



Elements

Western Illinois University's Literary Magazine
2024

Elements

2024

Acknowledgments

The editors would like to thank the Department of English, University Printing and Mailing, and the talented WIU students who submitted their fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and art.

Front Cover Image

Willow, Molly Borth

Back Cover Image

Surface, Molly Borth

All WIU students are encouraged to submit their work. Contact elements@wiu.edu.

Piece by piece, letter by letter, as creatives we have woven ourselves into the pages of this publication for you, dear reader, to see. We throw open the red curtain of our hearts, minds, and souls, in hopes that you will laugh and cry; feel your racing heart beat in your chest; and accept the warm embrace of the extraordinary talent us editors have captured for you to intertwine yourself with from beginning to end. I hold, deeply, an extreme gratitude for all of the creative minds displayed in this publication, as well as for the other editors and collaborators that helped to cultivate the magic that exists between the front and back covers of this collection. Please, dearest reader—take off your shoes, sip your warm drink of choice, and stay awhile. I know I will.

Poetry Editor, Ajayla Ries-Ennells

As Writers, we love stories. We love movies, TV shows, good series, funny anecdotes, shocking news articles, facetime catch-ups with long-distance friends, workplace dramas that are not ours, etc. Even a well-acted skit on TikTok can fully capture us. But more than consuming these stories, we love sharing our own. That is why I was drawn to this publication. Working so that my stories, and the stories of my peers, can be read in print, has been some of the most gratifying work of my life. I know my fellow editors feel the same. As you read, I hope you find your love of stories nourished, just as I have found my own while compiling the many fiction entries within these pages. So, happy reading, and hopefully in turn, happy writing.

Fiction Editor, Nicholas Rush

Creative nonfiction is a funny medium. Reading it allows one to know, if only for the briefest moment, what it is like in another individual's head. Editing creative nonfiction is a glorious experience; one is given pure access to the unfiltered thoughts of the creative masses. Jael, Austin, and I were so lucky; we were able to see, in advance, the stories presented in this edition of Elements. And now, it is your turn- so please, employ your mind and go forth. Explore the stories in WIU's 2024 edition of Elements, cry, laugh, seethe, engage your emotions, and enjoy; I know I have.

Creative Nonfiction Editor, Carter Myers

I have had the honor of looking at amazing artworks for this magazine. There were so many beautiful works of art that I got to see. It was very difficult to choose which artworks to put in it. While, unfortunately, we couldn't fit everything in, we do have an amazing selection of art pieces to offer in this magazine.

Art Co-Editor, Cora Wolford

Working on this publication has taught me a lot about myself and my capabilities and given me a glimpse of the publication world. It has truly been a learning experience in every sense of the word, and though it has been tough, hectic, and I was stumbling through the entire time, I am thankful and honored to have been a part of this. I must extend my thanks and gratitude to the Editorial team and our Production Manager, Dr. Ashley Beardsley, and Faculty Advisor, Professor Barbara Lawhorn as their hard work is the binding glue of the magazine. Lastly, I would like to congratulate the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd place winners of the Poetry, Fiction, and Nonfiction awards, and the artists whose beautiful pieces span the publication. I hope everyone has a great time reading through this 2024 Elements publication.

Managing Editor, Natoya Raymond

Poetry

Carter Myers

Soulfire 2

Cole Miller

Five Haikus 3

Ajayla Ries-Ennells

“Diplomacy” 4

“Hail Mary” — An American Sentence 5

Jael Henning

Knitting, or An Inadvertent Damnation 6

Sophia Best

Third Place, Cordell Larner Award in Poetry

Advance Directives 7

Mia Grimaldi

Lover’s Stone 8

Ashes 10

Khloe Weiger

Bent 11

Andrea Connel

Bending 11

Nicholas Rush

Of the Pain 12

Mattie Rose

Dear Anthony 13

Grace McGill

Pink 14

Mattie Rose

I Want My Old Man Back! 16

Ahitza Garcia

Once More 17

| | |
|--|----|
| Sophia Best | |
| A Nightly Prayer | 18 |
| Ajayla Ries-Ennells | |
| Second Place, Cordell Larner Award in Poetry | |
| John | 19 |
| Maya Steinke | |
| Our Reprise | 20 |
| Karol Sheese | |
| Three Sonnets from Noche | 22 |
| Khloe Wieggers | |
| First Place, Cordell Larner Award in Poetry | |
| Where I'm From | 24 |
| Maya Steinke | |
| Where I Feel Most At Home | 25 |
| Molly Borth | |
| Dandelion Seeds | 26 |
| <i>Fiction</i> | 27 |
| Abigail Jones | |
| First Place, Cordell Larner Award in Fiction | |
| Red Handed | 28 |
| Khloe Weigers | |
| The Bare Essentials | 32 |
| Nicholas Rush | |
| Worst Expectations | 37 |
| Hannah Herron | |
| The Sun and the Moon | 41 |
| Payton Brodie | |
| Last Day | 46 |
| Bryant Spencer | |
| I'm Planning Another Murder | 50 |

| | |
|--|----|
| Karissa Geisinger | |
| Third Place, Cordell Larner Award in Fiction | |
| The Amorato Estate | 53 |
| Abigail Golnick | |
| The Diner | 60 |
| Cole Miller | |
| Second Place, Cordell Larner Award in Fiction | |
| Hitboy | 64 |
| Jael Henning | |
| Jacob's Ladder | 66 |
| Ajayla Ries-Ennells | |
| REMINDER! | 69 |
| Grace McGill | |
| Salt Stars | 71 |
| Molly Borth | |
| Flutter | 72 |
| Nonfiction | 73 |
| Ajayla Ries-Ennells | |
| Beautiful Mom | 74 |
| Jael Henning | |
| Mother, Determination | 75 |
| Karol Sheese | |
| First Place, Lois C. Bruner Creative Nonfiction Award | |
| To Not Forget | 76 |
| Abigail Jones | |
| A Better Granddaughter | 79 |
| Gerry Garcia Campos | |
| Second Place, Lois C. Bruner Creative Nonfiction Award | |
| With Spurs and Spear | 82 |

Grace McGill

Third Place, Lois C. Bruner Creative Nonfiction Award

Sweet Treat

89

Nicholas Rush

When I was a Child, I Remember

91

Kieara Morey

The Wanderer

93

Poetry

Soulfire

Carter Myers

Reflecting off the winged light
a fire burns so very bright —
A crackling, sizzling, crying flame
that keeps you warm and knows your name.

The smoke—bouncing deep off your face,
too hot, too close, like you can taste
the ashes of too many gone.

It's a wooden carcass filled with song.
So old, so grand, chopped down for you,
to make a flame, a life anew.

To use for food, for warmth, for love,
sunset kindle saves like a glove —
on a neon night so far away —
from that ball of fire with which we do lay.

Its soul joined with yours, an oblong cinder,
two hearts joined together, growing from tinder.
Reflecting off your winged light
a fire burns so very bright.

Five Haikus

Cole Miller

Mangled wet brain stew
 Thinking thoughts, a thousand times
Can't match wayward eyes
/
Blurry, endless paths
 Each one a special prison
Besides the true way
/
Newly lit fireplace
 In a home of borrowed time
Still feel like a leech
/
Silk frilly white dress
 Proclaim your withering rose
Inland empire falls
/
I dance to their song
 No regard for the specters
Tears drop to the beat

“Diplomacy”
Ajayla Ries-Ennells

Dotting your T’s and crossing your I’s
crossing your arms and your eyes in annoyance

Annoyance of the voices that don’t care about
the I’s as in eyes on them
as in Indignation and willful Ignorance

They ruin the T as in Trust and spit on the Torch we hold
up to the Torture of ourselves and our world

Words and weapons and words
they are up in arms Arms as in weapons words

I am the only thing left uncrossed and undotted
with Arms up as in white flag battle scar

Battle scar as in crossed and dotted with scarlet
with Blood not mine but yours and mine and

Ours

“Hail Mary” — An American Sentence
Ajayla Ries-Ennells

I talk with Lucifer on the train; he says I am everything.

Knitting, or An Inadvertent Damnation

Jael Henning

I.

