy, rutting around like pigs in the mud in a cheap little motel room in Nauvoo? Will I ever know?

Just as importantly, what about Mark, who lands a new job as the Coordinator of the 9-1-1 Dispatch Center, then immediately put the moves on my wife? How much fucking game does this guy have if he can convince a seemingly happily married woman to confide her deepest, darkest secrets to him, then start sucking face... or more?

I begin feeling guilty. I think some of my thoughts could land me in jail in some places. It damn sure isn't politically correct. Sarah isn't my property, she's my wife. I'm not sure what my line of thinking says about the kind of guy I am on the inside, where nobody can see.

My thoughts linger on Mark and whether it is fair for me to want to even the score with him even though my wife has been an equal party to this affair.

Near dawn, I decide a couple of things. First, I don't give a fuck what my revenge on Mark says about me. The pain I feel has to be paid for by someone. If there's one thing I've learned, justice isn't always fair. If someone needs to pay the price for a problem between a man

and a woman, everyone knows it's the dick's fault. Since I've already given enough through my pain, Mark will have to be the sacrificial lamb in the act of vengeance I am planning.

Even though my coaching job is dominated by alpha types, I've always considered myself a little more beta than alpha, intellectual and sentimental, but with a hard-scrabbled inner voice who says all kinds of stuff, big, bold words that never leave my head.

I'm the kind of guy who never forgets birthdays, always says "I love you" and is certainly not the type to get into physical confrontations – ever.

Deciding there's a first time for everything, I think I have enough anger and brute strength to get in Mark's face in a full-on confrontation. Without meeting Mark, I sense I'm just mad enough to deliver the kind of beat down that will let him know in no uncertain terms that my wife is off-limits to him, no matter how much he might want her.

As I lie in bed thinking, my anger builds again, rising to a crescendo that demands release. Right or wrong, I know what I have to do – for me.

For all the times in my life I've done the right thing, where I've let things go even when I don't want to, where I've behaved exactly as expected, where I've taken the proverbial road less traveled.

It's time for me to test drive my anger on a different road, one paved with revenge and – for once in my life – a response that far exceeds what anyone would think me capable of considering, much less delivering.

A quick glance at the clock confirms what the early morning light seeping through the curtains suggests: I've worried, plotted and schemed away the night. After quietly showering and dressing, I slipped out the door and head towards Carthage, to scout out Mark's house and deliver a care package of revenge.

* * *

Several hours later, I park on the street across from Mark's house. Finding the house is much easier than I imagined. \$39.95, a couple of swipes and taps on my mobile phone, and I have his address.

Feeling a little guilty for acting like a stalker, I hunker down in the driver's seat of my car, hoping I don't attract too much attention. It wouldn't look good for a high school teacher and coach to be arrested outside the home of the man my wife has been seeing. I'd have no ready response if asked why I'm suspiciously parked there on the street.

I don't want anything to derail my plans. If I'm careful, I can slip into Mark's garage, beat the shit out of him and leave, undetected. At least, I hope I can. If I can't, the rest of my world will unwind.

Mark can come up with a cover story for his wife. He can tell her anything he likes as long as he leaves my name out of it. He's the one who's been fucking around with my wife. The least he can do is use his imagination for something worthwhile, something that might even save his marriage and his worthless ass.

Just then, Mark walks out of his house and into his front yard. The first thing that leaps out at me is how big he is. I realize my mind's eye played a cruel trick on me when I was safely tucked away in my bedroom dreaming about revenge. I had pictured him as a dude I could easily take, one who would be unable to withstand the violent beating I'd give him. The man I see fire up a cigarette in his front yard has a full six inches and 50 pounds on me.

There's no fucking way I can take this guy.

Most of the fight evaporated from me. There's no way I can pummel this guy. It would take more than I can bring. I might be able to kill him but I'm not the killing type. For Christ's sake, I'm a high school teacher. Taking a gun or other lethal weapon and using it as a means of ultimate punishment, as death's taxicab, just isn't my style. Maybe if I'm defending my family. Not this way.

No matter how much I hurt or how desperately I want to forever alter the landscape of Mark's life, killing him just isn't an option.

My mind reeling from my sudden rediscovery of my true beta nature, I start the engine and drive away, disgusted with myself and my weakness. Vengeance might be mine, but it's a worthless possession unless I can find a way use it.

Driving home, I think about my options. I don't want to let it go, I can't. Not without at least trying to take him. My mind keeps circling back to the undeniable truth of my beta weakness. Walking through my garage on the way into the house, I stop in my tracks. The answer to my strength problem is propped against the wall next to the door that leads into the house.

My son's shiny, rarely used, aluminum baseball bat. I chuckle softly. I realize I've leveled the playing field and significantly improved my odds of success.

Maybe I can't miraculously gain 50 or 60 pounds in a day. I can, however, mitigate Mark's weight and height advantage. I flip the bat in the air, catch it, and take a practice swing. This should work nicely.

Parked down the street from Mark's house, this time at a much safer distance, I wait patiently and think about what I'm about to do. As a coach, I know how important it is to not just have a game plan, but one that considers most scenarios.

I may not be able to account for everything, but I can minimize the chances that a fuckup will cost me my freedom. Lost in my fantasy of beating Mark to within an inch of his life, I watch as a boy of about 12 comes out of Mark's house and runs across the street, then returns. He must be Mark's son.

After the boy goes back into his house, I can't help but wonder about the relationship this kid has with his dad. His dad might be a dickhead, but no kid deserves to see their dad after getting the epic beatdown I plan to deliver with my son's bat.

My blood runs cold as the ramifications of what I'm planning sinks in. I'm going to commit a felony with my kid's bat. A felony that might very well hospitalize another kid's dad – or worse.

Using a bat with my son's fingerprints on it.

What if I can't stop beating him once I start? Or, God forbid, Mark manages to wrest control of the bat from me. I could be badly hurt, which would expose all kinds of dark secrets to my own kids that I'd just as soon keep to myself.

I howled in rage at my dilemma. Fuck my life!

My revenge requires a brutal response, yet here I sit, debating the finer points of my pussification. In other words, a return to the normal me.

I need to think this through. No, I don't. I can't do this.

Finally at peace with the idea that I won't be able to commit felonious assault or aggravated battery (is this what they call what I've been considering?) my mind carefully weighs options.

A brutal response is out of the question. Unless...

Finally, I know what I'll do. It will be brutal. It will also probably keep me out of jail if things go south. If I'm lucky.

I watch Mark's house, and I wait. Patiently.

Five minutes after Mark drives off in the other direction, I confidently point my car towards his house, and think about parking on the street before boldly parking in his driveway. After ringing the doorbell, I wait, like a kid with a secret he can't wait to share. Moments later, a gentle faced woman with some of the kindest eyes I've ever seen answers the door.

"Mrs. McIntire?"

She nods her head affirmatively and says, "What do you want?"

"My name is Travis. I have something to tell you about your husband. I'm truly sorry but what I have to say is going to hurt – a lot. May I come in for a moment?"

She unlocks the screened door and holds it open for me and I step inside. She sends her son to his room so we can talk, then offers me a seat.

Brutality takes on different forms. No less satisfying than leaving a man bleeding in the street or on the floor of his garage, my decidedly non-violent method of revenge will still be brutally painful to Mark.

When he returns home, life as he knows it will forever change.

Something Mark's wife said while I was in his house haunts me.

"He's done this before. When I took him back, he swore he'd never hurt me or the kids again. He said he'd live the rest of his day making it up to me," she said.

"I'm done. The bastard is on his own."

I climb into my car, satisfied that vengeance is nearly, neatly, infinitely complete. Mark's wife has picked his punishment, will control the timing, and will slowly let him roast in his own anguished juices.

I do feel bad for Mark's son. But I feel infinitely better than I would if the boy had found his dad lying in the garage in a puddle of blood.

As I back out of Mark's driveway and head home, I pass Mark about a block away from his house. He is blissfully unaware of what is about to happen when he walks through the door of his house.

I smile to myself.

"Mark, buddy, you don't know me, but I know you. Your wife has something to tell you about your future. I'm truly sorry but what she has to say is going to hurt – a lot."

I begin whistling.

Sarah and I will have challenges.

I need to tell her what I've done.

I'm sure she'll be pissed and maybe a little hurt.

I like our chances of working through this challenge a lot better now than I did yesterday.

After the last day or so, I know much more than I did about life, love, and creative solutions to overwhelming hurt. Some men will fly off the handle, others will leave a marriage.

I'm a fighter, just not from the usual mold.

Now that it's done, my life is infinitely more complicated. But it's also simpler.

I've learned a thing or two about breaking bad news. I think I'll find a different way to tell Sarah about this.

Before I go home, I think I'll drive by *David's Chamber*. I think it's a little messed up that Sarah chose this spot to share an intimate moment with me. Maybe one day I'll ask her about it.

For now, my trip to *David's Chamber* has one purpose: a celebratory, primal scream of... renewal. I'm reclaiming what is mine.

It's not perfect but it ain't bad.

Jazzy Thomas

“She’s a Hot Girl “

“SHIT”, was the only statement that came to Icy’s mind as she sat on the street curb waiting for officers to finish ransacking her truck. It was a sunny Saturday afternoon during the middle of June, her birthday was 7 days away and it appeared to Icy that trouble kept finding her. Today’s plan was supposed to be simple, go pick up her custom-made dress, head downtown to Michigan Avenue to the Givenchy store and buy a pair of shoes, make her drop and head back home for the day. This traffic stop delayed the last of her plans. She tried to play it cool because she had a secret compartment added to her 2015 Range Rover a few months back, it was hidden in plain sight right above the glove compartment on the passenger side. A 22-year-old Black girl driving a luxury car that no regular CPD officer could afford, would surely raise suspicion. Since Icy wasn’t some privileged offspring of a bourgeois couple, nothing about her lifestyle made sense to a spectator from the outside looking in. Cops were always on her ass, pulling her over at every opportunity they got. That shit didn’t bother her, she felt as though she’d been marginalized her entire life, so all forms of attention was good attention, and would fulfill her constant urge to be seen. After about 15 minutes of searching, one of the cops returned to the squad car while the other approached Icy. She proceeded to stand.

“Well Ms. Lola, I guess this was a misunderstanding” said the officer, He slide her ID between his two fingers as if he was going to flick the card at Icy. He leaned in “What’s a *mutt* like you doing around these parts anyway? Englewood doesn’t belong to your kind anymore” The other officer walked back to where the two were standing. Icy stood 2ft in front of the officer staring him directly in the eyes, the other officer approached with his hand on his gun and interrupts the stare down.

“We have a call to take on 69th and Halsted, let’s go, were done with this *mutt*.”

“*Mutt?*” Icy shouted back in an inquisitive tone. Right before she was about to go off on the officer she received a notification on her Apple watch. She glanced down to check it, and then looked back at the officer. “Can I go now?”

“Sure,” replied the officer, “next time signal before your turn”. She scoffed and grabbed the ID. As she sat in her truck waiting for the police to pull off she responded back to the notification she received earlier. “On my way” was the simple message she sent to Bryant before tossing her phone into her purse and pulling off.

As she drove down 63rd Street, it baffled her to see what gentrification had done to the streets of Englewood. There were two Chipotles and four Starbucks within a six-mile radius, white women with Michael Kors and Coach bags crossing the street on 63rd and Halsted to enter the grand opening of a Whole Foods. *What in the entire fuck*, she thought: These are the same streets I fought to survive in, and now it’s yuppie central Tssh unbelievable, and I bet those purses aren’t even from a department store. It was a bitter sweet thing for Icy, the land that bred her to be the cold hearted, money hungry ambitious girl that she is, now no longer exist. She awaited the day she could pull into the hood and show off her success, but the hood wasn’t the hood anymore. Everyone had been displaced and shuffled to different parts of the city. She pulled into a Starbucks on 87th right before the E-way and ordered a large chai tea latte with almond milk and three sugars. As she sat in the drive thru she freshened her matte nude lipstick by Mac and teased her fresh cut, loosely curled bob.

She froze as she reached to pull up the visor mirror. “*What’s a mut like you doing around these parts?*”. The officer’s statement rang in her ears again. Locking eyes with her reflection, Icy broke into tears. Not often did she get to cry, not half as often as she fought back

tears. She was soft on the inside, very insecure about her looks and she clung tightly to others opinion about her, she desperately sought love and acceptance from people. The two statements she's became numb to were "you're cute for a dark skin girl", and "you must be mixed with something" indeed those phrases no longer phased her, the term *mutt* was rare, so it was still painful. That term clung to Icy tighter than the 500-dollar romper she wore.

Icy, who was legally named Lola Armiley Carter, received her nick name partially from her physical appearance, the other from her later accumulated personality traits. She was 5'5 with a medium brown complexion. She had natural bleach blonde soft curly hair, and deep sky-blue eyes. Her mom started called her Icy as a child because she said reminded her of Siberian huskies running through the snow mountains of Alaska. She had a small, round nose, medium lips that had a natural dark lip line around them. The line was so perfect it was as if God took his time drawing the lines, they complemented any shade of lipstick she used. At 140 pounds, Icy was thick in all the right places, plus her condo building had a Gym for residents so she frequented there often, at least three times a week focusing in on core and legs.

Icy is snatched from her trance by the sound of the blaring horn from the car behind her. She looked up and saw the cashier hanging from the drive thru window signaling her to move up. She paid for her 6.00 drink with a \$20, paid for the car behind her, and left the rest as a tip.

Fifteen minutes later she arrived at Bryant's brownstone in Bronzeville. A beautiful two-story home with a modern Victorian style. After parking her truck, she hit the secret compartment, grabbed a brown paper bag with 2800.00 worth of coke in it and stuffed it into her purse. Before she could reach out to knock on the front door, it opened. Bryant stood behind the door anxiously, "Damn took you look enough and why you didn't use the back door?".

“Because Jim Crow died back when I stopped giving a fuck about your wife” she shot back.

“You need to chill. You got the shit?”

“Of course, I got the shit, How’s Vickie anyway”? She placed the brown paper bag on the stand that was positioned under the coat hooks by the front door. She turned to sit her purse on the stand as Bryant reached for the bag.

“I thought we agreed not to talk about my wife anymore.” Bryant said.

“Yeah, we did, ‘Icy replied’, but that was last time, and we made quite a few promises to each other last time.” She grabbed the brown bag from the table and put it back in her purse. Bryant approached her. He grabbed her tightly by the waist and pulled her in.

As they made their way to one of the guest rooms, Icy stopped in the hallway and started to chuckle, she passed a portrait sized wedding photo of Bryant and Vickie.

“What’s funny?” Bryant asked.

“I just find it funny how fuckboys justify their actions. You’re completely down for cheating on your wife in her house, but audaciously, got the decency to fuck in the guest room.”

Bryant exhaled, “Damn Icy that mouth of yours would fuck up a wet dream. You got a brother feeling bad and shit.”

“Guess not bad enough for you to turn this down and send me home,” she hastily replied as she dropped her in season Burberry catalog romper and stood naked. The foreplay started to get intense.

The housing alarm system cried out a series of beeps. Completely captured in the moment, neither heard the front door being opened. Vickie silenced the alarm using the code. She set her keys in the bowl on the stand and approached the bottom of the stairs, she placed her

hand on the pillar for balance while taking off her 6inch Louboutin's. She called out for Bryant from the bottom of the stairs.

“Bryant!” she took four steps, then called out again, “Bryant!”

The second time he heard her loud and clear. Bryant jumped up in a panic unaware of what to do, his heart was beating fast. This would be the second time he was caught cheating, and with the same girl. Bryant and Icy were very well acquainted. It was Bryant and Icy's affair that landed the couple and the mistress back into the city of Chicago. Bryant was an established professor at an Ivy League University in Atlanta and his wife was a district attorney in the same city. Both were Chicago natives who built a prosperous life away from the place that the wife hated so much but the husband considered home. It all began to go down the drain when Bryant picked back up on his coke addiction. He relapsed because he was unhappy with his life at that moment. After his wife received the promotion to be the district attorney for the state's second largest department, their marriage fell apart. Vickie became so career oriented that she forgot she was married, there were times she would be so involved with work that she never made it off the couch and into bed before she would fall asleep. One time, for a week straight Vickie slept on the couch just so she could do work and not disturb Bryant.