I imagine that there is an earthly tomb designated for death,
A place where the lamb is subsumed by wallpaper dirt.
Tears fall, lashing leaves with the sheen of fresh scars,
Lewd so near to the cracked lips of the quietly possessed.

Growths of bone protrude from the bodies of the slumbering dead,
Women tumbling down in sequence, like apples cascading.
They turn their faces to the wilted sun,
That vampiric paramour softly drinking of their dread.

The burnt land was made for this, fire in its hollow mien:
To kiln glossy terracotta headstones.
They pronounce through their veils of Delphic cotton
Some inscrutable thorn of meaning.

II.

I imagine that somewhere near
An old woman reminisces while knitting this conclusion,
Its every loop dear.
Why else would woolen memories catch in tiny briars?
And each drop of rain, larval and burgeoning,
Find itself cradled in the tender cups of girlish hands?

She recalls the wideness of her youth
While pulling yarn through yarn.
Its various dolors worm into her work through her open heart,
A scarf turned sepulture shroud.

III.

I would climb the dark catafalque
On which she is perched,
Beg her to crease my skin as hers is creased,
All to step over the bleached-grass lawns of being young.
Please drape your work over my eyes
And whisper only the beauty of the world
So that I may rest without sight
Until I am aged and ready to live.

Third Place
Cordell Larner Award in Poetry

Advance Directives

Sophia Best

I.
When I die,
do my hair in two braids
and tie cream colored ribbons at the ends.
I will not have children,
so give everything to my cat.
Give away my organs too,
the good ones that have not
been damaged by living.
Leave me my glasses though,
and a pen and paper
so I can write you
from the afterlife.

II.
I do not wish to be embalmed,
I'd like to be buried with all my blood in my body.
I don't want any formaldehyde,
the worms will not like the taste.
No casket please,
I want to feel the soft dirt
against my cold skin.
Please pull out my teeth
so my sister can drill holes in them
and wear them as a necklace.
Give her my metacarpals too,
so she can continue to hold my hand.

Lover's Stone

Mia Grimaldi

Eurydice
Eurydice
Joyous sweet Eurydice
With hair of gold and eyes of sea
It's with these words dear, hear my plea

Eurydice
Eurydice
Evermore in matrimony
Life of promise, I guarantee
If you and I can be a We

Eurydice
Eurydice
True love vows beneath this tree
If only this I could foresee
The kiss of fangs, a bite of three

Eurydice
Eurydice
As your soul began to flee
I made a solemn oath to thee
To meet you where you're soon to be

Eurydice
Eurydice
Found you in the darkest deep
I took your hand, so cold and weak
Us to the sunlit world, I lead

Eurydice
Eurydice
Curse should lock our tragedy
Less green grass is beneath our feet
Our lover's eyes can never meet

Eurydice
Eurydice
Up through dark, we fly to free
Your hand in mine, with warmth and glee
Blue skies above, so is our tree

Eurydice
Eurydice
Joyous sweet Eurydice
Think of the lovely life we'll lead
If only this I could foresee

Eurydice
Eurydice
Down to night, your soul did flee
There was still stone beneath our feet
I caught your eye, despairing sea

Eurydice!
Eurydice!
Grasped at nothing, then I screamed
“Oh, won’t you please come back to me?”
There was no hand, there was just me

A thievery!
Great thievery!
Oh, what will become of me
I am alone, grass at my feet
Standing alone, beneath our tree

Eurydice
Eurydice
There’s no life for me to lead
Though breath may part us, death is sweet
It’s with this blade I do decree

Eurydice
Eurydice
My last thoughts are of your sea
Our stone of love, so it will read
“Here lies two lives, never to be.”

Ashes

Mia Grimaldi

Ashes are what's left of things
When love's burned up its core
To make it through the ups and downs
Much broken than before

What's left of tries and spoken lies
A houseplant left for days
Dirt dry as bone, the blinds are closed
With nothing left to raise

Forget the lines that made you sigh
And let the vultures sing
Let rings decay, linked down in flames
Ashes are the cleanest thing.

Bent

Khloe Weiger

Why do you bend this body backward?
A routine with nothing new.

You can block your ears, ignore the lies,
brush off the black and blue...

And you broke your back to carry that love
just to call it “mine.”

But will he mend your busted lip,
your broken heart, your spine?

He said it’s not enough,
the entirety of your time,

your loving heart and helping hand
You were his favorite crime.

But your heart is tired
and your knees are weak.

This love is lifeless,
cold, and bleak.

You are too bent out of shape, you think
what more is there to do?

If he is not the one for me,
then tell me, darling, who?



Bending
Andrea Connel

Of the Pain

Nicholas Rush

None of the pain is sharp.
Sharp pains live in a moment,
Stabbing agonies that steal breath.

But the breath is renewed by a heavy sigh.
Quickly, air is drawn back,
between a smile that doesn't reach the eyes.
Instead, the eyes display envy and defeat,
resentment where excitement should be.
But the lips smile to share in the news.
A friend has found yet another romance.
There is pain in watching.

By now, much of it is dull.
Dull pains live in every moment.
Throbbing aches that drum against your bones.

Dear Anthony

Mattie Rose

I remember when it was my birthday
and I brought in cupcakes.
All the kids tried to be greedy,
but you gifted me with a small bouquet.

I dropped my books
while the teacher was giving announcements.
You smiled and picked them up for me
while I gazed at your good looks.

You were always insecure
because of your dark skin.
But, I found it beautiful
and others thought so too, I'm sure.

Dear Anthony, I know how much we grew
but is it funny that I still think about you?

Pink

Grace McGill

When I was young, I never liked the color pink.
I don't quite remember why, but here's what I think:
I thought it was too frivolous, too fragile, too flimsy.
It demanded admiration. It just wasn't for me.

I much preferred the sharper edges of colors like orange and yellow.
Colors that screamed "Here I am! You don't get to ignore me, hello!"
To little me, they were bold and brash and unabashedly there.
Pink seemed meek and shy if I'd compare.

As I grew older, I grew to love maroon and olive green.
Two colors that made me feel as tall and dazzling as a Christmas tree.
I bought all my clothes in those shades, and I still do —
my favorite outfit is a green shirt matched with low-top red shoes.

But then one October day, quieter than the quietest mouse,
pink snuck up behind me, but not like a pounce.
She wrapped her arms around me and held on tight
and didn't let go. She hugged me with all of her might.

It was then I realized something—it's not the color I hated.
It's the warmth, the love and affection, I feared too much to take it.
Pastel or neon, pink is a soft and gentle hue,
but my Pink is different, perhaps unknown to you.

My Pink is beautiful, though she won't admit it, from the inside out
with freckles and a smile you can't help but smile about.
She has eyes that love and hands that care
and lips that you can't help but kiss, if you dare.

My Pink can draw and paint and bake and do math
which are all the things that I'm pretty bad at.
She sits while I write and listens to my poetry
and when I ask if she's bored, she waves me off. She's in no hurry.

My Pink does her own taxes and has her own car, but meanwhile
gets excited by the new stuffed animals in the Walgreens aisle.
She is passionate and wonderful and clever and strong.
Plus, while she drives, she lets me play all my songs.

My Pink can make me laugh any day of the week,
and I have yet to find anyone quite as ridiculously sweet.
Just the sight of her can ease a day of its bad parts, while
her hugs do so much to lighten a heavy heart.

She can be frantic and worried at times, but that's where
I think I balance her. I can stay calm while she pulls out her hair.
The reverse is true too, and that's what leads me to believe

that we're a pretty good pair, my Pink and me.

So yes, when I was younger, I had a dislike, a problem, a beef
with the color itself, but after knowing her, I now hold this belief:
stripped of outdated meanings, I've grown to really appreciate pink.
So strong and so gentle, but here's the real thing.

My Pink loves harder than anyone you know,
however, she's shy, she's guarded, she doesn't often let it show.
She is loved and loved hard, and I don't mean to boast
But I think I get the privilege of loving Pink the most.

I Want My Old Man Back!

Mattie Rose

Listen to what I got to say now,

He kneeled on his knee and put on my shoe, her shoe
He kneeled on his knee and put on my shoe, her shoe
I was flattered, but he wasn't you

He called me his baby with a smile so clean, so clean
He called me his baby with a smile so clean, so clean
Yet, you treated me as your queen

Though he is fine and owns a Cadillac
Though he is fine and owns a Cadillac
I want my old man back!