“Yeah babe, Bryant yelled from behind the closed room door.

Icy moved swiftly and quietly around the room gathering her items, preparing to hide in the closet.

“I'll be down in one second I'm wrapping something up” Bryant replied to Vickie.

“And what the fuck am I going to do? How are you getting me out of here? I mean, I don't mind waltzing down the front steps, but to save you some alimony and my fresh manicure we need a better plan.”

“Where’s the bag?” Bryant asked.

“Over there on the dresser,” Icy started to get irritated. “Fuck those drugs, I’m tryin to get out of here.”

“That’s the only way to get you out.” Bryant said.

“How so?”

“If I do a line of coke and go down stairs, she’ll know I’m high and fly off the handles,” he exhaled. “I’ll just lead her into the kitchen and we’ll argue in there. Wait at the top of the steps. The moment you hear me slap my hands on the table, you leave out, I’ll be sure to keep her in the kitchen.”

Tears started to form in Icy eyes, “But” she dropped her head.

“That’s the only option we have. If Vickie catch you here, its more than just a fist fight. She’s going to place those phony charges on you and of course divorce me. I rather go face her high and possibly sleep on the couch for months than to risk your freedom.”

Icy’s spirit was broken, and she instantly began to blame herself. Earlier she said that she was just going to come make the drop and leave. Bryant was so irresistible to Icy that temptation was always stronger than both their self-disciplines combined. He wasn’t the average philosophy professor. A younger Black male with a Jawline chiseled by Picasso, he had white teeth that stood out brightly compared to his dark complexion, he had the body of a Greek God. At 6’3, 200 pounds he had a physique that every man dreams of. He had a fine texture of thick black hair that was low cut, his hair resembled the ocean in the way his 360 waves drifted from the top of his hair line, to the nape of his neck. He was muscular with a sex appeal that not many women could deny. Icy and Bryant were not amateurs at the cheating game, but this escape plan was the most dramatic. Bryant had been clean from his coke addition for a year. He only copped from

Icy because, he was the connect for his colleagues at the university where he currently was tenured and Icy is his plug.

“You are my freedom. The only living thing on this earth that loves me unconditionally. What is more freeing than that?” Icy said as the tears formed behind her eyes.

The two met back in Atlanta at the end of Icy’s sophomore year of college. She was enrolled in a big philosophy lecture class taught by Bryant. One day, a few officers came into Bryant’s office inquiring about Icy and her character, asking Bryant if he could provide information on who Lola Carter was. The visit from the officers really intrigued Bryant. He knew who Icy was by face and name, on the first day of class when he seen her he thought: *Woah, she’s gorgeous*. After the police visit, it was a week before Icy returned to class, that made Bryant even more interested in finding out who this girl really was. Bryant pulled Icy to the side after class. That next week, they scheduled a time to meet during his office hours. After the first meeting with Icy, Bryant mind was blown, in all his studies he had never been introduced to a creature of more fascination than Icy. From her physical appearance to her mind frame, he felt a sense of urgency in getting to know her. They both decided to continue meeting weekly outside of the university to prevent any suspicions.

It was after Icy’s first semester at the University that she learned how much rich kids were willing to spend on drugs. She soon found out what was in demand on her campus, and she supplied it to all. And, no, she wasn’t doing it because she wanted to pay her way through school, Icy was there on a full ride. She did it because she saw it as an opportunity to obtain things she never had, the material things that come with glamor and success. Selling drugs didn’t bother her morally at first. She saw no wrong with it, she figured someone was going to sell it anyway why not her. But, she turned a new leaf when she came to Chicago, she stopped selling

drugs directly and became a wholesale distributor. She figured it would lessen her load on the way to hell if she didn't sell directly to the humans who were using.

Bryant formed a line from a small amount of coke that he shook from the bag.

“Don't do this please. If you do I'll leave you, like leave you forever, for good, I can't watch you throw away your sobriety like this. Not again, because this time I'll know for sure that I am the origin of your down falls. Prove me wrong. Find another way” she cried.

“Origin? No baby, I have been battling my demons long before I met you. If anything, you are my salvation, that's why you have to let me do this.” Bryant said.

The two became silent as pain crept over them like a wave of warm air suffocating them past the point of speech. Icy flashed backed to the day she was expelled from her school in Atlanta. That day Bryant and Icy had met at a sushi house in Buckhead, it was 10 minutes away from where Icy lived in Georgia, and 25 minutes away from the University. So, it was safe for them to be in public, or so they thought. After the two finished their meal and unknowingly having pictures of them taken, they left the restaurant to go back to Icy's house to talk. The two were unaware that they were being followed, and that the both of them had an open investigation pending. Someone tipped the police about Bryant's newly found hobby of dealing, and it just so happen to be ironic that Icy was one of his students. Detectives on the case opened a joint investigation, and in support of their suspicions, Icy and Bryant were connected. With the suspicion confirmed detectives had enough evidence to have the district attorney ask the judge for a search warrant. The detectives called the DA immediately and was told that they would be able to receive the search warrant within an hour. The district attorney was a powerful Black woman named Vickie McCauley, although she had just recently received her promotion, she had connections high up

and everywhere. This was her first case as a DA, she had been tracking this Lola Carter since the change in her position.

Back at the apartment Bryant and Icy had just finished having sex.

“You want a drink?” Icy asked Bryant.

“Nah I really should be going, Vickie will be home soon”. He looked down at his phone and saw a notification from his wife Vickie. He decided to check it because he had been ignoring her a lot lately. The message said that she would be home later tonight because she had a case she was about to close. Filled with joy, Bryant locked his phone and sat it down. He walked over to icy and grabbed her from behind.

“Actually, I’ll take that drink. What you got?” Bryant asked.

“Well, I have some 60-year-old scotch, week old Hennessy, and hard lemonade in the fridge.”

“I’ll take the hard lemonade, you have scotch that’s older than the both of us combined, whew must be nice. Your student loans aren’t due yet, so I guess you can afford that” Bryant Joked.

“Well, we can get you some if you let me add a few more clients to your list”

“No babe, I told you ill be out of dealing soon, once I finished paying off that Brown Stone for us in Chicago”

Bryant was madly in love with Icy because she brought fire back to his life. He realized this after finding out that she would be expelled for selling drugs on campus. Bryant decided to buy a home for him and Icy so that they could escape Atlanta together, he was going to leave his wife. After Icy got the drink for Bryant from the fridge she went into her safe to get his package of coke.

“Here, its best if I give it to you now because it may slip our minds later.” Icy Said.

“You’re right, because all I can think about is you” Bryant said.

The two laughed, then suddenly someone started banging on Icy’s door. “APD! Open up, we have a search warrant.” The two stood there half dressed in shock, Bryant began to panic he grabbed the drugs and tried pouring them into the sink, and to his surprise the water supply in the house was cut off.

“Fuck, that’s not going to work, this was a planned raid, they shut the water supply off so I can’t flush or drain. I have two more pounds of that coke in my room” Icy Said.

“Throw it out of the window.” Bryant replied.

“Yeah, only thing about that is were on the 15th level, with floor to ceiling windows, they don’t open fool.”

“Shit, were going to jail” Bryant voice was shaky.

“No, we’re not, I’ll sit in jail for 8 hours because I’ll take the rap, I just need you to call my lawyer and have him bail me out” Icy said.

“I can’t let you take the fall for this” Bryant said sternly.

The police knocked again.

“Look you have more to lose, I’m young, no priors, great lawyer. Ill get a slap on the wrist, if any time its going to be less than 6 years, I’ll be out before 3. Plus, overall, they are my drugs, at my house. You tell them you were unaware of my habits, just here for sex.” Icy said.

Before Bryant could agree or disagree with the plan, officers kicked the door in and made there way into the house. Yelling orders for the two to sit on the couch with their hands behind their head. Officers put the two half naked lovers in cuffs as the searched the rest of the home.

An officer walked out of the room with the two pounds of coke Icy had stashed, at the same time the DA walked in the front door.

“Vickie?” Bryant said confused. Vickie looked over and when she saw Bryant she fainted. Icy snapped out of her flashback.

This was reciprocity at its finest. Bryant rolled the dollar bill, putting one end at the opening of his nostril, the other end at the start of the line of coke. Bryant held his left nostril down and took a deep inhale while making a swipe motion across the line. His head rushed. Icy’s heart stopped. Nothing could be said. They looked each other in the eye. Bryant wiped the residue from his nose and walked out of the room, leaving the door open behind him. Down in the kitchen, Vickie was checking her emails on her iPad and enjoying a sangria when Bryant walked in. Icy was positioned at the top of the stairs, the two in the kitchen exchange a few statements, and seconds later Icy heard a glass being thrown at Bryant. It missed him and hit the wall.

“You stupid asshole” Vickie Screamed. “You’re high right now!” Vickie Rushed into Bryant, he blocked her and moved closer to the kitchen counter. Vickie found her balance and aimed for him again.

“How selfish could you be, you’re right back getting high after my whole life was tossed down the drain for your addiction. I’m literally in the pit of hell, in trashy ass Chicago, with a lower position in life now all because of your fuck ups.” Vickie said.

“Don’t put this on me I NEVER asked you to come back here! I wanted a divorced, I wanted to leave and come here. It was you that decided to honor the part about death do us part.” Bryant shouted.

“So, is this your cowardly way of getting a divorce? You purposely throw you sobriety away to break free, as I remember you said till death do us part as well. I didn’t force you, you took vows at your own will.” Vickie said.

“I’m not sorry to say, but, your career was death of our marriage, that’s what did us part. You became cold, isolated, you lost the fire that sparked me into being a better man. What I needed was your warmth, nothing else just you. My girl on fire from the Englewood district.”

Victoria paused in utter confusion, especially since she wasn’t from Englewood. She didn’t understand a word Bryant was saying, the Hunger Games analogy threw her for a big spin. That’s because the statement wasn’t for her, it was for Icy. Icy knew exactly what that meant, the first date her and Bryant shared was at the premier of “Catching Fire”. It was the second film based on a series of books Icy loved. Bryant saw many similarities in the main character that matched characteristics of Icy.

“Just remember that, I will always love you, may the odds be ever in your favor”. Bryant said as his voice cracked. Bryant slapped his hands down on the counter. Icy wiped a tear that was preparing to fall, she sped down the steps and out of the door. As she closed it quietly, she stood there for a moment holding the door knob in her hand, something couldn’t let go. Vickie and Bryant started to argue again.

Koyo Masore

“Paraphrased Predicament”

Plenty propositions,
plan paragraphs.

Place pen on paper
pen on proofs.

Possibly put pointless pieces,

Pieces of puzzles
Pieces of people,

Points on pieces of paper.

Probable postulates pop from the performer,
pre-formed by the poet.

Powerful pieces of poetry
perpetuated by on point penpoints.

Pursued by perusing persons
partaking in publicizing pieces.

People pinpoint possible penpoint parables
praise poetic patterns.

Preposterous presents,
presented to placate populations.

Plenitude of platitudes
passed on from preacher to teacher
pretend to place power to pretentious preachings,
place priority on spacing and pacing,
place priority on rhyming and timing.

Not on purpose.

Purposeful poets
playing our preconceptions
procreate possibilities.

To what poetry could be

Jason Cummins

“Shame in His Eyes”

I take the keys out of my father's hand. He gripes them tighter, stumbling and falling towards me. He is sweating profusely and flushed bright red. The smell of whiskey from his body, and the smoke from that murky bar is empowering. I get those keys and lead him into the front seat of the truck. I am sixteen and have thankfully just gotten my driver's license, though I have been driving him home drunk from bars for much longer than that. In a small town, the cops tend to look the other way. They know about our family. Our family stays in the shadows of the town, but people whisper. My father's head hangs down, willing himself not to vomit. I pray he doesn't get sick in my truck. It is a cold December, the week after Christmas. There is still snow on the ground as it had been a white Christmas. The twinkly lights displayed in windows in our small town seem to be teasing me as I deal with the disgusting smells in my truck. We get home, and mom is still at work. Step by step, I have to shoulder a portion of his 200 pound weight to get him into bed. As he lays down, I see the look of shame in his eyes. He will remember the shame in the morning, but it isn't enough to make him change.

I know early on that all families were not like ours. I would go to friends' houses for dinner after sports practices. Other dads would read the newspaper at the kitchen table. Other dads could hold down jobs and not sleep all day. In my town, sports were everything. I was accepted into the popular crowd because I was a good athlete. That was the only reason I was welcome, but I never really belonged. I was an outsider to the good families. I was an outsider in my own home, as I was powerless to stop my dad's actions. I always felt alone, and always, always ashamed.

It is late autumn, and my senior year football team had made the play-offs. There was so much energy in the air that Friday. I walk through the halls feeling unstoppable, wearing my varsity jacket and having my girlfriend by my side. I was invincible. The locker room smells of sweat as the boys pad up. Nelly music thumps through that room, creating a soundtrack for our 2001. The cheerleaders and marching band fill the night with their school spirit. We claim a victory that night, making play after play, under the bright lights. It was the best night of my life, until I see my dad in the stands. Again, I am different than every other player that has just won tonight. I was scared of my own father, always walking on eggshells. I never knew if he would be my quiet dad that was kind, or the drunken dad that couldn't walk straight. He goes to congratulate me, and I again saw the look of shame in his eyes. I knew he was sober from his shaking hands. I also knew he would drive to the bar as soon as he left the high school. Eighteen years were gone. I had been a kid and needed my dad to help me navigate this messy world, but in that instant- I realized how alone my childhood had been. Standing there in what should have been the happiest moment of my life, I only felt full of loneliness and regret. There were no more chances for him to be the dad that I had needed. I was a man now, and I swore to myself that I would never need him for anything ever again. I would never let him have the power over me to make me feel alone.

Alcohol was ingrained in every childhood memory that I have. Every holiday, my family would sit around our downstairs bar and pour drink after drink. A glass was never left empty. My father was in his element, playing the boisterous bartender when he was still sober enough. A couple of hours in, he would be the one that couldn't stop. He would be the one that passed out drunk on the sofa when relatives or friends were over. Every camping trip involved much of the same. My dad started his dad with orange juice and vodka, around noon switched to beer,

and in the late afternoon, moved on to Jack Daniels. I remember the times that an ambulance was needed to take him to the hospital. I remember the smoky bars that called the police to show up after he was cut off from buying any more drinks. I remember the times he lost his driver's license. I hated the disappointment of our childhood.

It is 2018. I am a father myself. I play catch with my kids in the backyard. We go legitimate camping that has nothing to do with what we drink. My boys will never have to know the pain of alcoholism. I refuse to drink, scared that with one drink, I could turn into him. I never want them to feel like an outsider in their own family. I never want them to worry if I will be able to stay sober long enough for their wedding. I never want to hold my grandchildren with shaking hands from withdrawing. I don't hate my dad anymore. Holding onto a lifetime of hate is exhausting. Life is too short to hang on to that. I feel sorry for him. His life has had decades of disappointment, shame, and heartache.

I walk into my childhood home, and down the hall to visit my dad. Nothing has changed in that house. The same pictures hang on the walls. The same dreary curtains cover the windows. My dad is laying in a hospital bed that has been brought in for him. His skin and eyes are yellow from jaundice. His stomach is swollen from an enlarged liver. He is dying, and this is the end stages of cirrhosis and liver failure. He looks much older than his 65 years. He spends most of his days sleeping. My mom is getting counseling from the hospice workers, and she seems more at peace than she ever has. She smiles and laughs again. My dad has been sober for almost a year. He is kind now and asks questions about my life. We watch baseball together. It feels like we have met for the first time. The irony that it is too late is not lost on me. This is alcoholism, and it is ugly. It is the smell of dying in the air. It is planning a funeral when your parent is still living, with your dad requesting a Jack Daniels flag on his casket because he sees it as a fitting

tribute to his life. Alcoholism is regret. It is a disease and choice all at the same time. It is the look of shame in his eyes, that neither of us can seem to erase.

Austin Middleton

“The Brutal Indifference of Life”

November 21st, 2009

It was just like any average day for me in eighth grade, the final bell had rung and I was waiting outside the main doors by the flagpole with my younger brother Dalton. It was a small junior high school in the middle of the smallest county in Illinois, so as we waited for our step father Rick the only thing to look at was a cornfield and busses pulling away loaded down with students yelling excitedly. We never had to wait long because we only lived a mile from the junior high on a small farm. We technically could have walked but it was never much time before Rick would pull up in his big black Chevy truck just like today. My brother and I load into the truck and Rick pulls out of the school parking lot and heads for home. His truck reeked of cigarettes and miller light, but that was far from unusual.

“Austin I talked to your mom and it looks like the weather is going to be good enough for your grandfather to come get you,” Rick tells me as he moves his sunglasses up onto his hat, revealing the lighter skin around his eyes where they had been. It made his farmers tan much harder to ignore, “Do you need to pack still?”

“Awesome! I already packed my suit case last night just in case!” I had been worried all day at school watching the clouds roll overhead. I knew if the bad weather held up then he surely wouldn’t be able to come and get me. My grandfather had been a pilot for many years and often my mom and dad found it easier for me to fly for an hour and a half between them instead of driving me between them, but the weather was always a factor we had to consider when he flew to get me. We stopped at our farm house for all of five minutes for me to grab my stuff and to drop Dalton off. My younger brother is very awkward looking; he is very tall and his arms and

legs are lanky and almost look disproportioned to his torso. He wasn't coming to my dad's with me because he is a half sibling on my mom's side, I remember only giving Dalton a halfhearted good bye as he was always on my nerves and I was only going to be gone for a week so who cared?

Rick and I left our house on our way to Lacon which was not too far away. I had taken off from the Lacon airport countless times over the last few years so it had become the normal meeting place. Although unfortunately, by the time we arrived only thirty minutes or so later the weather had taken a toll for the worse. Rick was on the phone with mom and apparently my grandfather had radioed in saying he was going to have to land in Kewanee and pick me up there; it was as close as he could get with the storm coming in. The possibility of bad weather had been making me nervous all day, and now that the storm was making him reroute to a different airport I felt downright uneasy.

We arrived at the airport in Kewanee around five o'clock and my grandparents had just arrived, and as I sat in the small airport terminal I watched them get out of H's 1972 single engine Cessna and approach the building. Harold Middleton, better known by most people and myself simply as H, was a great man. He was pushing it into his nineties and although he moved slowly with a shuffle in his step and a hunch in his back he still came into work at our family's lumber company several times a week. H always wore slacks and suspenders over an old VFW jacket, for as long as I could remember he had kind of an old fashioned smooth wave haircut that was thinner and thinner every time I saw him; very fifties era when you looked at him. He had served in the second world war and worked hard his entire life to support those who relied on him, and on top of that he was one of the kindest people I have ever known in my life. He was one of the only men I had ever met who I aspired to be like when I grew up. My Grandma Peggy

was just as sweet and wonderful, H's fourth wife I believe and she was very plump and round with a short crop of blonde hair on her head that was so obviously dyed to anyone who saw it. They were wonderful grandparents and I always loved when I got to be around them.

They greeted me and they spoke with Rick for a few minutes before I said goodbye and we left through the back door of the terminal into the airfield. There were a couple of light posts I had noticed as I loaded my suitcase into the luggage compartment. By far though the greatest amount of light came from the ones that were rotating on top of the more tower like poles, the ones to warn any incoming planes. Like a lighthouse sitting on the cliff face so ships can find the shore in the dark or storms. This was actually my first time flying at night, and that fact for some reason made me more nervous than I already was. I just shoved all that out of my head and tried to convince myself it was just nerves, flying had always made me nervous and that's all this was. Nothing more.

We all loaded into the plane which was only a four seater, it wasn't spacious but it wasn't uncomfortable either. I just watched as H went through his preflight check flipping switches and confirming his takeoff on the radio. I just wanted this flight to be over as soon as possible so I grabbed my iPod from my pocket and put my ear buds in. I figured I could probably drown out the roar of the engine and maybe take a nap so the flight flies by. As I turned on the music and closed my eyes I leaned my head back and folded my arms back trying to get comfortable, and just then I could feel the plane taking off from the ground and I felt that twinge in my stomach. The one you get at the top of a rollercoaster right before the drop, the feeling of near weightlessness. I had not gotten through the first song I was listening to when it happened, and I will never forget what I saw in a million years. I felt something very odd. It was like I was being dragged to my right and it was strong, it was only seconds before I realized what I felt was

gravity and I opened my eyes and looked out the window. I couldn't process what I was seeing until I thought about it hours later, but what I saw right outside the right window of the plane was the ground.

Midflight the plane had for some reason tilted to the right and for a moment we had been flying with our wings perpendicular to the ground, and with the lights from the wings beaming down I could see the rows of corn flying by one after another as I got closer and closer and then there was an impact. My eyes were closed but I don't remember losing consciousness. I was thrown around the inside of the plane like a ragdoll due to the lack of a seatbelt and when I opened my eyes again what I saw was horrible. The whole right side of the plane was gone, torn open and I could see the night sky and a cornfield. We had landed a mile and a half south of the airport in the middle of a cornfield. H's seat was broken and though he was still strapped in, his seat was leaning back and pinning me down into mine which had undoubtedly kept me from being thrown from the plane.

"Is everyone alright?" I whimpered quietly as I pulled myself out from under my grandfather and out of the wreckage of the plane, the disorientation was so intense I couldn't even begin to understand what had just happened.

"I'm fine," H told me as I grabbed his arm and helped him climb from the plane. Peggy was still buckled into the passenger seat, but she was leaning out the torn open side and it looked as if she was stretched and stuck half underneath the wreckage. "Peggy are you okay?" I could hear H ask and all he got in response was a very weak *no*. Even in the midst of the tragedy H kept his cool, and I think that was what kept me from losing it myself. I had just checked my cell phone to see if I could get a signal and make a call, but the second I opened the phone the battery died.

“Oh God damn it, of course!” I yelled and threw my phone in the dirt. I noticed I could still see the rotating airfield lights and knew we couldn’t be that far from the airport. I looked by and saw H trying to clear debris and help Peggy. “I’m gonna run back to the airport and get help, Okay?” I tell H trying to keep it together and stay calm. He replied but was solely focused on helping Peggy, like this crash was totally normal and he had just been waiting this whole time for things to go south.

I took off through that corn doing nearly a full sprint down the rows wearing only one shoe. Cornfields absolutely terrified me ever since I was a little kid, but in that moment it never even registered to me where I was at. I probably made it through a mile of dark cornfield before I fell to my knees out of breath. I buried my face in my hands and started to sob. Waves of adrenaline were slamming into me. I still couldn’t even begin to process what had just happened to me. I sat there for several minutes just repeating to myself, “I’m alive.” It didn’t seem real. None of it. I couldn’t move, I couldn’t do a single thing. I sat and tried to steady my breathing, to get my body and mind under control. I watched the rotating airfield light go back and forth counting it slowly, one rotation after another. Before long though I started calming down ever so slightly and felt like I needed to puke, but when I leaned over to let it out I did nothing but heave. Then I noticed the blood on my hands in the thin veil of light, my forehead was definitely bleeding. I sat a few minutes longer, feeling the wet dirt beneath my wet socked foot, the broken corn stalks underneath my shoe on the other foot, and for the first time in my entire life I was thankful that I was alive, I could actually appreciate what I had. I stood up on shaky legs and readied myself, after three deep breaths I ran for all I was worth, as fast as I could and when I finally broke free from the edge of the cornfield I was directly across the road from the main doors of the airport.

I run up to the small brick building and I burst through the doors as quickly as I could as saw the attendant in her office where we had left her. She looked up at me from her desk through the office window and I sincerely thought this old lady was going to have a heart attack. She stood up from her desk with her mouth gaping open and walked out of her office. I just stood in the entryway trying to form the words and I simply mumbled as I collapsed into a nearby chair,

“Plane crash...” It was all I could utter as I tried to catch my breath. the woman on duty looked even more shocked than she had before.

“Oh my god, oh my god,” She started repeating as she went into her office for the phone, “I don’t even know who to call!”

“Uhh 911 maybe? Jesus any emergency services will do!” I couldn’t say anything else, I just buried my head in my hands and tried to hold myself together. The police response time was surprisingly good because the first officer showed up in what seemed like less than a minute, and I summoned what strength I had to meet him outside the front door. The police officer got out of his car and took one look at me,

“You were in the crash? Are you alright?” he seemed genuinely concerned.

“I – I’m fine,” I stammer quietly, “But my grandparents... their still at the plane.”

“What about the pilot?” He asks me as after speaking into his radio.

“My grandfather is the pilot,” I say quietly. Behind him two ambulances and more squad cars pull up, “We took off going east I think, I came from that direction.” I point across the road from where I ran out of the corn and the officer informed me that I was pointing south, “Okay man. I don’t know which direction it was then; I just know I came from that way.” He asked me a few more questions and then they loaded me onto a stretcher and put me in an ambulance, before they closed the ambulance doors the officer informed me they had found my grandfather

on a road nearby flagging down the sheriff. We left for the hospital and with all the adrenaline starting to wear off, I found it hard to fight the tears welling up in my eyes and I remember the EMT patting me on the shoulder, telling me that it was over now and I was alright. It was far from over though.

We arrived at the hospital and they wheeled my grandfather in a few minutes after me. The first thing I noticed was that we ended up in trauma room A, the same room my sister ended up in after her car accident. It wasn't long before my mother was on the phone with me and her speech was an unintelligible mix of screaming and crying. I couldn't even get a word in, and she scared me so badly I almost didn't take the phone when my dad called. He was much calmer and told me how much he loved me and how lucky I was.

When the doctor came in to tell H and I that Peggy was dead, I already knew. It seemed obvious at that point but what stuck with me was what the doctor said after my grandfather started breaking down, telling him that Peggy had been alive. He looked really apologetic and said the words,

“I truly am sorry Mr. Middleton. If we had gotten to her a couple of minutes sooner... I'm sorry. I promise we did everything we could.”

If we had gotten to her a couple of minutes sooner. Those words rang in my head like someone was shouting them through a megaphone. A couple of minutes. To say I felt guilty was an understatement. I sat in that cornfield for what must have been ten minutes at least, trying to calm myself down and it could've been the difference? I was overwhelmed with guilt, completely distraught. On top of it all I was unscathed, I got to go home and pretend nothing happened.

I didn't go to Peggy's funeral. At her visitation I was welcomed by everyone as a hero. They all said I was incredibly brave for what I did, and I felt like I couldn't even look H in the eye. I sat in a chair and stared at my feet for most of it. At one point a woman came to sit next to me who was apparently longtime friends with grandpa H, and she leaned in and whispered to me asking if I was alright to which I mumbled I was. I didn't look at her though.

"You know sometimes in life God has to harden our hearts. It's not our place to know why, but we need to believe there is a purpose to it. We take that pain and turn it in to something useful. Please don't let it drag you down," she leaned in and hugged me, and got up to leave. I didn't have the heart to tell her that any faith I previously held had taken a serious beating. I just wanted to throw up.

December, 2009

I was back at school, everything was basically the same. The day I came back everyone would just stare at me and whisper. I think I probably told the story at least forty times that day to students and teachers, even the school social worker. She thought I needed to talk about what happened but I didn't, I needed to move on. Eventually things got back to normal, relatively speaking. That was what I needed since I was still struggling with what had happened to me, still trying to process such strong emotions and now an extreme anxiety on top of it.

One day only weeks after my accident I was sitting in class at school. We were in science and we were doing a lab, so everyone was at a lab station. Our teacher left the room for a few moments and I hear someone whisper my name. when I looked up I instantly noticed a few of my classmates a few stations down smiling at me. I just look at them and wait and one of them puts his hand in the air lying flat, and he then begins shaking his hand violently, doing loops and

eventually crashing it into the lab table which the other boy followed by mimicking an explosion with his hands and mouth. The class thought it was absolutely hysterical, but I just sat there and looked at them. Then I looked down and I could feel my chest tighten and my breathing pick up, I could feel an anxiety attack coming on so I get up and excuse myself. I walk out and end up in the library just down the hall, only trying to catch my breath and not breakdown in school. I was just getting ready to go back when my teacher found me and she asked if I was doing okay. I told her I was fine and she told me not to worry and that I was very lucky, that there were angels watching over me. I looked up at her trying to hide any emotion, and as monotone as I could I said,

“There are no angels. There is no god. Nothing we do matters. We are all gonna die.

What’s the point?”

From that point I slowly slipped into a pit. A cynical pit of loneliness, despair, and confusion.

September, 2016

I stood back as everyone made their way out of the cemetery and to their cars. I stood there reading the tomb stone and rereading it. It was sudden, but he died peacefully. Of course it was too soon for us, me especially. We had unfinished business; I had never gotten to talk to him about what we went through. We just never spoke of it. I wanted to but it just never seemed appropriate or always like the timing was bad. I wish I had, especially then standing over his grave. If I had been brave enough to bring it up maybe things would have been different. Maybe I would have

processed my grief in a healthier way. I rolled one of the shells from his twenty-one guns in my fingers and thought about what I wanted to say.

These shells were supposed to be a symbol of bravery, honor, duty and for some reason rolling it in my fingers, besides making me feel close to him, gave me a sense of confidence. It took me a long time to realize what exactly had traumatized me so badly. I was a fourteen-year-old kid who had been relatively sheltered, and overnight my innocence had been snatched from me. Then I had to worry about things I shouldn't have had to worry about. I was kept up at night with anxiety about things like what the meaning of life is, why we are here and if it mattered. I was burdened with my realization of the fragility of life and the razor thin line we live on a daily basis. But mostly I was afraid from that moment on that I would live a life without purpose, and that I would die a young, fruitless death at any moment. He helped me through this being the man he is, being as strong as he was, even the few times I could see the pain in his eyes he pushed it away and wore the brave face he had worn his entire life, and he got on with his life, back to his business, his family, his purpose.

“I'm going to miss you. I hope wherever you are, you have a brand new pair of wings and clear skies. I'm sorry... for a lot. I wish I had done things differently. I'm sorry I let it drag me down for so long. I just hope you knew before you left that I rose above that darkness. I found my purpose, finally. I couldn't have done it without you either.”

Kendrick Keller

“A Poisonous Idea”

The office had a yellow tinge to its overhead light, even though the whole school was supposedly operating on fluorescent lighting, the environment and whatnot. On the left side of the Junior High office was a shelf full of colorful nick nacks, a degree from some Texas University framed with dust covered glass, and a picture of some high school football team presumably from a time before the invention of sliced bread. The two uncomfortable black chairs in front of the center desk sat two fourteen year old boys. The first boy, with his mud brown hair, thin frame, and Puerto Rican looks (he’s not) tapped his feet and scratched his elbow red. The second boy had light brown skin, short, fuzzy, sky black hair, and green store bought hoodie that clinged to his body like a cage to a bird. The first boy out of nervous anger spoke and answered the question.

“Why are you looking at me, he started it. He stabbed me first!”

I am not the first boy.

“Hold on, you made me do it. It was coercion. He stabbed ME first!” I, the second boy, said. This reignited the argument that started on the way out of art class and continued the whole way to the Vice Principal's office.

The first boy, Joseph flailed his arms in anger. “Well if you hadn’t messed with my project.”

“Messed with? I moved it and you freaked out and went straight for the pens,” I said while quickly flashing my fangs because I found the whole thing hilarious.

“Boys! You have both never been to my office before. Right?”