She wants her old man, old man back
She wants her old man, old man back
Even though he does not own a Cadillac

I want my old man back!

Once More

Ahitza Garcia

Why does the scent of a cigarette whisper comfort? Chemicals bound in paper, how do they conjure such warmth? It's the singular fragrance that lingers in my memory of my father. The crisp menthol aroma clinging to his jacket, a fragrant testament to days spent in the chill weather of Chicago, and the embrace that spoke of love without words. I long for the echoes of his presence, the resonant steps of his heavy boots, the wisdom etched in his hands. I yearn for his voice, the playful tunes of childhood songs serenaded to me, even when I stood at sixteen, deemed "too old." Oh, how I wish to bask in that melody once more, if only just once.

A Nightly Prayer

Sophia Best

When I was little,
my dad would come into the room I shared with my sister,
and stand in between the two twin beds.

He'd tuck us in tightly,
kiss our foreheads,
turn off the light.

He didn't sleep well,
so when he'd inevitably wake up,
he'd peek his head into our room.

I think it brought him peace
to see us safe and warm,
to see we were still alive.

Now I lay me down to sleep,

I pray the Lord my soul to keep.

If I should die before I wake,

I pray the Lord my soul to take.

Second Place
Cordell Larner Award in Poetry

John

Ajayla Ries-Ennells

I heard today that you are dead.

I read the newspaper, a blazing sun in my eyes
I read “five house fires within the week”
I read “West Seventh St.”
I read “the body found”
I read “identified as that of...”
I read your name
I read that no one knows you.

I remember your toothy smile, your charcoal voice
I remember you smelled of cigarettes, of bar soap, of fresh linen
I remember you were kind, that you loved
I remember you were a veteran, that you were brave
I remember you were a firecracker, a bottlerocket, a roman candle.

I remember that old garage
filled with board games and toys, like lost treasure in an open sea.

I remember that I know you, of course I know you.
I remember that I
knew
you.

I see my dad’s tear-stained face from the backseat
in that double-crossing rearview mirror
the fading image a fucked up exposé
a cheap shot at a wounded man

and I remember that he knew you, too.

Our Reprise

Maya Steinke

We stepped off the plane into a different world,
unrecognizable to two women from Chicago.
We gazed as the mountain range unfurled
and at the warm breeze which began to blow.

Crisp, damp hibiscus flowers were laid around our necks
and we stepped onto the double-decker bus.
We raced to the top floor pushing and shoving,
other tourists talked loudly around us.

Inertia launched us forward as the bus took off
and we clutched to each other for support.
“We’re beginning our adventure at last!” she shouted,
and we moved farther and farther from the airport.

We saw palm trees dance in the wind,
mountains stood stoic and silent.
People carried surfboards like workers carry lumber,
others haggled over prices, looking semi-violent.

Our feet hit hot pavement outside the grand hotel
just across from endlessly blue water.
We threw back the crisp sheets and opened the windows,
she leaned forward a bit too far and I caught her.

We pulled on our swimsuits and ran out the door
feeling empowered by being alone together.
Our feet hit the sand and then the cool ocean
our hands clasped as if to form a tether.

The ocean stretched as far as the vast expanse of sky,
the goosebumps on our skin were small mountains,
the bright coral invited us in with their vibrant colors,
streams leaving dolphins’ heads were tiny fountains.

We bought new, cheap sandals
for we’d ruined our regular shoes.
We weaved in and out of shops on the strip,
taking lots of time to pillage and peruse.

When the sun disappeared where the ocean married the sky,
we walked to find something to eat.
Past live, loud music flowing from open windows
and ignoring expensive places – a big feat.

We settled on a Poke bowl corner shop
and feasted on fish and rice and seaweed.

The smoky taste danced across our tongues –
just like that – from hunger’s grasp we were freed.

Our hearts, lungs, and bellies full
we headed back to our room.
We showered, unpacked, and got ready for bed
neither one of us clouded in gloom.

We took one last look out the balcony
before climbing in bed and shutting our eyes.
The smell of sea, the rush of cool wind, the distant mountains, the twinkle of lights:
altogether, they marked freedom. They marked the beginning of our reprise.

Three Sonnets from Noche

Karol Sheese

To Be One

To be, I whisper, maiden lost alone
A room of cries, I wait, I peer, she who
Forsook her shroud, her home, their hearts like stone
They loomed nearby, I trembled, quaked, withdrew
So shunned, turn'd I, so aware, awake
When they, those foes, ignored these greedless eyes
Where then, so green these eyes did scream, to take
My woes, my dreams, my needs, whence they arise
Some stranger haunts me, move away, now fast,
I'll take this open place, sin's friend, her known
But closed, more so admitted truth, life's last
A phantom real, two hands surround, I'm prone
 My world is darkness, lost within this trap
 The sky is bright, I'm clutched in Love's new wrap.

She Leaves

She leaves me. Daily, nightly. Surely not
My fault, I beg for her return; I feel
Like daylight holds no value; Joy forgot
To hold me close, the door she thought ideal
Without me, days rewarding, joyous, bright
Mine, dull and poor and glued to yonder door
I'm back in that room, lost alone, no sight
My cries, unheard. A raven's "Nevermore"
All ease to mock, parrot, ignore, or cite
That Poe, the poet, never realiz'd
This fear awoken 'round my mind's soft crow
Then harmonized in screeching hinges priz'd
When open, shut, lock and keys' mad blow
 But balk then foreign terror, useless strife
 For return righteous, Love does, perfect life.

Noche

Oh tell me, lurking shadow, blindside bright
Forewarning, storming, scored the earth's bland sky
My Noche, nocturne, darling treasured sight
Disturb me? 'Neath my lantern's glowing high?
She, bore perfection's burden, beauty known
My greatest joy, could never bother such
With gracious peace, so daily maiden's grown
I dare not risk dissuading Night as much
To cloister joyous spirits behind doors
Of onyx rage and charcoal harsh disdain
Her sharp recurring friendship, taken more

As stepping aches and gentle words maintain
My best companion, closely held embrace
In starlit days and precious cosmic space.

This is Noche.



First Place
Cordell Larner Award in Poetry

Where I'm From

Khloe Wieggers

I am from SaraLee honey-wheat bread and cheap tanning oils,
from Smucker singles and Crystal Light pitcher packets.

I am from the Prairie Hill ranch house,
with plastered walls and laminate floors and loud door hinges.

I am from pure white and blood red peony bushes,
the untamed backyard shrubs with leaves that feel like wax,
a pool with a constantly patched hole.

I am from Christmas Eve church services and big brown eyes,
from Francis and Ronald,
and Kevin.

I am from the loud and situationally unaware,
from being on my "best behavior" and "cool it" and
"don't be a tattler!"

I am from uncomfy red church pews and ancient hymn books,
Christmas cantatas and raised wooden ceilings that carry a vibrato's belt.

I am from Swedish American and Ellis Island,
homemade gnocchis and burdock patties,
from a special cake for Jesus' birthday, the youngest blowing out the candles.

I am from the green clay mask my sister applied to my immature skin,
and birds nests in the bathroom fan.

I am from the flowers I plucked out of my neighbors flower bed,
from the hours I spent grazing the yard for four-leaf clovers,
and the chalk tracks I painted the cul-de-sac with if I ever got lost.

I am from my Grandma's junk drawer of McDonalds salt packets,
eggs in a basket, and the Bago Gazette.

I am from the basement storage room, containing crates of albums,
from photos that spill out like the blood we drew to keep our family together.
Frozen moments when family was still in one place,
and not just because they were in the same album.

Where I Feel Most At Home

Maya Steinke

Beating hot sun pounds upon the black asphalt street,
thousands of sunburnt families throng.
Arcade games flash and buzz and beep,
patrons shove cheap, paper tickets where they belong.

Fizzy, popping drinks dripping with cool condensation,
lightly buttered popcorn that misses eager mouths,
parents see over-priced lollipops which evoke precipitation,
wrappers, bags, and napkins litter the grounds.