The deep, soft voice came from the large blonde man sitting behind the desk. Mr. Hendrickson was the Vice Principal of La Vernia Junior High. He wore the standard white button up and khakis getup used by school reps and waiters around the country. Hendrickson had a warm presence, always had a smile on his face even when delivering disheartening news. From our few interactions at the time he always showed that he walked around with his authority on his hip, not his face, kind of like a reverend or a traffic officer.

“Yes.” Joseph and I responded in unison.

“And the two of you are friends. Right? I've seen you eating together and you had to sit next to each other for this to even happen.”

“Yes.” We said simultaneously once more.

“Ok then, act like it. There's no reason for the two of you to behave like animals. You're friends, so don't attack each other. As long as this is the end of this, you boys can go,” Hendrickson shifts his weight and leans back in his chair. “Is this the end?”

“Yes, sir.” We said for a final time.

Joseph and I stood up to take our leave through Mr. Hendrickson's thick wooden office doors to return to class. Hendrickson followed behind us and reached out his long sleeved hands to the both of us before we took our leave. Shaking the man's hands felt relaxing yet oddly empowering, like walking up to a 400 pound unchained lion and him letting you pat his mane, if only for an instant. Teachers to me weren't symbols of a learning establishment that respected and engendered good will towards its students, even the bright ones. Teachers demanded and belittled, they abuse power to teach you a lesson you already know. Being near Mr. Hendrickson however, all I felt was respect.

The Ouroboros, originating in the ancient Egyptian text, The Enigmatic Book of the Netherworld, is an ancient symbol that depicts a serpent eating its own tail. The Ouroboros connects head to tail with its jaw sprawled wide to allow its scale covered tail to cram itself elegantly into the creature's own throat.

On an all but normal Wednesday in March 2011, Ms. Hendrickson, the elderly mother of Glen Hendrickson, rushed to La Vernia Texas after a distressing phone call with her son. In Glen's home which he shared with his school teacher wife and two young boys, Ms. Hendrickson found her son on his bedroom floor with a gunshot wound in his head. Mr. Hendrickson killed himself at his home in the local Rosewood subdivision; a quaint cul-de-sac like subdivision filled with wide roomed townhouses attached to small fenced in backyards. My longtime friend Brett lived in Rosewood; it took me far too long to make the connection between the house I visited to play Grand Theft Auto and shoot airsoft guns and the suicide of my friendly administrator.

We first heard of the death of our beloved VP at the place we flock to for fun and guidance every Wednesday after school. I along with several dozen of my classmates walked through the dark pews of our dimly lit Baptist Church after school. We looked up to the front of the auditorium-like room; overlooking our seats was a wooden stage, built with nothing but God's love, hard community labor, and a measly few thousand dollars worth of tithes. The stained glass windows painted with colorful depictions from the bible towered over us teenagers. The lights that poured through illuminated our soft faces with brilliant reds, bright yellows, sun spotted oranges, and a tacky looking green that must be made of leftover Heineken bottles.

The service opened with the news of Hendrickson's death, barely half a day old, not even a black and white headline yet. When the preacher spoke on the suicide, the room evacuated all light; we might as well have been in the chill Nevada desert under a sheet of night. It's as if we were left without a star in the sky, the southern church was barely lit and the only sound was sobbing. The dams flooded before my preacher even stopped for a breath: sobbing from puberty stricken kids erupted from the pews. Students came forward to speak, to pray, to be cradled by an adult, any adult, just so someone else could do the work of keeping their bodies upright while their spirits lie at the steps of God's house. My friends and I didn't know Mr. Hendrickson well, but we still bore witness to the dreary scene around us. I was at a loss for actions. I sat, trembling within my booth, gripping the wood and biting my nails while mourning surrounded me in real time. The tense lack of understanding and anxiety with nowhere left to escape to, fell from my eyelids and dampened my green hoodie, a venom that needed extracted. After a single moment of pouring my saltwater from my face to my jacket sleeves, I found myself with nothing to do but sit and watch.

Hendrickson died because of corruption, greed, and the mistake of being a person who cared. The higher ups at La Vernia Independent School District had stolen money from the district, lied to parents and students, and covered up for a Drama teacher that used hard drugs before class. In the aftermath, we found out that Hendrickson knew all of this and was powerless to stop any of it. The morning of Wednesday March 30th, Hendrickson left school and visited my Drama teacher in jail, before driving to his Rosewood home one last time. The school learned nothing from the loss of Hendrickson, corruption stalked us, viper like, creeping in the background throughout our next four years in the town. After that week, there was no long term reaction from the school or the town because of Hendrickson's passing. He wasn't made a

martyr, he died without a cause, teaching his students without the need for a lecture that a single bullet can't fix everyone's problems, but it can fix yours.

The symbol of the Ouroboros represents both beginning and end as a closed loop that swallows itself, this representation of life and the passage of time is not however as symmetrical as it would suggest. The Ouroboros' interpretation of beginning and end is that they are one in the same, or at first sight, it paints it this way. However, anyone with eyes can identify the beginning and ending points of the serpent, the slender eyes, protruding from the enlarged head, the beginning. The bloated and pronounced beginning takes over and devours a tail that thins as it reaches out to its tip, tickling the far end of the serpent's throat, the end.

I lived in La Vernia throughout almost the entirety of my primary schooling. This meant that the only time I met anyone new was when I left or they came. Because of the lack of intellectual and ideological diversity, the town can only be described as incestuary. Change wasn't prevalent in the community, the most modern thing about the town was the new Whataburger ("Just like you like it"). Seeing the same faces everyday for the first sixteen years of your life means that everyone supposedly matters, no matter how well you know them, how close you are, or if you've ever spoken a word to each other. Lives are treated like a roll call, every day you go down the list to check if all the ducks are in a row.

I had seen Bryan a few times a year since I was in elementary school. He knew my name and I knew his. All other information we had about each other must have been secondhand. I could tell based on his friend group, his large truck, and his boots that he was very southern and somewhat stoic; in a much more passive way, people liked Bryan, his presence was

never treated as a nuisance. Bryan most likely knew about me what most kids at my high school knew, I took advanced classes, skateboarded the town with my sometimes lovable shithead group of friends, and I was part of the approximately six and a half black kids in the school; everyone also knew I was the half. Our tertiary relationship could only get us that far. I had personally spoken to Bryan, probably less than ten times in my life. The majority of my interactions with him took place sophomore year of high school. I would see Bryan slither past in the open pathway between the brick buildings that houses the departments of the school. I passed him by maybe once a month, he'd nod his head and whisper my name "Kendrick." And I'd hiss back, "Bryan." We wouldn't stand there too long, I was taller than I was in junior high, my glasses were traded for contacts so you could easily see my brown eyes with their full black center. As if we were five year old barely capable of looking through a book to find Waldo, point to his face and call out his name to prove to our parents and counselors that we didn't have a learning disability.

On a winter day sophomore year I didn't nod to Bryan. No one did. That morning we were informed that Bryan hung himself at his home the previous night while his parents were out. We were given no reason or explanation, we were just expected to hear the news and hand out "thoughts and prayers" in return. I didn't cry when Bryan died, I didn't stop with my day or leave the school and neither did most. However to say it wasn't felt in every moment without a distraction that week would be a lie and an injustice. Whenever I would exit the classroom that week every spot and surface was grey. I would walk the same path I took every week. I would like clockwork leave my class at the bell and get precisely five minutes to traverse my campus that was covered in a pathetic combination of concrete and muddy grass. I never saw Bryan's round face or still eyes on my way to class again. There was now this tiny point of empty space

with a gigantic weight. Bryan's absence was a supermassive black hole that sucked in all light with no hope of escape. My sadness over the loss of Bryan was much more selfish than it could have possibly been for the rest of the student body. I wasn't feeling the pain of his family, or the sympathy of every parent with a son his age. I was constantly in shock by the blunt quickness that someone who had always been there had willingly departed with.

Everyone has had the experience of looking into a mirror and seeing a pore that sticks out in just the wrong way. This pore doesn't quite fit in and in that moment you become bothered. Whether because for curiosity or perfection, you prod at it. You scratch or stab or slice at it to get it to leave, to fall out. And what does the it do in response? The only thing it can, it bleeds. That's how I dealt with Bryan's death for the remaining week. I'm prone to obsession of thought. And the lowering of the population of my town was one I couldn't shake if I blasted a Disturbed album and banged my head on a solid chunk of wood for fifty four minutes straight. Because of this anxiety and how little felt I knew Bryan, I didn't even consider going to his funeral.

The Principal announced over the scratchy outmoded loudspeaker one morning in the latter half of the week that anyone who wants to go to Bryan's funeral on Friday doesn't have to go to school. Lucky for me I had a Doctor's appointment. Our town was small enough and safe enough that it was usual for a kid to walk the town by themselves regardless of the time of day. I walked from my house through La Vernia towards my little Doctor's office on the hill that overlooked a large lot of grass that stretched out in front of a wealthy neighborhood. When I reached the top of the hill, I could look down and saw the very funeral that I wished to keep my distance from. Dozens of people stood hand in hand, some with heads bowed and others with small fires the size of Coke cans in their palms. The sight made my spine tingle and my mind race a few MPH faster than usual. What could they possibly be asking of God, is this to ease the

agony of the family, to make Bryan's loved ones feel better? Or is it for themselves? There's no criminal to catch, no tragedy to clean up after, there's not even a single person that we know to blame. Bryan must have been suffering, they type of suffering that time and laughter don't erase. If we can't fix the problem, why beg for it to go away? Why he needed to die for anyone to think about him after they nod in his direction? Bryan was a kind hearted sheep who was sacrificed in the middle of the week so we could collectively give a damn. A god didn't pluck Bryan's soul from him and leave his lifeless corpse to fall to the the ground. At the end Bryan finally had control. Bryan scarfed down his own tail.

Cheyenne Rideaux

“Blue Aster”

We all knew little Sami Wallows was not Ava’s son. Although he shared her blond hair and green eyes, there was no likeness past that. With either Wallows. No. Ava would never have admitted to us that she was infertile. We all knew though. Rosie Stevens had known first; pointing out the suspicious vacation the two had booked only weeks after the pregnancy announcement.

We all knew Mrs. Cruz had lost her job in town. We had begun to notice the way she hoarded her newspapers, cutting the coupons as if her life depended on it. Occasionally, her son, Anthony Jr., would come to one of our homes to spend time with one of the children. On more than one of these play dates, he was happy to ‘volunteer’ to stay for dinner.

We all knew of the affair between Joseph C. Darin, the science teacher at Sterling High School, and Elizabeth Moore, the English teacher at the same school. This was brought to light quite recently when Annabelle Moore walked into her mother’s classroom to retrieve her lunch money. Suffice it to say, the affair came to an abrupt and **silent** end.

That is the key term to our community and its perfection. **Silent**. We know the secrets and imperfections in the neighborhood, but it is expected, out of courtesy, to never admit or complain about your problems. That should be none of our business. Never voluntarily. We agree to ignore the gossip; unless behind closed doors. That was our unspoken agreement. Until Verna-Mae Tissano.

It was nearly eleven at night when we awoke to the sound of a moving truck pulling into the Darin’s driveway. The couple had moved out a few days prior, but it was no surprise that a

family would be moving in so soon. Blue Aster was a highly sought after community. We stood outside on our stairs, watching as the moving truck pulled in, followed closely behind by a beat up, grey, 2007 sedan. Rosie was standing at the house across the street, staring at the atrocity.

We watched curiously as someone exited from the car; a large hoodie pulled up so we could not see any features beneath the streetlamps. The person was followed by two small children exiting the back seats. It was far too dark to see them clearly. We let out sighs, knowing we would see nothing more until morning.

As soon as day broke, we set to work on our welcoming gifts. It had been a while since someone new moved into our neighborhood, but we still knew exactly what we were each responsible to bring. We met at the Steven's kitchen to put together the basket. Rosie's muffins sat on the counter cooling, while she worked on the little "Welcome to Blue Aster" ribbon that would be tied around the basket. We watched as her expert hands moved the thread around to create an intricate ribbon around the weaved basket. It was one of the many hand-woven baskets that Rosie's daughter, Mary, took immense pride in making.

The rest of us placed whatever items were meant for the basket onto the table. There were hand lotions from town; from one of the expensive stores that marked the price onto the item itself to ensure that the receiver would know just how much was spent on it, home-made jams, expensive cigars shipped from overseas, and a book; the newest best-seller romance. Rosie was the one leading the welcoming committee. The rest of us carried our own glass Tupperware full of casseroles.

"Okay girls, let's give this new family a nice welcome," Rosie said, smiling. It was the perfect mix of heart-warming and threatening, showing anyone who looked at her that she was

clearly the head of the community. We walked with purpose towards the Madres yellow house, smiles on our faces that, after several years, felt natural.

Rosie's light rasping on the door was the only sound that we could hear as we stood on the front porch. The house was eerily silent. There were no footsteps, no TV, no radio, no children giggling. The ugly sedan remained parked in the same spot it had pulled into last night. Perhaps this family had another car we didn't see? We were about to turn away and walk back to our respective homes, when the door suddenly swung open.

"Can I help you?" A little boy asked. He stood in the doorway, a hand on the doorknob still, his other hand clutching a toy car. He was most likely around six years old, maybe younger, with curly black hair, olive skin, brown eyes, and a frail frame. He stared up at us with boredom.

"Hello there, is your mother home?" Rosie asked in the same voice she used when talking to one of her pomeranians. We wouldn't have been surprised if the boy had rolled his eyes. However, he merely turned around and called into his house.

"Mama, people at the door!" He announced as he walked away and into the living room. We were shocked that he simply left the door open, let alone answered it without a parent present. There were a few more seconds of silence before a woman emerged from the kitchen.

"Why, hello there. Sorry to have kept y'all waiting," she said with a heavy southern accent. Unlike the child, this woman had fair skin, freckles sprinkled across her nose, her shoulders, and the back of her hands. Her red hair hung straight and flat down to her shoulders, and her frame was a tad bit stocky. The only thing that she shared with the boy was the brown eyes; dark enough to be mistaken for black. She smiled at us, revealing an upper row of shockingly crooked teeth. "I was in the kitchen working on breakfast for the boys, feel free to come in and make yourselves at home. I won't be but a few minutes."

Like the boy, the woman simply walked away from the wide-open door - and our confused expressions. She sauntered back into the kitchen and made no sound at all. We remained on the porch, looking at one another as we waited for someone to make the first move. To no one's surprise, Rosie was the first to step into the house. It looked almost exactly the same as the Darin family left it, save for the boxes that lined the entryway and spilled into the living and dining room.

We entered the living room, standing close the walls and bay window. The only furniture in the room was a single coffee table and a grey couch that looked as though it had been picked up at a garage sale or on the side of the road. Rosie stared at it with a skeptical eye, but turned to Elizabeth, nudging her head in a silent *"You should sit, it would be the polite thing to do."*

Elizabeth timidly sat in the middle of the couch, so far off the edge that it took most of her strength to keep from falling. The boy who had answered the door was seated on the other side of the coffee table on the hardwood floor. There was another boy with him, an identical twin, who moved his own toy car around on the floor; racing the first boy's. It was shocking, yet pleasing, how silent the two played in front of us.

"Breakfast time! Come and get it before it gets cold!" The sound of their mother's hollering jolted us, making Rosie tense and Ava nearly drop her glass tray of tuna casserole. The boys scrambled up to their feet, racing each other towards the kitchen, shoving into one another on the way. The woman walked in the opposite direction, separating them nonchalantly as she came into the living room. "So, what can I do for ya, ladies? Is this the welcome committee or something?" The way she pronounced 'something' came out more like 'some-than'.

“Yes, we are,” Rosie said matter-of-factly. “We came to welcome you and your family to the neighborhood. Is your husband home by any chance? We would love to welcome him as well and to let him know when he could meet with our husbands.”

“Ain’t got no husband,” The woman said plainly. We weren’t sure if she was going to say more or not, but when she continued to stare at us with her big eyes, we figured that was all she had to say about it.

“Oh! Well... you know we don’t have any issues with lesbians.” Elizabeth informed her quickly. We glanced down at Elizabeth, shocked by her accusation. After all, there were many reasons as to why someone could be without a husband. Death. Military. Divorce.

“That’s good to know. I don’t have any issues with lesbians either. But if you’re trying to reassure me, there’s no need for that. I’m not a lesbian. I just don’t have a husband.”

“Did you adopt those two boys, by any chance?” Ava asked in a timid voice. Rosie gave her a sideways glance, knowingly, but remaining silent about her opinion.

The woman smiled at that, but shook her head. “Nope, they’re mine. Had them six years ago, and have loved and raised them since.” The room fell silent after that. We waited for some sort of explanation. Grilling her on the whereabouts of the father was quickly becoming awkward.

“Well! I think this is all lovely. We would love to stay and chat more, but it is clear you have plenty of work to do with unpacking. I would be happy to send over my husband to help if you would like, but he may be busy with Mr. Kim.” Rosie said quickly as she handed the woman the welcome basket. We all stood, placing our own gifts onto the coffee table. The woman remained smiling, not seeming to mind the quick exit, and nodded her head.

“By the way, we will be having a bar-b-que at my house, a sort of belated farewell to the previous owners of this house. You are welcome to stop by if you would like. We would love to learn more about you and your family.” Elizabeth chimed in at the last moment. Rosie glanced at her, but remained silent.

We quickly made our exit, smiling at her as we left. We were halfway down the stairs when the woman opened the door. “The name’s Verna-Mae by the way!” She called down to us in her heavy accent. We turned back, smiled, and waved to her.

The sun was beating down on our backs as we stood on Rosie’s back porch. Our sun hats managed to protect our skin from the sun, but did absolutely nothing for the warm breeze that was beginning to pick up. Ava Wallows had to hold the hem of her blue summer dress down to keep the breeze from blowing it up. Verna-Mae was the only one who had shown up in a pair of high-waisted denim shorts and a blue tank top. Liliane and Joseph C. Darin had come for the day, wanting to apologize for their sudden departure from the community, so the rest of us felt it would only be appropriate to dress our best.

“It was awfully sudden of you. None of us even knew you were leaving until we saw the moving truck.” Rosie Stevens stated in a ‘concerned’ tone. We raised our eyebrows and leaned closer in our own feigned shocked expression. Liliane nodded her head, glancing over at her husband at the grill. The men, our husbands, stood on the grass, crowding around the grill, attempting to keep the wind from blowing the food away. Or they didn’t want us to over hear anything they had to say. They each held a can of beer in their hands as they chatted. None of them drank for a few moments; sensing our eyes on them.

“Yes, Joseph found a job in Bonney Lake, Washington. There is a beautiful gated community, Trilogy at Tehaleh. Plus, I have extended family there who I wish to be closer to.” We nodded our heads in understanding as Liliane explained. We took sips from our lemonade and blotted napkins against our lips in silence. Verna-Mae’s eyes flicked over each of us, almost as if she were trying to determine if we were robots. “I’ll desperately miss this community. I see all you girls as my sisters,” Liliane continued after a moment. Her eyes flicked to Elizabeth Moore.

We could feel the tension as the women stared at each other. Elizabeth chose to stand directly across from the host, despite our better judgement. Elizabeth placed a strand of her chestnut brown hair behind her ear, a small frown wrinkling the corners of her mouth. “I’m happy Joseph found a better paying job. I hope you’ll be happy in Washington. However,” she started to say as she shuddered slightly, “the name of your town, Bonney Lake, just sounds dreadful.”

We tensed as Elizabeth finished speaking. Our eyes were glued to Liliane, silently noting the way the corners of her eyes did not crinkle as she forced a smile onto her face. It was the kind of smile that was clearly fake. The way her hands tightened at her side; not into balls and not fully straight, just tightened. It was something that not many would have noticed. In a small community, it was easy to begin to notice just about everything about someone else.

“It is a silly name for a town, isn’t it? We wish we didn’t need to move, but it is for the best. The high school had some... issues, that I don’t believe Joseph, or our future child, needs to be around.” Once again, no one was surprised at the mention of the unborn child. The looks of surprise still appeared on our faces, mixed with delight. Liliane had told Rosie about the pregnancy a week after the affair came to light; only a month ago. Rosie felt it would be best for everyone to know, save for Elizabeth. We didn’t believe it was for any vindictive reason,

however, the reaction of poor Elizabeth was entertaining to us all. Elizabeth was the only one who had a truly genuine reaction. The superior fire in her eyes dimmed, stolen by Liliane as she placed a hand on her flat stomach.

“I can’t help but feel like there is something between these two. What happened?” Verna-Mae asked, leaning towards Ava to whisper the question. Not surprisingly, her whisper was easily heard over the silence that had fallen over the group. Ava looked towards Rosie, unsure how to answer the question.

“The food’s ready! Are you girls going to continue to stand there and gab, or join us?” Joseph C. called to us, saving Ava from the needing to make the decision. We looked up towards him, but we said nothing. We walked carefully towards the men, making sure our Mary Janes did not sink in the dewy spring grass. “What were you ladies talking about anyways?”

“I told them the good news about the pregnancy,” Liliane informed her husband. She stood beside him, placing her arm around his waist. We couldn’t help but notice the way he hesitated to put his arm around her. His eyes shifted subtly to look at Elizabeth standing beside her own husband. Rosie was the first to break the silence, taking the moment to congratulate the soon-to-be father. We nodded in agreement, offering our own congratulations and advice from personal experiences. The Moore couple were the only ones to remain silent.

“Oh! Did something happen here?” Verna-Mae suddenly broke the silent. Her finger pointed from Elizabeth to Joseph. We were genuinely shocked this time. The audacity of such a question. Liliane tensed, staring at the new woman. If looks could kill.

“I have no idea what you are talking about. As stated, we are leaving for a better job opportunity,” Liliane said through clenched teeth. “Besides, I’m not too sure who *you* are to be saying anything in the first place.”

“My apologies, my name is Verna-Mae Tissano. I’m the one who moved into your house.” She held her hand out towards them, waiting with a patient smile plastered on her face. We couldn’t tell if it was a fake one or not. Joseph was the first to reach towards her hand; only to be stopped by his wife.

“Pleasure,” she said coldly as she held Joseph’s arm, lowering it back to his side. Verna-Mae slowly lowered hers as well, keeping the smile tugging at the corner of her lips.

“Well, now that we’re all acquainted, I believe the men prepared us some delicious food.” Rosie’s eyes remained on Verna-Mae as she spoke. Her attempt at dissolving the tension did nothing. If there was one thing Rosie hated, it was a community event being ruined.

A month. A month was all it took for Verna-Mae Tissano to change Blue Aster’s perfection.

We were nearing the very end of summer when. It was the end of the summer Blue Aster block party. The streets were lined with different activities, mainly for the children, ranging from bounce houses, pony rides, face painting, and small arts-and-crafts tables. The doors to everyone’s homes were wide open, letting the smell of our cooking out into the streets.

As custom, each family was put in charge of a different course for our party meal. We would start at the Wallow’s house for the hors d’oeuvre portion of the night. As we expected, the start to the evening was nothing special. We filed into the Wallow’s home, the layout and color identical to the rest of ours. Her furniture focused on a very blue and glass aesthetic, matching Ava’s personality. We stood in the dining room, picking at the pastry-wrapped asparagus, sweet fig crostini, and tomatoes with lemon dill dip. We talked amongst ourselves about our children,

who remained outside snacking on the finger foods that we had prepared separately for them, and our husbands' promotions.

"I'm sorry, hope I'm not too late. I was figuring out how to make sure my food didn't burn or nothing while we did this house hopping thing (*thang*)." Verna-Mae apologized loudly as she came into Ava's house. Everyone turned their attention to her, confused and surprised at the sudden, loud, burst of energy. We had almost forgotten that the Tissano family even moved into Blue Aster.

The family had been silent for several weeks following their welcome 'party'. The twin boys mostly kept to themselves, playing in the backyard a total of seven times in the past month. Verna-Mae remained in doors most of the time. We had assumed it was simply to unpack all her boxes. The only times we knew of that she or the boys left the house were the few times when we heard the rickety sedan making its way out of Blue Aster or the weekends, then returning during odd hours of the night.

The men stared at Verna-Mae with surprised, confused, and impressed expressions on their faces. We, the women, glanced back, scrutinizing. She wore a short, bright red dress that hung off her shoulders, showed off her cleavage, and stopped just above the knee. Her heels added at least four inches on her, making her once stocky body appear almost as normal as the rest of us who worked out.

"Don't worry about it, we're happy you could join us. We were about to head to the Cruz's house for the soup course," Rosie informed her in a threateningly sweet voice. Her smile was strained, losing it's 'natural' feel as she looped her arm in the new woman's. Verna-Mae smiled at her genuinely, showing off her crooked teeth. She flipped her thin hair over her shoulder and looked back at the rest of us, her eyes falling on Andrew Moore. Elizabeth's back

straightened, her eyes narrowing at the other woman as Rosie led her and the rest of the group to the next house.

The tension during the soup course managed to dissipate slightly. We sat down for Elaine Cruz's famous albondigas soup, smiling at one another and returning to our small talk. The soup was followed with the fish course at the Kim household, without any issues. However, it was the salad at the Moore house that signaled the shift of the night.

"I thought I would try to bring the freshness of summer out through this strawberry balsamic salad with French 75, a little cocktail I found in a 'Spice Up Your Night' book," Elizabeth told us as we sat at her large table. The salads looked classic, nothing too special with them, but classy. Ava was the first to take a sip from her drink, and her face told us enough. Her lips puckered and her eyes widened slightly from the sharp vodka taste and tartness of the lemon juice. However, she did her best to put a smile back on her face.

"Oh come on, it can't be that bad, can it?" Verna-Mae suddenly asked as she grabbed her own drink and took a long sip. Her eyes widened as well, but she smiled widely. "Now this is what I'm talking about! I ain't never had a cocktail at a fancy dinner this good!" Rosie's eyes narrowed at her, then at Elizabeth; blaming her for this fiasco. The rest of us remained silent.

Rosie grabbed her own glass, her eyes never leaving Verna-Mae. She gulped down the drink faster than any of us had ever seen her drink before. She refilled her glass right away, and downed the second one just as fast. Verna-Mae locked eyes with her, and seemed to take pleasure in what she interpreted as a challenge. She drank her glass quickly. She was onto her third within minutes, as Elizabeth was the only other woman to join the little drinking contest.

"Well, I moved here from Louisiana because I wanted to give my kids a new life. There were a lot of things I did down in the south that I'm not too proud of. I wanted to start new for

my boys.” The men stared at Verna-Mae, nodding their heads vigorously as she told her story. “They haven’t had the best life so far, so I thought a place like this could do them some good. Maybe find myself a man or men to help them learn things like fixin stuff and grillin.”

“What happened to their father?” Rosie asked, her head cocked to the side, staring the other woman down.

Verna-Mae didn’t even waver as she stared back at her with a smile slowly spreading on her face. “I don’t know. It was one of those situations where you just don’t really know who the father is.”

We were shocked silent for a moment, not wanting to continue to probe, but Rosie was clearly not backing off.

“What do you mean? Don’t worry, we’re a loving community, you can tell us.”

“Ain’t much to tell. I was in my third year of college, thought I would have some fun. I was the kind of girl who liked to have a good time and never thought it would catch up to me. After a good night at a party with a few friends, I realized maybe I had a bit too much fun. Never bothered to try and track down the possible fathers, so I did what I had to and now I’m here.” She started to lean closer, leaning over the table towards Rosie in a snake-like manner. “Did that story satisfy your need for fresh gossip?”

Rosie was taken aback by the comment, but said nothing. Instead, the men were the ones who spoke up to break the tension. “What kind of fun did you like to have?” Andrew Moore asked as he leaned closer to Verna-Mae. Elizabeth reached over, slapping her husband’s arm with disbelief written on her reddening face. Her eyes struggled to focus on him through the alcohol. “Oh, come on! You can have a full-on affair under my roof, but I can’t ask a simple damn question!”

We all fell silent, unable to think of anything to say. There were tears threatening to fall down her face as she sat, mouth hanging open, and stared at her husband. He started to turn towards Verna-Mae again; ignoring his wife completely.

“Listen, I don’t want anything to do with this martial thing. I never meant to start anything, but I worked damn hard on the main course of the dinner, and y’all are still welcome to come,” Verna-Mae said, holding her hands up in a defensive gesture.

“Looks like you already started something,” Rosie said under her breath, her words slurring ever so slightly. She stood first, slamming her glass on the table in annoyance.

The rest of us stood then, our chairs scraping against the Persian rug beneath us, and we awkwardly, but silently, made our way out of the house. Andrew stood to leave as well, but Elizabeth grabbed his arm, still seated and staring down at the discarded salads. Rosie closed the Moore’s door behind her, stumbling only slightly as she walked down the stairs. Verna-Mae led the group to her house. The only sound around us was the high-pitched laughter of our children.

“Welcome to my home! I hope y’all don’t hold none of this against me. I was trying to tell my story,” Verna-Mae said. The home was extremely different from the house the Darin’s left. The once egg-shell white walls were now a vomit green, the furniture was random; from the old grey couch to the scratched-up red book shelf. There were children toys lining the entry way, shoes that had clearly been thrown into the corner and ignored, and jackets draping the couch and stair railing.

We took our seats at the table and our nostrils were bombarded with the scent of spice and meat. “Please, don’t worry about it Ms. Tissano. Those two have been having problems for years,” Dick Stevens reassured her with a gentle smile. Rosie’s eyes narrowed at her husband, as

if daring him to say anymore. He quickly dropped his head, like a shamed puppy, and sat rigid in his chair.

Verna-Mae ignored the awkward moment that had just transpired, and took her seat. “So, under your dome covers are your meals. I thought I would try to make it pretty fancy with those.” She noted, a proud smile on her face. We lifted the domes and stared at the food before us. We weren’t sure if it was the colors or the smell, but we could tell this would be the last straw for Rosie. “In front of you is some of my famous Louisianan rum vinegar-glazed ribs, collard greens, and crackling.”

“Crackling,” Rosie repeated the word as though it was a foreign language. That was it. That was all it took. “You made crackling and ribs? I gave you the *honor* or making the main course, something I thought anyone with a brain could figure out, and you make fucking crackling and ribs?”

To our surprise, Verna-Mae managed to keep her expression calm, another small smirk tugging at the corner of her lips. “Now, I didn’t do nothing wrong to any of you, so I don’t see why you think you can come into *my* home and speak to me like this. Y’all said you wanted a dinner, and a meal that represented us as individuals, so that’s what I gave you.”

“Look around you! We do what we can to be harmonious! We follow the fucking rules!” Rosie screamed at her. We sat in silence, knowing she was right. “Either get with the program, or get out of my community.”

Verna-Mae slowly brought herself to her feet, letting her chair scrape loudly against the hardwood floor. “It’s funny you think you’re something special. Me and my boys have done absolutely nothing wrong here. My boys have kept to themselves, remained quiet, and I’ve tried to stay in and make my house look presentable for your damn fru-fru asses. All I’ve wanted was

to make a new start in a nice community. But in the month that I've spent here, all I've heard is you all talking gossip about one another behind each other's backs. Who gives a damn if Mrs. Cruz is unemployed, or Mrs. Wallow's kid ain't hers?"

Ava and Elaine's eyes widened. Their shame was obvious. "You have no right to say anything! You're... you're just a damn slut!" Ava exploded. She stood up quickly and stormed out of the house with her husband, slamming the door behind her hard.

"You know what, yea, I'm a whore. I had my moment in college and I ain't ashamed of it. If I didn't do what I did back then, I wouldn't have the boys who I love more than anything. I won't ever be ashamed of that. And I ain't going nowhere. So, you best be leaving my house."

The warm air outside the house chilled us. I watched as the women left with their husbands, walking in every direction towards their own homes. Door after door slammed shut, the sounds of muffled discussions trickling out into the streets; quickly masked by the laughter of the blissfully ignorant children.