Kids press their faces against clear, chilly glass
hungry to get their fortunes read.
Dollar bills that may once have been used for gas
are being put to other uses instead.

Rickety, rickety rides creak and croak
held together by a handful of screws.
The rotted wood splintered by the weight of carnival folk
who ride with reckless abandon thanks to booze.

Bustling street vendors from far ends of the globe
arrange their trinkets in aesthetically pleasing designs.
They haggle until they talk off your earlobe
and do not accept any of your declines.

Cheap, plastic rings sandwiched by velvet-covered foam,
magnets and keychains attached to fake feathers,
poorly painted Jesus nailed to his cross home,
an amalgamation of curbside treasures.

When the day is done and I leave this busy street,
I stop for a while to marvel alone.
This is the place my life feels complete,
this is where I feel most at home.

Inspired by "Where I Feel Most at Home"
by Susan Czechowski



Dandelion Seeds
Molly Borth

Fiction

First Place
Cordell Larner Award in Fiction

Red Handed

Abigail Jones

Madeleine knew better than to snoop through her Maman's purse, but she just couldn't help herself. When Maman had called to her and asked her to bring the chocolate grand-mère had sent along with them after their visit, Madeleine had really tried her best to ignore all the other trinkets. But she was only seven and, as grand-mère often said when she was being scolded by Madeleine's Maman for giving her too much sugar or playing pranks on grand-père, being good was an awful hard thing to do sometimes.

The chocolates were the first thing Madeleine found in the bag, the wrappers peeking out even before Madeleine could really look inside. Her Maman's bag was large and old, the straps worn and only attached due to the work of Maman's sewing kit, the mismatching thread colors a testament to how many times Maman had to sew the bag back together. The color was much messier than the clean cream it once had been, some of the stains being older than Madeleine herself.

Her Maman, Marie, had first used the canvas bag to carry her schoolbooks when she was still a student, but after Madeleine was born, she found she had more and more to carry. The bag had found its second life carrying wallets and Band-Aids and whatever else found its way in. Sometimes, Madeleine thought it reminded her of Mary Poppins' carpet bag and wondered if, were she to lean too far in, she might just be swallowed whole. And were she to fall inside, would she find herself in a different world, like Alice had in the storybook grand-père had read to her?

That is why she decided to take just a small peek inside, and while the bag didn't seem to have any secret ways of storing more than the fabric allowed, she was happy enough to discover what was inside. She waited until Maman went to Mademoiselle Élise's house, as Maman had promised to help Mademoiselle Élise with her garden and Madeleine knew that gardens took a long time. Every spring Madeleine had to help her own Maman and grand-mère ready their own gardens, as their village was so far from any supermarkets that Maman said it was just easier to grow their vegetables herself. Monsieur Garnier brought them milk from his dairy farm and Madam Chloé's hens always laid enough that she sold to half the village.

Madeleine knew that she shouldn't snoop through her Maman's purse, which is why she waited until grand-mère, who always came to watch Madeleine when Maman had to leave the house and Papa was away. Madeleine's Papa was a Military Chaplain and was away often. Madeleine waited until grand-mère sat in the sitting room and put on her Édith Piaf record because nothing could disturb grand-mère when she was listening to Édith Piaf.

Madeleine could still hear the whisper of Hymne A L'Amour, though it was muffled as she had made sure to close the door to her room so as to not be found out. It was while she was looking through Maman's purse that she found the lipstick Madeleine and Papa had gotten from Maman for her last birthday. It was red, deep red, like the color of the camion de pompier that Madeleine had seen in the parade last year. The lipstick was fancier than the lip glosses that Maman let Madeleine wear on special occasions, though only a dab, and just holding it Madeleine felt a little bit fancier.

Madeleine hurried to put the other items back into her Maman's purse, only forgetting the packet of tissues in her excitement. The house was quiet and she tiptoed to the sitting room to check on grand-mère. Grand-mère was fast asleep, the record that was still spinning covering her soft snores as she lay slumped on the couch. Madam Piaf was just starting to sing Je Ne Regrette Rien. The picture on the wall across from Madeleine caught her attention as she peeked into the room.

The frame, round with leaves etched into the red-painted wood, held a picture of a young lady applying lipstick, her face visible to the camera in the reflection of the vanity mirror she sat at. The photograph was black and white and creased, the creases worn as if it had been folded and unfolded many times over. The woman was young, her curls peeking out from behind the scarf she wore on her head. There was no mistaking her as the same woman sleeping on the couch, not because of the beauty mark next to her left eye but because if Madeleine's grand-mère had been awake the same playful smile would grace her face as it did her younger self's photograph.

Madeleine knew from her grand-mère's stories of childhood that the photograph had once been carried in the pocket of her grand-père, back when he had gone to Germany for reasons unknown to the little girl.

It was the photograph next to grand-mère's that Madeleine had come in with the intent to view however, as it was what had caused her to feel such delight at the tube of lipstick grasped in her hand. This photograph was similar to her grandmother's, but this one held Maman. If grand-mère's had been in color, someone might have confused the two pictures as identical. Both women had deep chestnut curls and eyes the color of grass in the yard after a good rain. Madeleine, too, shared many of these features, though her eyes were unmistakably her father's, a hint of mischief hidden in the chocolate brown irises.

Maman's picture was a moment from her and Papa's wedding, one snapped while she had been getting ready and that had become her favorite over the years due to its similarity to her own mother's. In it, Marie was wearing a white gown, the silk draped over her body with no puff or plaits or adornments, simple and yet elegant. In one hand she clutched a bouquet of Baby's Breath and Delphinium, the light blue color matching the wall that the picture frames hung on. In the other hand, she held a tube of red lipstick, applying it in the same bathroom mirror that Madeleine surveyed herself in every morning after Maman had done her hair.

The photos, hung amid a dozen others, were the focus of Madeleine's attention every time she walked into the room. Perhaps it was because they were one of the few photographs hung that she was not in or because they both happened to be her Maman and grand-mère's favorites. Perhaps it was because in Maman's the red lipstick stood out against the muted colors of the white dress and cream-colored bathroom. Either way, when Madeleine imagined growing up and becoming a woman, she pictured herself as the next frame in the series.

Madeleine ran to this bathroom now, climbing onto the toilette and then leaning over the small, white porcelain sink so that she could see her whole face in the mirror. The bottom of the tube had an H imprinted on it, with a chariot just like the one in her history book above the H. She took off the cap, seeing the word Hermes pressed into the lipstick. Carefully, so careful that her hand almost shook, she tried to recreate the way Maman applied the color to her own lips before they left the house. She rubbed her lips together like she had seen Maman do, but looking into the small mirror Madeleine frowned. It still didn't look right. Madeleine tried again, less careful, and this time when she rubbed her lips together the color smeared around her lips. There. That looked prettier. For good measure, Madeleine applied the lipstick one more time. However, this time she pressed too hard.

The creme stick broke, one large half falling into Madeleine's lap. Madeleine gasped, picking up the broken piece with too much force and smashing it even more. She pressed it back into the tube and put the cap back on, her now-red hand leaving traces of the lip color on the tube. In a hurry, Madeleine ignored the fact that the lipstick was now unrecognizable from the one she pulled from the bag. Instead, she took the remnants of her misbehavior, tossed them into the canvas bag, and then ran the bag back to its usual place by the front door just as she heard the record end.

Now, Madeleine knew not to snoop in her Maman's bag and she knew that grand-mère knew that Madeleine wasn't supposed to snoop in her Maman's bag. So when Madeleine heard grand-mère stir as the music ended and quiet descended upon the house, Madeleine had very

few seconds to think of what to do. The only thing she could think to do was to face her grand-mère.

“Grand-mère,” she called out. “je vais Aloïs loger.”

With promises to come back before dark, Madeleine left her house. Facing her grand-mère could wait until after she visited Aloïs—her schoolmate and the son of a close friend of Maman—because everything seemed better after visiting Aloïs. He was a year and a half older than her, never letting her forget it, but he still played with her sometimes when there were no other big kids to choose from, and whenever she had a problem, he always seemed to have the better answers.

Besides, the idea of Aloïs seeing her wearing red lipstick like a grown-up made her face turn almost as red as her lips, though in fairness her face already was plenty red from the lipstick itself.