I entered my house, my husband walking into the living room to turn on the evening news. He sunk into his chair, like on any other night. I walked into the dining room and stared at the plates. The lemon-berry savarin that I had slaved over for hours looked fake. The slices all looked like some plastic toy you would buy your daughter for her tea set. I reached down and grabbed what would have been my slice and stared at it, unsure if it would even taste like anything.

Marissa Purdum

“Flipped”

BEEP, BEEP, BEEP. I turn over to see my alarm clock going off. It's 4:30 AM, and here I am awake hours before my dad gets up. I lay in bed for a few moments, letting my eyes adjust to the darkness before I get up and trudge to the bathroom. I groggily flip on the light and head toward the small sink. I splash my face with cold water to try to wake up, then I stare at my reflection in the mirror. My long brown hair is awry this morning, tangles left and right. I grab my bristled brush, and work out all the tangles. Then I notice my green eyes are carrying heavy, dark bags underneath them. I grab my concealer and start to make my bags magically disappear, then I add my usual fountain, black eyeliner, and mascara. Even though my face has remained relatively the same this past year, the sameness is just a mask hiding what I am really feeling.

I can't remember the last time I had a good night's sleep. I look at my bed, longing to return to its sweet embrace, but I knew if I did, I wouldn't fall asleep. I would just lay there feeling empty until it was time to get ready for school. Instead, I go to my wooden dresser, pick out one of my pairs of dark blue skinny jeans, a gray NASA t-shirt, my black bra, and a pair of black socks to go with it. As I change out of my t-shirt and shorts pajama combination and into the clothes I just picked out, I look around my room. Most of my walls are white and bare. They don't have anything on them anymore. At least not for a year now. I remember when these walls used to be almost covered from ceiling to floor with the photos I've taken of my family, my boyfriend, and anything else I loved. But I've given up my photography. It just doesn't feel right anymore.

Waking up this early has become a ritual of mine for the past eleven months. I do the same thing every morning, wake up, do my makeup, get dressed, then I sneak past my dad's

room, steal his car keys, and I leave. I remember the first few times I did it, I was so afraid that my dad was going to wake up and stop me. However, after the first month, those fears melted. I'm pretty sure he knew that I left by the third time I snuck out, but he didn't say anything. It's been a rough year for the both of us. Instead, he ignores the fact that I steal his car for about an hour every morning just to drive to IHOP to eat some pancakes. Why do I do this? Let's just say about a year ago in December, my life was flipped upside down.

James and I were at the local mall here in North Muskegon, right along the coast of Lake Michigan. I needed to get some of my pictures developed, but I didn't just want to go to the mall for five minutes and then leave. So James and I decided that we wanted to add some bright purple highlights in our hair, and then afterwards we would go to the camera store. We made an appointment at Live or Dye, the best hair dye specialist in a fifty-mile radius. As we were waiting for our stylist to finish up the customer before us, we sat down and I started looking around the salon. The walls were all black with various Black Sabbath posters, lit with purple UV lights. However, at the stations where the stylists worked, the lights were a bright white and they almost blinded me. The stylist cleaning up one of the stations had green spiked hair, black lips, thick, black eyeliner, and a lip ring sticking out on the left side of her face. Then I averted my attention to James. His pale skin reflected all the hours we put into playing *Call of Duty* over the summer instead of hanging out on the beach like every other normal high schooler. His brown curly hair was just dangling low enough past his ear for me realize that he really needed a haircut, and his brown eyes were focused on whatever was on his phone screen. As usual, he was wearing his favorite band's t-shirt, Guns n' Roses, some jeans that had way too many holes in them, and a pair of old sneakers that matched his jeans.

James looked up, "Ready for this, PJ?" he asked.

"Ha! Are you?" I replied.

James smiled and held my hand, "As long as I'm with you, I'll be ready for anything."

I smiled and gripped his hand tighter. James had always been that cheesy, it was just who he was, which is why I loved him.

The stylist interrupted and said, "Penelope?"

I shifted my attention from James to the stylist, "Yeah, that's me."

She nodded to the chair and said, "Sit down."

I looked at James. He smiled and said, "Go get 'em."

I sighed and started moving toward the chair. My heart was pounding. I don't know why I was so nervous. This was something that I have always wanted to do. I guess the reality of it all was enough to get my heart pumping. Seems almost silly now that I was so nervous, especially after what happened last December.

When I was halfway to the chair, my phone rang. It was my dad. I turned to the stylist and said, "Sorry, it's my dad. I have to get this." She rolled her eyes at me, but continued to prep the station. "Hello?" I answered.

At first there was a long silence, then my dad's voice cracked, "PJ?" He paused.

After a few more moments of quiet I asked, "Yeah, dad? What is it?"

He took a long pause before he spoke again. "It's your mom..."

"Are you going to sit down or not?" the stylist asked in a snarky tone.

"Dad, can you hold that thought for a second?" I asked, then I turned to the stylist. "I'm sorry, it'll just be a minute more." I then turned my attention back to my phone, "Okay, dad. What about mom?"

There was a slight pause before he spoke again, "PJ, she's in the hospital."

"Wait why? Was there an accident or something?" I hurriedly asked.

"No, no. She..." he paused again.

I began to wonder why my dad couldn't just spit out whatever he had to say to me. "Dad, just tell me. Did she accidentally twist her ankle again?"

Then my dad said, "No she didn't, PJ... She had a stroke."

At that moment in time, everything stopped. His words echoed in my head like a song playing on repeat. My heart pounded like it was about to jump right out of my chest, and I clenched my jaw to hold back on all my emotions. "Alright," I said, "I'll be right there." I felt my chest begin to tighten and before I knew it, I found myself walking straight out of the salon, car keys in hand. James hurriedly followed me.

"PJ! What's up? What's happening?"

Tears formed in my eyes, but I couldn't get a word out. My mind was only focused on getting to the hospital. I rushed past everyone, bumping into anyone who got in my way. Once out of the mall, with James following close behind, I unlocked my car, got in, put on my seatbelt, and started it before he had even gotten in.

James said, "PJ, talk to me. What happened?" but I ignored him. I pulled out of the parking spot and the next thing I remember was passing cars on the four-lane highway. I watched the speedometer go up, sixty, seventy, eighty. I was speeding so fast past the other cars that they were only a blur to me. James spoke again, "PJ, you need to slow down. Tell me what's wrong." I couldn't do either of those. I was focused on my mission and nothing could get in my way.

"PJ, please." His 'please' snapped me back into reality. I looked over to him and time seemed to slow down. James gave me very concerned look. He knew something bad had

happened, but he was so confused as what could make me act this way. I could see in his eyes that his mind was racing a mile a minute, trying to decode and defuse the ticking bomb that was inside of me... but he would never figure it out.

“Watch out!” James screamed at me. I looked towards the road and I saw a massive buck. Before I knew it, I had swerved to avoid it, but I turned too fast. The road was so slick from the snow slush that it caused my car to roll sideways. I had no control, I was entirely helpless. I know it sounds cliché but flip after flip, my life flashed before my eyes.

Crunch. It’s my first day of kindergarten. My mom had dropped me off at McKinley elementary. Other kids were filing into the school, but my mom made me stay back. She hugged and kissed me so many times that I was almost too embarrassed to go to school. She could not stand to leave her baby girl there. She was proud of her little girl, but at the same time she couldn’t bear the thought of me growing up.

“Alright, you got your lunch, crayons, pencils... Hmmm...” she paused, “What is Mr. Blonk doing in here?” my mom smiled as she pulled out my favorite teddy bear out of my bag. I started to giggle. My mom’s smile broadened, and she started to tickle me. “You silly girl,” she laughed. The first warning bell rang. “Well,” my mom’s face saddened, “It’s time for you to go, baby.” She gently shoved me inside. When I looked back, my mom was wiping tears from her eyes. “I love you!” she yelled as the door closed behind me.

Crunch. When I was in second grade, my goldfish, Blushie, had just died. I remembered when I had got him a few days earlier after a small circus came through town. I had won him after my dad threw a ball and it made it into his small fish bowl. He meant everything to me. So I went up to my dad and showed him the dead fish in the bowl. He promptly directed me upstairs to the bathroom. I was crying over the toilet as my dad flushed Blushie down.

My dad patted me on the head and said, “PJ... It’s just a fish.”

My mom, a much more gentle soul, gave my dad a dirty look, then turned to me and said, “It’s okay, hun. I know you loved Blushie, but think of it this way. He lived a good life, and his death will not be forgotten.” She paused, “Do you want to go get some ice cream?” I nodded, and she took my hand.

Crunch. It’s Christmas morning. I woke up and made my way to my parent’s room like I usually did for Christmas. I quietly climbed into their bed and started jumping.

“WAKE UP! WAKE UP!” I yelled.

“Urrrghhhh, okay, okay, we’re awake,” grumbled my dad.

As soon as my dad said that, I rushed downstairs and sat beside the tree. I picked up my first present then waited for my parents to make their way down, which at the time felt like forever. The second their faces were in the living room, I tore open my present. It was my first camera. It was not any old camera though. It was my mom’s old polaroid camera that she had while she was in college. One day when I was younger, she would show me all these photos of her adventures. Her ice skating, her climbing a mountain, even just her and my dad enjoying the day out in a park. After that, I used to go around the living room pretending that I was taking pictures of everything.

I smiled, got up, and hugged both my mom and my dad. “Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

My mom smiled at me and said, “You’re welcome, sweetheart. I love you.”

“I love you too, Mom... and Dad” I replied. Then I turned the camera around and snapped a photo of the three of us. That photo was the first to make it up on my bedroom wall.

Crunch. It was the middle of my seventh-grade year when James moved here from Wyoming. His hair was short back then, not even long enough to form curls. He walked into Mrs. Fraphorn's class like he owned the joint, then he sat next to me.

He flashed me a smile, looked at me with those brownie colored eyes, and asked "So, what is there to do around town?"

I smiled and hushed him, "Mrs. Fraphorn doesn't like people to talk when she's talking."

"That old bird?" he gestured to the teacher, "She doesn't scare me. What is she going to do? Give me detention on my first day?"

"Mr. Kelch," Mrs. Fraphorn said sternly, "I know it's your first day here, but if you speak out of turn, I will give you detention. Consider this your first and final warning." Then she turned back to the board.

"Geez," James said. "She's a bit of a grouch, right?" I smiled at him, but remained silent. "Cmon, this is more like a prison than a class if that's the rule!" he said.

Mrs. Fraphorn raised her voice, "Mr. Kelch, I warned you. I'll see you after school today for detention."

James dropped his jaw and I giggled at him. He remained silent for the rest of the year.

Crunch. Freshman year of high school sucked, but luckily I was friends with James. Even then, he always seemed to make things better. One day, the popular girls walked up to my locker and started to make fun of my all black outfit.

"Hey, PJ," one of the girls taunted. "Are you going to a funeral, or did you find those clothes in the trash?" The other girls in the group laughed.

"Just leave me alone, what did I ever do to you?" I replied.

“You know... Just your mere existence bothers me,” she said as she took a notebook out of my locker.

“Hey! Give that back!” I demanded.

“What this?” she dangled the notebook in front of me. “Why? It’s not important, just like you,” she laughed. Then she tore up my notebook and threw it on the ground. The other girls followed her lead. They took everything out of my locker and scattered it across the hallway.

At that moment, James rounded the corner. “Hey!” he shouted then rushed towards the scene.

The girls looked at him, laughed then continued kicking my stuff around.

“Hey, back off,” he said threateningly as he got closer. “Go apply more clown makeup or something.”

The leader gave him a dirty look. “Whatever...” the girl replied. “C’mon girls, let’s get out of this loser hallway,” she said as her and her posse left.

I started to pick up my stuff when James asked, “Hey, PJ. Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.” I replied. James helped me pick up my stuff and put it back in my locker.

“You know what, PJ?” he smiled his handsome smile. “You are so much better than those girls. You’re freakin awesome.”

I looked James in the eyes. He was looking at me differently, like he was examining the most beautiful photo he has ever seen. I smiled back and blushed. He became my first crush that day.

Crunch. It was the day James finally met my family. We had been dating for two months when my mom invited him over to our house for dinner. He treated my parents like any true gentleman caller would by trying to impress them with kindness and humor.

“So, James,” my mom said. “PJ told us you were originally from Wyoming. Do you miss it there?” Then she took a bite of the chicken parmesan she had prepared.

James smiled, looked at me, and squeezed my hand, “You know, when I first moved here, I thought I’d miss Wyoming a lot. It hasn’t been as bad as I thought it would be though.”

“Well that’s good!” said my mom. There was a short awkward silence before James spoke up again.

“I mean, the thing I miss most is the ol’ ride around town, guns a blazin’ and riding off into the sunset, but I’m glad to retire. It’s so much more peaceful here.” James joked. I stifled a snicker.

“Ah yes, I remember the good ol’ cowboy days as well!” my dad added. “Me and my stallion, Rex, trampled over the neighbor’s cat one time... That vermin never saw it comin’.” We all busted out laughing at my dad’s remark. I thought nothing could be more perfect.

Crunch. Last Sunday, we were all at IHOP for breakfast to celebrate my seventeenth birthday. My mom, my dad, James, and I were sitting at our favorite booth in the corner of the restaurant. I was eating my favorite, pancakes. I sat next to my mom and James and we were lightheartedly discussing some of my ‘cherished’ childhood memories. Then my mom’s voice changed.

“James,” my mom said seriously, “I need to tell you something about PJ.”

I shook my head. I knew what this voice meant. It meant my mom was going to embarrass me again. “Mommmm no, not on my birthday!”

“Yes, Mrs. Wallace?” James smirked.

“Well... When PJ was three years old, we asked her what she wanted for dinner.” My mom and my dad exchanged grins.

“Mom. I beg of you, no.” I beamed.

My dad butted in, “At that age, all she wanted was soup. I still have no idea why she wanted soup all the time, but that’s what she wanted.”

“Hey, I was fascinated that a food could come purely in liquid form, okay!” I replied.

“Anyways,” my mom turned to James. “We asked her what she wanted and out of her mouth came the word ‘poop’. Her father and I were so concerned until we realized that she wanted soup. She didn’t grow out of that until she was five, so for two years we had to explain to people that when she said ‘poop’ she really meant ‘soup.’” We all started laughing, and my face turned red from embarrassment. I was so happy, despite being embarrassed. I looked around the table and realized how much I love all of these people. I wished that moment could last forever.

Crunch.

The car had stopped rolling. We were both upside down dangling from our seats. Feeling dazed and my ears ringing, I looked around the car. Blood was splattered all over the car like paint. I wondered if it was mine. Then I over at James, he was bloody and unconscious. “Oh god.” I uttered. I watched the blood drip from his mouth onto the ceiling of my car. I tried to reach out to him, “James?” He didn’t move. I have never been the religious type, but in that moment, I prayed. I prayed in hopes that James will be fine, that everything will be fine. I needed things to be okay.

Next thing I knew, my eyes fluttered open to see my dad sitting in the chair next to my hospital bed with his head in his hands. His brown hair was disheveled, his stubble was growing in, and it looked like he hadn't slept in days. I tried to move my hand towards him, but I felt so weak that I barely wiggled a finger. My dad looked up from my small movement, and grabbed my hand. "Thank God," he muttered. When he looked at me, I could see that his eyes were red and puffy. I don't think I've ever seen him like this before. It seems as if he had aged five years since the last time I saw him.

"Dad?" I croaked.

I tried to sit up, but my dad gently held me down. "PJ, just relax. I'm going to get the doctor." He got up, and started heading towards the door. Once he got to the doorway, he paused looked back just to make sure I was still alive, and then continued on his way.

Once he was gone, I took a better look at the hospital room. Unlike most hospital rooms, this room was surprisingly warm. The walls were white, with pictures of random medical charts scattered like a collage across them. To my left was the dark green, upholstered chair my dad was just sitting in. To my right were a few machines, like the ones you see in movies.

Then my dad returned with the doctor who was carrying a clipboard.

"Hello Penelope, my name is Dr. Lancer. How are you feeling?" he asked.