As she walked the small path, Madeleine thought to herself not for the first time that her village must be the prettiest in France. The way she walked was surrounded by farmlands, but the dirt path was bordered by wildflowers that she liked to pick for her Maman on her way home from school. The village itself was fairly small, but that only added to the charm Maman often said. Everyone knew everyone, and people cared for each other. Grand-mère said that if she lived in a big city like Paris or Toulouse Madeleine wouldn't be able to walk to school or her friends' houses by herself, another reason that Madeleine loved her village. For how silly would she have seemed if she had to be accompanied by her Maman or grand-mère anytime she wanted to see Aloïs!

In fact, Madeleine found herself filled with a happiness so grand that she couldn't help but skip as she walked along the path, waving to Mademoiselle Camille and Monsieur Jacques and many more who passed her. Some rode their bikes, some drove their cars, and even a few strolled along as she did, but they all smiled when they saw her and Madeleine knew that the happiness that made her skip must be so powerful that it even made those who passed her smile.

But because Madeleine was only seven, and because she was so enthralled by the thrill of doing what she knew she was supposed to do, she made the grave mistake of being impatient. Madeleine had lived in her village her entire life, running through fields after butterflies and accompanying her Maman on errands to neighbor's houses, so she knew every shortcut there was. She decided to take the one that would get her to Aloïs' house the quickest. It wasn't until she was just in sight of Mademoiselle Élise's garden that she realized her mistake.

“Madeleine, c'est toi,” her Maman asked Madeleine as she paused mid-step in the path. Before Madeleine could come up with something to say, perhaps Non, Maman, je suis not Madeleine, Marie caught her first glimpse of her daughter's face and gasped.

“What have you gotten into,” Marie asked her daughter. “Where is grand-mère?”

Madeleine's face was covered in a thick coat of red lipstick, the evidence also smeared over her hand, which she quickly held over her mouth in a futile attempt to hide her misbehavior. She stood looking at her daughter a moment more before she let out a laugh. Once she laughed she couldn't stop and it was a moment before Marie, wiping tears of amusement from the corner of her eyes, calmed down enough to take the crimson hand of her daughter and start down the lane back home.

That night, before Maman had found the red-stained canvas bag and her ruined lipstick inside, in between bouts of laughter, grand-mère took out her camera and snapped a picture. One of Madeleine staring straight at the camera with both hands raised, as if proud of her handiwork. Another of Marie, standing behind her daughter with a rag raised as if to begin the work of wiping the makeup away, and Madeleine protesting as they peer at her reflection in the bathroom mirror. Later, when the bag had been washed enough that only a slight cherry hue remained, a digital copy of the photos found itself in the email of Madeleine's Papa far away. A printed version of the picture of mother and daughter found its way next to Maman and grand-mère's. Whenever Madeleine felt the curiosity of that canvas bag rise again, she looked up to the

framed photo and reminded herself that she knew better than to snoop through her Maman's purse.

The Bare Essentials

Khloe Weigers

Making a break for her window, Roxanne grabbed her cat, Felix, in one hand and a napkin-wrapped bagel in the other. The banging on her front door continued, as she shimmed down the steps of the fire escape, trying to be as quiet as possible while tripping over the tote bag she had slung around her shoulder. She was afraid of heights, but she'd rather face the fall than face him.

In the cold drizzle of New York, she crept, like a robber, down her 12-story fire escape ladder, trying to remember which steps were too rickety for comfort. Felix knew this drill all too well, so he stayed nestled under her arm, only occasionally attempting to nibble at the bagel dangling from her mouth. After dismounting the metal grates, she looked up towards her window and let her middle finger float in the space above her head. She laughed, readjusted her socks and skirt, and rounded the alleyway to retrieve her bike. No one was out, but then again hardly anyone was awake at 5 a.m. on a Tuesday in the Bronx.

Looking around, Roxanne observed traces of the sunrise creeping up the sky through rows of houses and apartment complexes. She unchained her bike, sitting just behind the dumpster, and placed Felix into the small basket in the front. She kicked the ground to get a jumpstart on her noble steed and started to pedal. The wind swept her red curly hair, framing her face like it was just styled for a new edition of Vogue. Her lips were cracked, her skin still adjusting to the cold weather. Rounding the corner of Main and 31st Street, she white-knuckled the handlebars, realizing she desperately needed some coffee. She made a useless attempt to wipe the tiredness from her eyes while whizzing down the empty streets. She was far from an early bird, but she could get used to this.

After a detour through the park, she locked up her bike in the employee lot on 13th Street and Wallace, a 3-mile distance from her apartment. With Felix back in her arms, Roxanne glanced at herself in the shop window, readjusting her skirt yet again, before jogging into "Andy's and More."

She had worked for Andy for almost a year now, and he couldn't remember why he ever agreed to hire her. She never showed up in uniform, was always late, and couldn't go anywhere without her damn cat. Regardless, he still left the backdoor unlocked, knowing she'd eventually waltz in, usually requesting an advance on her paycheck.

It was 10 minutes till 6 when Roxanne snaked through the back door, slamming her tote on the counter and dropping Felix to the ground. He knew Andy's well enough to know that if he leaped over the piles of books in the corner, he might find a place to nap.

"Honey, I'm home!" Roxanne called through the bookshop flattening her hair out with each step she took inside. Vogue windblown hair might have been a stretch.

Rounding the corner, Andy looked at his wrist, pretending to check the time. "Wow. You're actually on time today, Roxanne ... What happened? Your house burned down or something?" He threw an apron at her, in hopes that she might show up in the proper clothing one of these days.

"No, but ..." Roxanne licked the cream cheese off her finger, and formed her napkin into a ball, aiming for the nearest trash can. She missed.

"Here," Andy said, handing her a wad of cash. "But seriously Roxanne, you need to figure out a way to start paying your bills or they're gonna come knocking on my door."

"Yeah ... okay," Roxanne replied, going to the employee break room. She flicked on the lights and sat down at the little desk. Andy had refurbished the break room after the first time she was evicted, something she had never actually thanked him for. She reached into her tote bag and pulled out some eyeliner, making dark black smudges to accentuate the crevices of her eyes. Andy walked by, lingering in the doorway. He already knew.

“You can stay here tonight, but first thing tomorrow morning you take that money to your landlord, Roxanne. I’m serious, I can’t keep saving your ass.” He smirked, knowing that even though Roxanne lived for the thrill, not having anywhere to go was her biggest concern.

“Shut up, Andy. Your life would be so much more boring if you didn’t have me around and you know it.” She turned to him, batting her blue eyes.

“Whatever, just put your apron on and get the lights. We open in five.”

Roxanne had never learned the importance of settling down. As a foster kid, she was accustomed to keeping her life small, her life treasures confined to a small trash bag, always ready to pack up and leave. Her experiences of never being wanted and never truly owning anything made her hate how hard it was to attach herself to people, places, and ideas. She couldn’t bear the weight of being stripped of the things she loved, so she chose not to let herself get too comfortable.

Andy says this is the reason Roxanne can “never be tied down” in a romantic way. She had been in a few serious relationships in her adult life, but once she felt things getting too concrete she pulled the plug and cut all ties. She only rented when it came to her living situation, partly because it was what she could afford but also because she was so accustomed to being uprooted, she had grown to like bouncing from place to place. She was what most outsiders call a minimalist, only owning the bare essentials, but in her mind, she had an abundance. Most of her belongings consisted of things she had collected from each house she lived in as a child and cheap relics she bought as an adult when moving cities. She was thrifty when it came to clothes, but she never minded. Materialism never intrigued her.

These were the things Roxanne thought about as she worked her shift at Andy’s. Today, however, was especially slow. Of course, the usual group of old hags came in, browsing the knitting manuscripts and history archives, selections they’d never actually buy. A small posse of edgy teenagers would roam in around 4 pm, holding over-priced Starbucks cups and seeing which one could identify the most books. Occasionally, a mother with knotty hair lugging an obnoxiously large stroller would trample in after a warm day at the park, or a college student would ask if we sold used textbooks. Andy had tried to talk about the news with her a few times—today the headline was a school shooter on the run—but she never fully tuned in. Why would I want to start my day with that depressing bullshit? Needless to say, there were few regulars, even fewer accidental run-ins, and almost always nothing to do.

Roxanne glanced at her watch which read 3:20 p.m. She had roughly half an hour before she needed to be up front to watch the register before the delinquents came from school, but just as she turned toward the break room, the bell above the door chimed. Annoyed, Roxanne wheeled around to see who was in charge of depriving her of a break when a man with a dark brown leather jacket stepped up through the door.

Although she had only been working the job for a little over six months, Roxanne knew this man was not a regular customer at Andy’s. However, he took no time to look around and headed straight towards the poetry section. Shamelessly she watched him from the corner of her eye. He was tall (maybe 6’2”) but his posture made him seem shorter. He wore dark cargo jeans, a tan turtleneck fleece, and a distressed brown jacket lined with sherpa. He was wearing loafers the color of his jacket and a beanie that sat too far down on his head. Roxanne felt herself blush at the thought of how he’d look with fewer layers on but shook her embarrassment off as he walked towards the counter.

Scanning the barcode she said, “\$15.89, please. Would that be cash or card?”

Roxanne had gotten a good look at him now that he was up close. His eyes were a dark russet brown and he had eyelashes any female would be jealous of. He had straightened his posture upon walking to the desk but still looked intimidated and meek.

“You guys take Apple Pay?” he asked. His voice was deeper than she expected.

“Sure do! One second let me go get my manager and I’ll be right back ... Okay?”

Roxanne tried to lighten his mood, but he wasn’t taking the bait. He nodded and stuffed his hands back in his pockets and she turned around rolling her eyes. The cute ones are always so awkward.

“Andyyyyyyy!” Roxanne yelled into the store.

“Coming, coming, coming. Don’t get your panties in a wad!” Andy stopped short, making eye contact with the man, and then darted his gaze towards Roxanne.

“Oh, hey kid! I forgot you were stopping by today. Let me go ahead and add on the employee discount.” Andy leaned over the counter as if the jacket man was his best friend. “Just the perks of having a cool boss.” He smiled at the man, who laughed back out of respect.

“Roxanne,” Andy started to shout, then realizing she was still right behind him, he lowered his voice. “This is Drew. I found him on one of those cool hipster apps where you boast about how talented you are and get hired for mediocre minimum-wage jobs!” Andy shot her a look that was supposed to be interpreted as: What do ya think? But instead, Andy looked like he was passing gas ... “Show him around, would you? I’m really busy.” Andy walked away.

“What could you possibly be doing?” Roxanne called back, wondering why she had to train him.

“I’m too busy avoiding you!” Andy chuckled from somewhere out of sight.

Roxanne turned to look at Drew. She had no idea that Andy was hiring, and she felt slighted that he never mentioned it. Then again, she hadn’t even been working for Andy for a year, and he didn’t owe her an explanation for how he chose to run his own store.

“Alrighty then ...” Roxanne started. “I guess I’ll just quickly show you around, let me know if I’m going too fast or if you have any questions.” She turned around, ran smack into the wall, and then stepped back. She looked at Drew. “This. This is a wall.”

Laughing, Drew teasingly added, “Yeah, I gathered.”

She gave the wall a nice awkward pat before ushering him into the rest of the store, making sure to be much more graceful. She was frustrated with herself for being so weird. What’s wrong with me?

After leading Drew to the break room, he took off his jacket and hung it up. He was tugging at his turtleneck collar when she handed him his apron.

“Here.” She stuck her arm out. “An honorable employee must wear the finest attire.” She spun in a circle, showing off her stained and dust-crusting apron. He smirked and she felt her face flush as she watched his muscles contract under his sweater.

Leaving Drew alone in the break room, Roxanne headed back towards the front and collapsed in a fit of childish giggles behind the counter. She shook her head.

“Oh boy,” she said. “I don’t know how I’m supposed to do my job with America’s Top Model working beside me.” She straightened up and laughed, “Well, I guess there could be worse problems ...” She skipped back to the break room. “Oh, Drewwwwwwwwwww!” she called, feeling her heart flutter.

E*

After locking up the store for the night, Andy, Drew, Roxanne, and Felix congregated by the back door. Roxanne looked around and watched the city start to perform. Couples bustled in and out of shops, holding bags of clothes they’d have hung in their closets for months. A few drunk men stumbled into the side of buildings, seemingly overrun by the homeless. Groups of women in monochromatic jogging outfits shuffled past, updating each other on the successes of their Pampered Chef parties. Stray dogs weaved in and out of alleys, only fooling a couple of kids into handing over their pieces of pepperoni. Behind them, the bar and restaurant lights were

flickering on, the outside patios were playing music, and everyone was chatting. To most people, this scene of rapid movement, flashing lights, and sounds from every possible direction causes panic, but Roxanne likes the chaos. She had grown to enjoy the consistency of these endless sounds, and she found comfort in the busyness of the city.

“See ya tomorrow?” Andy asked while waving goodbye to both of them and giving Felix a soft pat on the head.

“Bright and early!” Roxanne called, watching him walk towards his car. She turned to Drew. “So, rookie, how’d you like the magical, life-altering, totally mind-blowing, once-in-a-lifetime experience that is ‘Andy’s and More’?” Roxanne raised her eyebrows seductively.

“It was ...” Drew pondered. For a second Roxanne feared he was going to give a legit answer, but instead, he cracked a smile and said, “It was actually horribly mind-numbing and I don't understand why anyone would willingly own a used bookstore that costs more in utilities than it makes in profits ...”

Roxanne laughed but stopped herself quickly, afraid she might boost Drew's ego. She felt herself blush a little, a quick sensation of heat rising up her neck and snaking its way to her face. As embarrassing as it is to feel flushed by a man, it was a girlish pleasure she hadn't felt in a while.

“You need a ride?” Drew asked as Roxanne fought with the chain on her bike.

She had locked and unlocked her bike hundreds of times, yet it felt like the only time she had not mastered the skill was when an attractive man was peering over her.

“No, thank you though,” Roxanne replied, subconsciously noting Drew's thoughtfulness. She struggled with the chain some more, and when she finally freed her bike from the fence, she noticed Drew still standing. She shot him a look of: I said I'm good ...

“I wasn't asking you,” Drew said laughing. “I was asking Felix ...”

“Okay, whatever, hotshot. Go home.” Roxanne said, laughing along with him this time.

Drew turned around and walked toward his car. He turned around one more time to make sure Roxanne was ready to go, but when he checked Roxanne had already gone. He shook his head and then drove home.

Roxanne rode around the block 3 times before going back to Andy's, using the spare to let herself in. She didn't want Drew to know this was her temporary home for the time being. She told herself she wasn't embarrassed by it, she just wanted to start her relationship with Drew off on the right foot.

Nothing says, “I'm a functioning member of society” like 3 eviction notices and living at my place of employment!

She walked to the bathroom and turned the shower on, then waltzed to the breakroom for a soda. When she came back, Felix was napping on the bathroom counter. She hadn't stayed here in a while and was even hesitant to ask Andy, but Felix seemed to have no objections.

After stepping into the shower, Roxanne piled a generous amount of soap onto her loofa, watching the water seep deeper and deeper into the fibers of the mesh. She moved the cloth around her body, hitting every spot acceptable to wash with such an item. Her eyes watched the suds crawl down her legs, propelled by trickling streams of water and stared while they danced around her feet. She lifted her chin, her face being shot by a steady stream of hot water, and closed her eyes.

He was behind her, holding out his hand for his share of soap while running a comb through her hair. He hummed the tune of “Bare Necessities” from the Jungle Book.

“Your hair is getting so long, Roxanne. It looks amazing.” He said, reaching above her shoulders to put the comb back into the shower caddy. He took a hand cupped full of water and

splashed it against his face before grabbing Roxanne by the waist and spinning her around. Facing him. Facing her. Face to face.

“I love you,” he whispered in between wet soapy kisses. He said it over and over, placing it on a different part of her body each time. Her hair, her neck, her chest, her legs.

Roxanne opened her eyes to the shower head's steady water beating hot onto her porcelain skin. When did I stop breathing? She picked up the comb, a different one Andy had “accidentally” left for her use and ran her fingers over the teeth. She looked down at her feet, the sound of him, the gasp of air he breathed in between fits of giggles, his horrible Elvis Presley impression... it all funneled down the drain with the rest of the soap.