"Fine," I said softly.

"Good, good. You aren't feeling any pain or nausea?" he asked. I shook my head no.

"Great," he scribbled down something on his clipboard. "Do you remember what happened?"

I nodded and uttered, "I was in an accident."

Dr. Lancer nodded, "Can you tell me what happened?"

I looked at my dad, he nodded encouragingly. “I was speeding to get here,” I paused to give my voice a break. “Then a buck appeared out of nowhere and we swerved and...” Then I remembered my mom and James. “Is Mom okay? What about James?” I asked.

Both the doctor and my dad exchanged solemn glances. Dr. Lancer turned to me and said, “How about you get some more rest, I’ll come back to check on you later.”

Once the doctor left the room, I looked at my dad. His gray eyes were avoiding my gaze. “Dad?” I asked.

He looked at the charts as he said, “The doctor told me you had no broken bones or internal bleeding, but he did tell me your brain was swelling so they needed to put you into a medically induced coma until the swelling went down.” He sighed, “They kept you under for a couple of days as they ran their tests. The doctors kept me updated, but every time I tried to ask questions I became more and more confused. I just wanted to know if you, my baby girl, were going to survive and no one was giving me any straight answers. They would say things like ‘Oh we can’t be certain yet’, ‘It’s too soon to tell’, or ‘It looks promising, but I don’t want to get your hopes up.’” He paused. My dad turned to look at me. His eyes were full of tears as he said, “I was just so afraid I was going to lose you too.”

My dad looked away. I laid there, not quite sure if he was saying what I thought he was saying. “Dad?” I paused, “Are they...” He moved towards the chair and sat down. I could tell he was struggling to tell me something. Then he grabbed my hand, and nodded. At first my mind rejected the idea that they were both dead. Eventually, it slowly began to sink in, but I still felt the need to ask.

“How?” I asked.

My dad swallowed his emotions before he responded, “They tried everything they could to save her, but the stroke... It was massive. There wasn’t much they could have done.” He cleared his throat before he continued, “And James... He never made it out of your car. He was already gone by the time they got there.”

My lip started to quiver, and then the tears started to roll. My dad looked at me with sorrowful eyes and hugged me. I could feel him tremble, which only made me cry harder. I couldn’t stop myself, all I knew was that two of the people I loved died today and one of them was because of me. I was so focused on being here for my mom, like she always was there for me, that I disregarded everything else. Everything had changed. I was no longer the seventeen-year-old, excited for some dumb purple highlights to be put into my hair. I had become broken and unfixable, just like my car.

And that’s why I started this ritual. I lost both my mom and James in the that fateful day in December. So every morning before school, I wake up, steal my dad’s car, and go to the last place where I was with them both together, IHOP.

I walk into the restaurant and wait to be seated. As I am waiting, I look around. Nobody else is here today, just me and the staff. On their tan walls, pictures of different breakfast foods decorate the restaurant. Then I look at the corner booth. The brown faux leather seats are worn down and are starting to fall apart.

The usual waitress, Stacy, approaches me and says, “Follow me, hun. I’ll take you to your booth.” She leads me from the entry way and to the corner booth on the far side of the restaurant. “Would you like some coffee today?” she asks.

“Oh yes please,” I respond as I remove my coat and sink into the booth.

Stacy leaves for a short while and then returns with the coffee, “Here you go, hun. I’ll be back in a little bit.” Then she leaves again and heads towards the kitchen.

As I sit in the corner booth with my coffee in hand, I think about everything that has happened this past year and how it all seems... I don’t know... It just feels different today. When I woke up this morning, everything seemed the same. Well, I guess it is the same. I mean, I’m doing the same thing I did yesterday morning, and the morning before that, but something feels different.

Stacy approaches my table again and interrupts my thoughts, “Hiya, sugar. What do you want today? The usual?” she asks.

More than anything, I wanted everything to be ‘usual’ again. I wanted my mom and James back. I wanted life to be like it was before, but nothing ever will be the same. I know that now. So I guess now I want to just make them proud of me, wherever they may be. I want to show them what I can do with my life.

“Hun, you alright?” she asks.

“You know what, Stacy?” I smile meekly, “I think I’m just going to go home, I’m not too hungry today.” I get up, leave her a small tip for the coffee, and I leave. As I pull out of the parking lot, I look into my rearview mirror. I can see the corner booth, both my mom and James are sitting there, smiling and laughing. I take a mental picture of the scene. Then they both slowly melt away until the booth is empty again. I smile and wipe away a stray tear. I miss them both so much, but it is time to keep moving forward and stop blaming myself for their deaths.

As I pull onto the same highway where the accident happened, I look over to my passenger seat. I can still imagine James sitting next to me smiling and cracking one of his jokes. I place my hand on his seat then turn my attention back to the road. Up ahead I see something

moving, so I slow my car to a stop. In front of me is a huge buck. It stares at me and I stare back. After a couple of moments have passed, I honk my horn to attempt to scare off the buck. It still doesn't move. Eventually, he walks slowly back into the woods where he came from, disappearing from sight. As I continue down the highway back home, I think about that buck. Was it the very same one from a year earlier?

When I finally make it back home, I immediately head upstairs to my room. I get on my hands and knees and look under my bed. They are all still here, all my pictures and my camera. I pick out a few pictures that had James or my mom in them and hang them back up on my wall. I smile in attempt to try to hold back my tears. Then I kiss the picture of my mom, James, and I sitting in the booth twice. One kiss for my mom, who will never be replaced, and one kiss for James, who will forever have my heart.

"I love you, Mom and James. I'll move on and live my life. It'll hurt like hell, but I know you both will still be there for me," I say as I lean my forehead on the picture. "I'll miss you." Then I kiss them both goodbye.

Austin Middleton

“To love is to Bury”

On a very cloudy day in the middle of London, a young man is returning home from his work as a solicitor at a law firm in Piccadilly, London.

“Ello! Mr. MacCulloch? ‘Ello?” a little newspaper boy says to the young man.

“Hello there little Charles,” Mr. MacCulloch says to the young boy, his full name is actually Griffin MacCulloch. He gives the boy five pence and takes a paper.

“Ave you been to the ‘arbor yet today? Ere’s a storm coming in,” the young boy says to Griffin.

“I agree. I should make sure Alice has battened down the windows,” he tells the boy, smiling.

“Good day, Mr. MacCulloch!” Charles says as Griffin walks away, leaving the small child to peddle his papers. His home isn’t much further away, and although it isn’t much it was enough for him and Alice. A nice modest home, a loving wife, children soon, maybe. Griffin couldn’t have asked for a better life. Coming up upon his steps at residence No. 347 Piccadilly London, he opens his front door.

“Alice?” he calls.

“In the Pallor Griffin Dear,” she calls to him. He enters the room and sees her sitting in an armchair reading a book.

“What are you reading?” he says, trying to see the title of the gold covered book from where he’s standing.

“It’s called Dracula. It’s brand new,” she says beaming. Alice loves to read, although she prefers tales of fantasy which Griffin had to admit were much more enjoyable to read than his

legal books. She looks so lovely; Her long brown hair, perfectly groomed. She has fair skin, and the most gorgeous white dress on. He just sits in his favorite armchair, sits and admires her as she reads. They've been engaged for about six months, but in love nearly fifteen years. They met when they were very young.

"I am going for a quick jaunt in the park, I have been sitting at a desk all day and my legs could use a good stretch," he tells her, "Maybe I'll get caught in the rain." he winks at her and she smiles.

"Don't be gone too long so we can eat supper, I've asked Olivia to prepare your favorite," she tells him trying to sound stern, but failing. He smiles at her. He loves her so much. He leaves the house and on the way to the park it starts raining. He doesn't mind though, he always loves a good walk in the rain. London is such a beautiful city. When he gets to Hyde Park, he finds it as alive as always. The birds are singing despite the rain. He continues on for a while, and eventually the rain stops but the sky doesn't clear any. When he catches a glimpse through the trees, he can't help but thinking it looks very ominous.

He thinks about turning around, before it gets too dark. Then he notices something very, very odd. There are no noises anymore. No birds chirping, no crickets, not even an occasional dog bark; its deathly silent in the middle of the woods. Then bushes about twenty meters away start moving violently.

"Who's out there?" Griffin calls out. Then *it* jumps out of the bushes and clears a ten-meter gap. It's a huge, hideous beast. The word monster simply does not do it justice. It stands to its full height, which is easily two, two and a half meters tall. It stands on bent hind legs, covered from head to toe in fur. It has an elongated snout and ears, with claws that Griffin thought almost begged to rip his throat out. Griffin was paralyzed with complete and utter terror.

The monster decides to pounce, easily covering the next ten meters. It slams into him, knocking him down. It holds him down and sinks its teeth into his neck, gnawing chunks out. Then a burning sensation flares to life underneath his skin. Griffin screams out in pain. A scream of pure, heart wrenching agony.

Out of nowhere the beast is gone; he can see the night sky through the trees. He is only slightly aware of a struggle happening a few meters away. Griffin turns his head, ever so slightly and even that movement sends tremendous amounts of pain through his body. He sees, through blurry vision, a second even meaner looking monster fighting the first one. The new monster was actually slightly smaller than the first Griffin noticed. After a few seconds of exchanging blows the new monster smashes its giant fist over the head of the first one and the savage goes limp.

The new arrival walks up to him on its awkward, bent legs. Griffin is too weak to even attempt to move. The mean looking beast slowly transforms, somewhat painfully by the looks of it, into a young man. If Griffin could move his face into an expression, it would have been one of horror. The monster... the man... speaks to him,

“Listen carefully, you are dying; and very quickly from the look of it. The bite from that werewolf will kill you,” he pauses, “I might be able to save you...” he stops short as Griffin starts shaking violently and foaming from the mouth. The man’s face starts transforming, and he sinks his teeth into Griffin’s neck where the first werewolf bit him. The burning sensation is amplified times a thousand. It’s almost as if a bomb has gone off in his artery. He lets out another scream of pain. The man stops biting him and looks griffin over, checks the wound. All the while the first insane werewolf gets up and is slowly crawling towards the pair; but griffin is too stunned to utter a single syllable. Then monster attacks the one trying to supposedly save Griffin.

The “good” werewolf throws the insane one off. Griffin notices his movements are more controlled, more agile. He slams his fist into the snout of the insane werewolf. The insane one returns his blow with his deadly claws, slashing flesh. In a gruesome fight of clawing, biting, gnawing and punching the insane werewolf wins as he slams his fist over the head of his assailant; an eye for an eye. The monster is grievously wounded though and falls to the ground unconscious, leaving two bodies slumped on the ground and Griffin paralyzed. He struggles to gain control but he can't. It's like a tiny war going on inside him. He notices the insane monster stirring. So he tries harder. He can feel his toes. He wiggles them happily, and then his fingers. He can start to at least flex his muscles. Then Griffin roles himself over, slowly dragging himself on his weak arms. He manages to crawl about ten yards away before risking a look back, and when he does the scene is exactly the same. The insane werewolf's face is visible from his position and it looks terrifying. Griffin is about to start off again when its eyes snap open. It jumps up with unnatural speed and lunges at him. This is it he thinks, this is the end. In that very moment before the beast is upon him, his head clears, the pain fades, and he has complete control.

With unbelievable speed he rolls over onto his back and grabs the beast by the throat as it lands on him. He starts to squeeze, and large claws start to extend from his fingertips. The monster barks out in pain. Griffin tosses it to the side like a rag doll, and gets up to run away. He runs faster than he has ever run before, faster than any human could ever even dream of running. It seems like it's only seconds later when he's out of the park and back on a city street. Griffin is in a daze. He heads towards the nearest place that's open, a pub. It's somewhat crowded so no one notices as he dashes straight for the wc as he gets in. He checks himself in the mirror. Apart from ruffed up hair and a bloody shirt, he looked fine. No wound, no scars. It looks like he just

got back from playing a game of rugby in the park, not fighting for his life against a mad werewolf. Then a horrifying realization strikes him. The monster was a werewolf, half man, half wolf. It should be able to track him to his home... to Alice's home... he takes off in a full sprint. As fast as he can he bolts down the streets of London. When he reaches their home he doesn't even open the door, he just runs into it and breaks it down. Alice was right where he left her, reading in the parlor, and she jumps about a foot into the air.

"Griffin? What on earth have you done?" she squeals, assessing the damage. "And what have you been doing? You're dirty and sweaty. And what in God's name is wrong with your ears?" he stops and runs over to the mirror above the parlors fireplace. His claws protruding about an inch or so out of his fingertips weren't the only thing different about him. His ears have a very definite point to them and his top and bottom canines were very fang like. He also has rough patches of hair growing on his jaw line. He looks very similar to the man when he had saved him, except his mouth wasn't very snout like. Thank God! He thought.

"Alice, my love, we must leave at once," He tells her, urgency in his voice. She senses this quickly.

"Griffin dear, what is the matter? Has something happened?" she asks worriedly.

"Yes!" he screams at her, "We need to leave now! Or we will die!" her face was one of horrified shock and she could do nothing but stammer. As Griffin pleads with her, he hears a slight tapping sound, so slight and quiet its almost nonexistent. He looks past Alice as she's trying to form words and out the window, a large grand window made of crown glass; through the window he sees the large, insane werewolf. It's drooling, and almost... smiling at him. Griffin instantly grabs Alice and throws her to the ground as the monster breaks through the giant window. The beast slams into griffin, along with several shards of glass.

It attempts to slash Griffin with its huge claws, but he bats them away and throws the beast off of him with ease. The monster scrambles towards Alice.

“Run Alice, Run!” Griffin yells at her just before grabbing the beast by the hind legs and swinging it hard into the fireplace. Alice is half sitting up. She seems almost frozen, completely rooted to the spot. The beast takes advantage of Griffin being distracted by Alice and picks him up then throws him into the nearest wall. Griffin hits the wall *hard*; not only the wall but the monster tosses him into a very sturdy lamp sconce. When he hits, the lamp breaks off and the bit the lamp was perched on imbeds itself deep into Griffin’s back. He can almost feel it about to poke out between his ribs. The sconce holds his weight and Griffin is left weak, and suspended on the wall all the while losing a lot of blood.

The monster goes and stands over the stunned Alice.

“Run...” Griffin breathes. The werewolf smiles his satanic smile at Griffin, and he notices the beast readying its claws. Killing them both is simply pleasure. “Please...” he says towards the werewolf. The beast looks thoughtfully at him for a moment. Then it smiles again and throws its head back and howls loudly bringing its claws in an upwards slash across Alice’s torso, killing her instantly. In a stunned silence, Griffin doesn’t have the strength to cry out Alice’s name.

The werewolf leaves Alice’s body alone and walks over to Griffin. Hanging from the wall like this he almost matches the beast’s height. Griffin only glares at the beast. It sneers at him. It snatches him up by the throat and lifts Griffin off the sconce. He thinks about just letting the monster finish him but could not bring himself to roll over so easily. He knew if he did that Alice would be furious at him, no matter where she is now. Using all of his strength Griffin uses both feet to kick the werewolf in the chest, breaking himself free and managing to slice his neck

on its claws. The beast howls and charges at Griffin, who jumps over the beast and kicks it in the head with ease. This only makes the monster angrier. It uses its claws to slash and slice at griffin every which way but it can't land a single hit and Griffin finds it surprisingly easy to slide out the beasts' path each time. He slices at its back, deeply, as it misses again. That was it, the werewolf is done playing and in the blink of an eye it whips around and smashes its fist into Griffins jaw. He doubles back falling over broken furniture, hits the floor completely stunned and figures his jaw is shattered.

The werewolf stands over griffin, sneering again. Griffin digs deep and finds his strength. He finds his *anger*, and stands up on wobbly legs. The beast slashes at him and Griffin catches his wrist mid swing. The beast puts more effort in the swing and in one flick of his hand Griffin snaps the monster's wrist. It howls in pain and Griffin digs his claws into the monsters throat and squeezes around it esophagus, in one movement Griffin jumps high into the air flipping over the monster and taking its throat with him, ripping it clean out. The monster crumples to the ground with blood gushing out from its neck. He drops the monster's esophagus.