She was seconds away from tears when her phone chimed. It was a text from an unknown number.

“Hey. What time are you going in tomorrow? Also ... Felix gave me your number. He said you wouldn't mind ;)”

She looked at Felix, perching on the bathroom countertop. A glint of light blinded her from the Walmart-made name tag she had bought him. Her phone number, dangling from his neck. Roxanne took a jagged breath in, clutching the phone to her wet chest.

It had been months since she thought of her ex-love, the one that got away. It had destroyed her from the inside out. Her whole life, everyone had left. Truth be told she was scared it would keep happening. But something about Drew felt different. He was dashing, funny, and provocative. But most importantly he had made Roxanne feel something she hadn't felt in a long time: seen. She wouldn't run anymore. She picked up the phone and texted Drew before she could convince herself it was a bad idea.

“Meet me at Quincy's. I'll be there in 20. Drinks on me.”

Worst Expectations

Nicholas Rush

“LEARN TO FUCKING DRIVE, DICKHEAD!!”

The slew of hastily strewn together expletives shot out the driver-side window but to no effect, as they were immediately shredded by the deafening roar of traffic. The target of the unkind words, an absolutely egregious green Hummer, continued into the intersection, leaning hard against its left tires as it barreled through the far too late turn. A gaunt looking, nearly arthritic hand reached out the window, offering a middle finger as they passed before disappearing into the chaos of Salt Lake rush hour.

“Oh my fucking god,” Payson uttered to himself. He breathed in deeply through his nose before letting the air part his thin lips.

Payson glanced into his review mirror, partly looking for the idiot fucking Hummer driver, but mostly to steal a look at himself. His eyes looked red. No more than usual, but he still always noticed. Thin, spindly veins encroached upon his gray irises, like growing vines hungry for sunlight. The wrinkles, already lightly etched into his 24-year-old forehead, deepened at the sight. His dark eyebrows furrowed even further after noticing a strand of curly hair had fallen loose from the form he had hurriedly sculpted before leaving home. With dry and calloused hands, he roughly smoothed back his hair, which immediately threw forward even more curls.

Payson’s eyes snapped back to attention when a car horn, probably more than one, blared behind him in aggressive harmony.

“Shit,” he muttered while his foot tamped down on the gas and his three-times owned Honda Pilot lurched into the intersection. The light had been green, and Payson thought he caught a voice cursing him out, somehow carried over the winds of excessive traffic.

As he continued on towards his destination, he could feel the anxiety, which had been brewing in the pit of his stomach all morning, come to a boil. This, of course, introduced a twinge of resentment as his destination was a friend’s house. His close friend, one he had known since childhood. His friend’s house, which he had been to and stayed at many times. This should not be a trip that inherently causes anxiety.

But of course, it was. Alex, his friend, had never been easy to candidly speak with. He lived in a world of bubbles that protected him from anything too real or too hard. All his life, his rich mommy and daddy had paid for everything, effectively ruining their son’s perspective of the real world. Alex had no regard for true struggles. To him, everything had always come easy, so why would the world treat Payson any differently?

Payson’s thoughts continued to condense, like a dark thunderhead, rumbling before the first flash of lightning. He peered up through his cracked windshield, which he was still saving up to get fixed, and half-expected to see a sky that mirrored his mental conflict. Instead, a brilliant blue sky filled his view. Soft, white clouds drifted behind the harsh contours of the Wasatch mountains, which were just turning green again after the long and insistent winter. Magnificent multi-million-dollar homes crept up the slopes, crowding against one another to reach the highest point. To his right, a dozen blocks or so, the grandiose capitol building stood, its granite columns gleaming in the midday sun. In his rearview mirror, Payson could see the entire valley sprawling out behind him. He balked at the view of Alex’s neighborhood, as he so often did. Further up into The Avenues, Alex’s condo waited with its ridiculously gorgeous view of the Salt Lake City skyline. Of course, the condo and its view were paid for in full by Alex’s parents.

Payson rounded the last bend that would bring Alex’s place into view. As Payson drew closer, he expected to see his friend lounging on the patio furniture, phone in one hand, an e-

cigarette twirling between the fingers of the other. Callie, Alex's absurdly adorable Australian Shepherd, would be lying underneath the patio chair, gnawing on a stick that Alex was too careless to confiscate. Usually, a book that he was reading would lay unopened in his lap. He'd been carrying around a dusty copy of Edgar Allen Poe's short stories for over a year now, which he always kept carefully in view.

Instead, as Payson slowed to a halt in front of the three-story condo, he saw a strange car parked in the driveway and an even stranger man seated on the patio. Callie wriggled around at the feet of the stranger, very obviously desperate for a belly rub. The stranger absentmindedly dangled a few fingers down to Callie, which clearly did not satisfy the pup. Alex sat next to him, the two engaged in deep conversation. He looked up as Payson shifted his Pilot into park and waved him encouragingly up the driveway. Payson's eyebrows crashed together; his face scrunched up in confusion.

What is this fool doing now? he thought to himself. He unbuckled his seatbelt and climbed out of the car. Callie's ears perked up at the sound of the closing car door and she bolted across the yard to greet her Uncle Payson.

"Hi, girl!" Payson cooed as he knelt down, cupping the dog's fluffy face in his hands and allowing her to lick his nose. "What the hell does your daddy got going on? Can you tell me? Can you tell me?" Payson asked in a low, sing-song voice, chuckling to himself as Callie nearly jumped out of her skin with excitement. At least Payson could count on Callie to be reliable.

"Alright girl, let's go see." Payson stood and began walking up the driveway, Callie bounding at his heels, staring up at him with her tongue lolling from her mouth.

After a few awkward steps which he spent curiously eyeing the stranger's beat-up Nissan Altima, Payson stood on the front patio.

"Hey, man. You're late," Alex joked.

Payson's eyes rolled. Alex was chronically late, something that bothered his more punctual friend. If and when Payson was ever late, even if only by a few minutes, Alex made a big show of pointing it out.

"C'mon, you know what Salt Lake is like during lunch hour. Can't switch lanes without pissing somebody off!" Payson halfheartedly joked back, "Speaking of lunch, are we still on?"

Naturally, Payson's eyes were on the new guy, who he was now certain he had never seen before. The stranger didn't look like one of Alex's usual clingers. Thirsty finance guys who desperately hung around, trying to get in good with Alex. No, this guy had a different vibe. He seemed quiet and withdrawn but had this calming air about him. He definitely presented more humbly than the typical guys that might show up with Alex. He wore a pale-yellow sweater, one that looked soft but worn, maybe thrifted from a used goods store, which was coupled with a pair of thinned levis. The outfit was punctuated by some bruised looking loafers which Callie was insistently sniffing. Next to him, Alex lounged in a similarly comfortable feel, but his casuals were crafted much more carefully. His outfit, which consisted of low-top sneakers, tan corduroys, a graphic tee, and a steely blue button-up, most likely cost close to the stranger's car payment. Nonchalantly, a rattlesnake coiled around a cowboy boot was partly visible behind the open panels of Alex's baby blue satin. The other guy wore his secondhand sweater as comfortably as Alex wore this surely outrageously overpriced graphic tee.

"Of course, we are still going. I invited a friend to come with us. You don't mind, right?" The new guy's smile, which he offered to Payson when their eyes met, felt used but genuine. Like it was his obligation to grin, but he didn't fully mind.

In return, Payson's smile was tight and forced as he stretched out his hand. "Don't mind at all. I'm Payson."

Callie sat, staring up at the three men with her head cocked.

"Nice to meet you, Payson," the stranger said while grasping his hand, shaking it up and down.

“You hired a fucking mediator?!” Payson snapped over his shoulder to Alex who was sitting in the back.

“Yeah, I don’t see what the big deal is!” Alex fired back, “You said you had something serious to tell me and I know how you can get sometimes. So, I hired a fucking mediator! That’s literally what they are for!”

“Oh? And how exactly do I get sometimes?” Payson asked.

“If I might interject here,” the mediator commented from the passenger seat.

Payson shot him a withering look before swinging his eyes back to the road. His knuckles were white on the steering wheel.