"That was... impressive," Griffin hears from the hallway. He whips around and he sees the man; the werewolf from the park who "saved" him. He looks surprisingly normal, wearing a suit of all things. Griffin figured him dead.

"What in the 'ell do you want?" Griffin demands.

"I am here for you," the man replies.

"Why should I go anywhere with you!" Griffin yells at the man.

"The Yard will be here soon, if they find you here at the scene of a grisly murder... they will never stop hunting you," the man says.

"I need to say goodbye to her," Griffin tells him, kneeling next to Alice.

“There isn’t time, you will have another chance to say goodbye, I promise! But we must leave now!” Griffin looks at him hesitantly, not trusting the man, but knowing he is probably the only one who can answer all his questions.

“What do we do?”

“Just follow me.”

Griffin is standing on the roof of the home across the street from his. He found it surprisingly easy to climb up the side of the house. He is changing into clean clothes which he thankfully had time to grab, while the man is watching the commotion the police are making right across the street.

“What is your name?” Griffin asks the man.

“Ranlyn... Ranlyn Dunsford,” he tells griffin, turning his head back to him.

“How old are you?” griffin asks, assuming he is in his early twenties.

“I was born 543 A.D.” Ranlyn tells him, and Griffin scowls.

“I’m sorry, how old are you?” Griffin asks again, thinking he heard wrong.

“I am thirteen hundred and fifty four years of age,” Ranlyn tells Griffin, completely serious.

“That’s impossible; do you think me an imbecile?” Griffin asks.

“If I were a human, then yes, it would not be possible. But neither you nor I are human, we are werewolves. We are immortal,” Ranlyn tells Griffin.

“Immortal? As in... we never die?” Griffin asks.

“Oh no... we die. But we have the potential to live forever. Although everyone is bound to slip up and make mistakes. Some life threatening,” Ranlyn tells him turning his head back to the police across the street.

“Do we do anything else?” Griffin asks, “Besides turning into giant beasties?”

“We have many powers and abilities, and I will teach you to use each one of them. More importantly I will teach you to control them,” Ranlyn tells him.

“Why? Why bother? You have no reason to,” Griffin says.

“As a matter of fact I do. The bond between an Alpha and their cub is incredibly strong. You do not feel it yet, but you will,” Ranlyn tells him.

“An Alpha?”

“I will explain everything soon enough, Griffin,” Ranlyn says looking intently at the scene across the street. “They are bringing out her body.” Griffin gets up and walks over to the edge of the roof, and looks at the scene. Sure enough they have a body on a stretcher covered in a blanket. They load it into the back of the ambulance and take off. “We must leave now.”

“You can go,” Griffin tells him, “I am not leaving her.”

He begins to wait, and the longer he stands there, the more these thoughts try and force their way into his head. They threaten to drive him insane. Alice is gone, she is dead. All that's left in her absence is a gaping hole filled with anxiety, terror, and uncertainty.

“Have you been awake all night?” Ranlyn asks. Griffin's heart skips a beat and he jumps about a mile into the air, he hadn't even been aware any time had passed at all. Like he had just entered a trance for several hours.

“All night, I will not leave her until the funeral,” Griffin tells him, with a look of annoyance as he shoves all of those thoughts into the back of his mind.

“Very well,” Ranlyn says, and then settles down on the roof cross legged. They sit the like that for some time. Neither move, their eyes never leave the building.

Then around three o’clock, a black carriage pulls up to the door, and they carry a casket out, and place it in the back.

“That must be her,” Ranlyn says to Griffin.

“Okay... Are we going to follow them?” Griffin asks, looking back at Ranlyn.

“Yes, lets go,” Ranlyn tells him.

The two start off and follow the funeral procession to the nearest cemetery. When they get there, they scramble up into a tree near the funeral, a spot they won’t be seen accidentally. He just sits in the tree and watches the funeral.

“I suppose we had best be off,” Griffin tells Ranlyn after a while.

“Yes, I think that would be best,” Ranlyn agrees. Just then, Griffin spies Alice’s mother and father arguing with the priest about opening the casket. He can make out the conversation exceptionally well from this distance. They open the casket and begin to cry, Griffin can’t see Alice from this angle but he can smell her now.

“Wait...” Griffin says sharply.

“Yes, what is it?” Ranlyn says, almost falling out of the tree.

“She smells tainted. What is wrong with her?” Griffin looks at him. Ranlyn closes his eyes and breathes in slowly.

“Hmm... Interesting,” He says quietly.

“What? What is interesting?” Griffin asks nervously.

“It is just her body beginning to decay,” Ranlyn tells Griffin, “Now, we are going to jump into the bushes below and make for the edge of the cemetery. Follow me closely and be quick about it.”

“Now wait just a moment I have come across dead animals before and they smelled nothing like that, now tell me what it is or I will go nowhere with you,” Griffin tells him, not believing he is being entirely truthful. Ranlyn lets out a low, almost inaudible growl, towards griffin.

“If you follow me, I will explain it once we are safely concealed.” Griffin eyes him suspiciously but nods in agreement. The pair drops into the bushes just below and makes for the edge of the cemetery. Once they reach the cover of a nearby wood Griffin grabs Ranlyn by the arm,

“Now, what was that smell?” Griffin asks him.

“That... was the smell of the vampire,” Ranlyn replies, tugging his arm from Griffin’s embrace.

“You mean to tell me she was bitten by a vampire?”

“Yes, if I had to assume, there is probably a vampire working in the morgue,” Ranlyn says, leaning up against a tree.

“So what does this mean?” Griffin asks, falling to his knees.

“It is possible she is not dead.”

“But that monster... it slashed her throat. How could she possibly...?” Griffin asks.

“One can have the smallest spark of life left in their body, but if it is there, the bite of the vampire or werewolf is strong enough to bring them back.” Ranlyn explains.

“That is incredible!” Griffin says, a smile crossing his face.

“You mustn’t get too excited yet, Griffin,” Ranlyn tells him. His smile disappears.

“What do you mean?”

“Yes, but she is vampire. You cannot be with her anymore, our laws forbid it. The laws of both our races forbid it,” Ranlyn tells him.

“Your laws forbid me from being with my wife?” Griffin scoffs, “To hell with your laws then, I do not need them and I do not need you. Now shove off!” he yells with a growl and pushes Ranlyn away. Ranlyn stumbles backwards awkwardly trying to catch himself, although he manages to steady himself and comes up behind Griffin, putting him into a headlock.

“You have been infected with Lycanthropy for less than twenty-four hours and you already want to be a lone wolf?” Ranlyn growls. Griffin manages to pull his head out from the headlock and looks at Ranlyn.

“For the last time old man, shove off!” Griffin yells again his anger growing, and he shoves Ranlyn into a tree directly behind him which causes it to violently shake. Ranlyn closes his eyes and stands still, breathing heavily. Griffin turns around and looks back at the crowd, remaining silent. Ranlyn narrows his eyes at him, then slowly walks away. Griffin stands there like a statue, watching as the funeral proceeds and eventually ends.

As the sun starts to set he moves closer to the grave site waiting, and sure enough just past three in the morning the vampire shows up. Griffin watches as he slowly makes his way to the grave, just a general shadow of a man. The vampire, who was carrying a shovel, starts to work re-digging the grave and he manages to do so with incredible haste. Once the grave is dug, the vampire pulls the casket up and opens it. He seems to study Alice for a moment or so, then he lifts her out and gently places her on the ground. He returns the casket to the grave then fills it

back in. After he is done he picks up Alice in his arms and stands up straight. In the blink of an eye he shoots up into the sky and is gone. Griffin looks to the sky in awe,

“It can fly?!” Griffin exclaims, “How in the ‘ell am I going to find Alice now?”

He asks himself. He jumps from the tree, starting to set off, the smell of that vampire still fresh in his nostrils. Then he gets an idea, Griffin breathes in deeply and the smell grows. He can pick up the general direction they went and starts off for it. He can feel this immense power fill his muscles, making him strong. He leaps from a running point and flies through the air, landing on a nearby roof. He continues to run from rooftop to rooftop quickly evading chimneys and hoping large gaps from home to home or scaling the wall when the roof abruptly rises due to an adjoining home with a higher roof; like many in London.

Griffin follows the vampire to a small inn on the edge of London. There he wait all night and day; solid and unmoving, like a statue. Shortly after the sun fell again he watched the vampire leave the inn without Alice. Curious, Griffin decides to tail him. The vampire strolls along the street quickly and quietly, blending with the shadows. He only walks a few blocks away from the inn where he enters a pub. Griffin quickly makes his way to the back of the pub and settles himself on the roof of the building across the alleyway from the pub. After a few minutes the vampire actually emerges from the backdoor and Griffin quietly drops to the ground, covered by darkness. The vampire instantly notices something is wrong and scans the alleyway.

“Hey you,” Griffin calls, emerging from the dark. The vampire looks at him confused for a moment and holds his stare, sizing him up Griffin figures.

“Good evening,” the vampire nods, giving Griffin a smile full of fang. He smiles back at him, showing the vampire fangs of his own. Griffin was quickly building with rage and could only think of attacking the vampire.

“It is a nice night,” He agrees, stepping closer, “The moon is nice and big.”

“Is there anything I can assist you with?” the vampire asks. Griffin loses control and grabs the vampire by the collar of his coat and slams him into the wall of the pub as hard as he could, and he holds him there so he can say what he needs to say. Then the vampire grabs hold of both Griffin’s wrist and attempts to pry his hands off, but Griffin only gets angrier and puts even more strength into his push forcing the vampire off the wall and onto his knee. The vampire is strong though, and manages to pry Griffin’s hands away from his coat for a moment. Griffin pushes back and grabs hold again, picking the vampire up and slamming him against the wall even harder still.

“I know what you did to my Alice,” Griffin speaks to him, calmly as he can.

“Griffin... MacCulloch? I thought you died,” He tells Griffin.

“Did you tell Alice I was dead too?!” Griffin starts yelling, his voice turning growl like, then he pulls the vampire away from the wall, suspending him a foot in the air. The vampire grabs Griffin by the wrist with both hands and tries to pry free of his grip. The Vampire looks completely shocked, but the he isn’t scared yet. That’s what Griffin wanted. He wanted vampire to be afraid, to feel complete and utter terror. To know that Griffin definitely meant business. He could feel the vampire’s neck breaking in his hand.

“You were never going to tell her the truth?! You did not want her to know?!” he screams at the vampire, baring his fangs.

“I... did not know... you... were... alive,” it’s becoming harder for the vampire to speak.

“Listen, and listen well. I am going back to that crumby little inn and I am taking Alice away from you before you can hurt her further,” Griffin seethes at the vampire.

“Griffin!” a very familiar voice yells, and Griffin turns his head ever so slightly to see Ranlyn jump from a nearby roof and sprint over. Griffin can feel how mad he is, but he is also very worried and for some unfathomable reason that made Griffin worried. Ranlyn grabs Griffins wrist and pulls on it hard, attempting to aid the vampire. Griffin let the vampire down but didn’t loosen his grip, then he easily swats Ranlyn to the side with his free hand. He was in control, and he could feel his new power flowing through him.

“Listen to me carefully, you spawn of Satan,” Griffin says, pulling the vampire in closer, “If I ever find out that you hurt my Alice, I will hunt you down to the ends of the earth, and I will kill you. Leave her alone forever. Do you understand me?” At those words the vampire quickly and effectively broke Griffin’s wrists and swept his legs out from underneath him. He bent over and put his nails to Griffins throat, who howls out in pain.

“You have just threatened a vampire noble,” he tells Griffin, who has no idea what that means, “I have half a mind to execute you, but considering you are obviously new to our world, I will spare you.” The vampire extends his hand to griffin, who takes it reluctantly while glaring at the vampire. “How is your wrist?”

“It hurts. But healed,” Griffin mumbles.

“I am very sorry about my pup’s behavior, Count?” Ranlyn asks.

“Howard, I am Count Howard. You are?” Count Howard asks.

“Count Howard? Pollux Howard? My name is Ranlyn Dunsford. My apologies again, Count Howard, I promise I will keep him under control,” Ranlyn tells him, bowing ever so

slightly; Griffin glares at both of them. Pollux Howard turns towards Griffin and says to him very sharply,

“Listen to me now and *listen well* boy. Alice is my new progeny and she is going to walk this world by my side and learn the ways of the vampire. Any rights you think you have over her are gone. Dead. Our two races are not to intermingle, and that is law as solid and unbreakable as stone, I assume your master would have mentioned that. I want you both out of London by daybreak,” Count Howard tells them, staring them down.

“Maybe I should kill you now,” Griffin tells him, “I am sure I could.”

“You are strong for one so young, but not strong enough I fear,” he tells Griffin, “If you two value your lives, you will leave this city immediately.”

“Yes, we will be off right away,” Ranlyn says, “Come Griffin.” Ranlyn walks away, but Griffin stays where he is, eyes glued to Howard. “Griffin! I have said come!” Ranlyn yells and Griffin reluctantly follows him.

Marissa Purdum

“A Love Story: Fog”

Like a cresting wave, fog rolls in.
He rolls through the empty small-town streets
and gently onto the dewy morning grass
before anyone awakes.
Gradually at first, but then
all at once, the entire town is shrouded.

As the sun rises,
the light gray hue conceals
the dawn's pink and orange gleam.
Like a white, matte, masquerade mask
he hides the sun and sky from our sights.

Although seemingly eerie,
the fog is like a bride's veil.
He hides the face, then when the time comes
the veil lifts to reveal the Earth's countenance.

However, the veil lifts only for his one love;
the warmth of the sun's embrace.
Then he ascends to join her.

He disappears slowly at first,
then as suddenly as he came...

He's gone.

Marcus Sweeten

“Hand in Hand”

Run in innocence,
Hurry down past the grass
Where the lilacs bloom near
Quartered water fields,

There’s an escape here,
A place no one near can find
And no one can hear your sighs,
Or see the discontent in your gaze,
Or notice our urge to just runaway
And to disavow everything,

There is a path underneath the trees
Where we can pick all the daisies we can find,
I look at you and wonder what is on that restless mind,
Everything here is displayed and made by Mother Nature
Just for you,
You and I.

We can find here
Nothing quite so menacing,
Until our last goodbye.

Claire Dodson

“Match Head Toxicity”

My head hurts. It is still spinning from recent blindsiding events
in actuality I saw coming from
several smiles away,
several snaggletoothed smiles away.

head like a match head
easily stricken
quickly set to flame
but just as quickly extinguished.

I was planning ahead
safety net cradling insecurities
bracing for the Venus flytrap love curse
waiting for its jaws to wrap me in virginal mercy once more.

Claire Dodson

I study Latin because I like dead things

A yeasty, pearlescent, wet scent blows by me,

But not before it runs up my nose,

Offers me a seat on the train to an uncovered past.

Alive she is

My hope is ongoing for a past that slept like a dozed dog under the rosebush:

Belly-up & defenseless.

But the blue recently started creeping in at repeated observances

“Here we go again”.

I know that if I take the road--

When I take the trip--

It will be a shallow death first

Followed by a blissful afterdeath

I didn't know could exist.

The most recent issue is unwillingness to assume

I replay my own end relentlessly

And I make it beautiful, a masterpiece

All white and satin and exactly how I dreamed,

The sweet breathtaking release.

Waterfall or racecar inferno,

driving me to do anything.

Cremation sounds brilliant.

But I am porcelain.

Claire Dodson

Constant state of abstaining

I look with eyes at a frenzy
it has burned, fallen—the phoenix, deeply rooted.

before it happens it will come along very often
the listless blossoming might create bad shape,
but you're still in luck:
be blunt or suck the puck.

this secret expression of darkness,
that tragedy haunting, taunting to hurt, pardon me!
the theft of my thoughts, utter burglary,
is preferable to mediocrity.

before it happens it will scrawl the second half
it's basically a massive distraction—chocolate, coffee
but it be such a nice suffering.