“My purpose here is not to get involved or invested in any personal matters. I’m only here to negotiate a clean and fair exchange so that you both may express whatever issues you might have in a safe environment.”

Payson laughed out loud, “And what issues might we have, Alex?”

“Man, you are taking this way too personally!” Alex returned. “I wanted it to be easier for us to talk about whatever you want to talk about. So, I hired a mediator. It’s nothing personal.”

“Well, it feels pretty fucking personal when you hire one because of how I get sometimes.” Payson threw on the blinker and sharply swerved into the left lane, causing them all to lean harshly to the right.

“Look how you’re getting right now, man!” Alex complained.

The mediator cleared his throat. “It is natural for you both to be feeling tensions right now but let’s remember, directing our frustrations towards each other, rather than towards a solution is not conducive to a productive exchange.”

“Where’d you fucking get this guy, Alex, Merriam-Webster?” Payson satirized.

“Payson, if you want to know, this is what I mean. You get so offended over everything! I can never please you! I thought a mediator might help!”

Payson’s eyes glared back at Alex through the rearview mirror. A flash of red ahead and Payson slammed on the breaks. Everyone in the car was thrown forward into their seatbelts.

“Right. Well, I’ll tell you what your fucking problem is,” Payson snarled. “You have never had to deal with a real struggle in your life. Now, when anything remotely difficult comes along, you think throwing money at it will make it disappear!” A flash of green and Payson sent the Pilot hurtling into the intersection.

The mediator, eyes fixed on the jagged crack in the windshield, gripped the armrests anxiously.

“I really think this should wait until we get to the restaurant,” the nervous passenger suggested.

Payson angrily glared at the mediator again. “See, this is a great example. All I said was I had something important to tell you and you invited a fucking mediator to lunch!”

“I just wanted to be prepared—”

“Bullshit, you wanted the easy way out,” Payson interrupted.

Alex fell silent for a moment. No more retorts came up from the back seat. Payson glanced in the rearview mirror again to see an obviously upset, but contemplative look on his friend’s face.

“I’m not saying you’re right. But you might not be far off,” Alex let out a deep sigh that seemed to ease the tension in the Pilot. “I don’t mean to be that way. I just got paranoid thinking about what you were going to say and how I was going to react ... So, I thought it would be helpful to have a professional coach us through it.”

The irritation that had begun prickling out of control began to subside within Payson. He let a moment pass before responding, “It’s alright man. I get it. I’m sorry for getting pissed so fast.” Payson flipped on his blinker and merged into the right lane.

The Mediator's grip on the passenger seat's armrest softened.

"We're good, man." Alex looked to the passenger of the front row. "Some help you are!" he joked.

The mediator nervously chuckled.

"So ... What was it you wanted to talk about then?" Alex questioned.

A flicker of nervousness passed through Payson's eyes. His knuckles whitened around the steering wheel again. "I ... I'm not gonna be able to watch Callie for you next weekend."

Alex's jaw dropped.

The mediator, eyes squinted with rage, whipped around to face Alex. Then, he yanked his head back to Payson. "THE FUCKING DOG??"

The Sun and the Moon

Hannah Herron

Danny

The very first time I laid eyes on Maria St. Jones was the first day of fourth grade. She came into Ms. Carlson's class with scuffed-up brown sneakers and an army-green crossbody bookbag. Sitting alone at a table near the back of the class, I was watching everyone else come in and quickly find their friends when I saw her enter. Her wide brown eyes did a quick sweeping assessment of the colorful room, noting everyone and everything. When her eyes landed on me, I quickly looked down at the table in front of me, embarrassed that she had caught me staring. A moment later, however, the chair across from mine screeched out from under the table. Startled, I looked back up as she plunked herself down in it, still assessing me.

“Why are you sitting all by yourself? Don’t you have any friends?” she asked me in that blunt way that all children speak to each other.

My cheeks heated as I shook my head no. I will not cry in front of this girl, I thought to myself.

“Oh, well, that’s okay. I’m Maria and since I just moved here, I don’t have any friends either.” She stuck out her hand from across the table for me to shake. “Do you wanna be my friend?” she asked.

I stared at her outstretched hand for a moment, shocked that she would offer such a kindness to me. When I looked at her open and earnest face, though, I could tell she was being genuine.

“Sure!” I exclaimed, quickly grabbing her hand and shaking it before she could take back her offer. “I’m Daniella, but everyone calls me Danny.”

She smiled at me then, a big toothy grin that showed she was missing one of her front teeth. Then and there I knew that this girl was meant to be my best friend for life. She shone bright, even that first day, just like the sun. Little did I know I was about to end up being her moon.

By the time we had reached 8th grade, we were inseparable. Everyone at our school knew that Danny and Maria were a package deal, as odd as our friendship was. While Maria had grown to be soft and lush, I had grown like a newly planted tree. My limbs had felt too long for my body, and I didn’t know what to do with my thin black hair so I often chopped it into a spiky pixie cut. Meanwhile, Maria had long, wavy locks of golden hair that fell delicately around her diamond-shaped face, framing her brown eyes and soft lips perfectly. My eyes were a shade of blue so pale they appeared gray, and I was told by most people that I had birdlike features—which really was just a nice way to describe my small mouth and straight, narrow nose.

“Did you see what Tara was wearing today?” Maria asked one afternoon, slamming her locker shut and leaning against it. We had just gotten out of 5th period and the halls of our junior high school were bustling with anxious students going to and from midterms.

“Yeah,” I snorted. “Didn’t anyone tell her that neon pink is so not her color? She reminds me of those highlighters you get in a four-pack, with the way that dress fits her.” Maria threw her head back and laughed at my comparison. Deep down, I didn’t really think that Tara looked bulky like a highlighter, but mocking people was one of the things that made Maria happy these days, so I said it anyway.

“Seriously, what was she thinking?” Maria checked her appearance in the small mirror inside the door of my locker as I exchanged books and folders. “She is never going to get Jamie’s attention dressing like that.”

“She probably wasn’t thinking. That girl has like, two brain cells.” I finished tucking my last folder into my bag and turned to Maria. She was stunning, as always. Her glossy peach lips parted as she smiled in the mirror at me.

“True. Hey, are you ready for your history midterm? I took it this morning and Mr. Packler is no joke. He takes his recounting of the civil war very seriously.” she asked as she looped her arm through mine.

Shutting my locker, we turned in the direction of my history class. “Yeah, I’m ready, you just hate history.” It was meant to be a light joke, but Maria had pursed her lips in distaste and didn’t respond. “Seriously though, Mare, I’m sure you did great,” I added.

Lately, I’d noticed that Maria had been more sensitive to teasing, especially when it came from me. I was worried that something might have happened, but I didn’t want to push her on it if she wasn’t ready to talk about it.

“Yeah, you’re right. I probably did great.” We stopped in front of the classroom, and she turned to me. “Good luck anyway, D. I’ll catch you afterwards.” With that, she kissed my cheek and bounced off to her next class as though she didn’t have a care in the world.

It perplexed me, even back then, how quickly she could change the whole mood of our friendship. But I was always grateful when she didn’t take things too seriously or get into her head too much.

Maria

I looked down at the unopened letter from the University Danny and I had applied to. One of five, all of which Danny had carefully hand-selected for us. So far, she had been accepted into three and I had only been accepted into one. Big deal, she had said the last time we opened our letters together—hers being another acceptance and mine being a rejection. That college was at the bottom of the list, anyway. There’s only one that really counts and I’m sure we’ll both get in. I had always admired that about Danny, her ability to make any situation a positive one. Despite her dark and cloudy exterior, inside she was soft-hearted and a ball of sunshine. Everything that I wished I could be.

“This is it, are you ready?” Danny asked, sitting across from me at a little iron table outside of our favorite coffee shop. We had both agreed to meet here this morning once we saw the letters in the mail this morning, though I wish we had opted to sit inside. The late May sun beat down on us, and I fanned myself with a napkin.

Taking a deep breath, I looked up at her face one last time before opening the piece of paper that would decide our entire future. I knew that Danny only applied to those other colleges for my benefit, probably because there was no way I was smart enough to get into the school that she really wanted to go to. “I’m ready.”

“Okay, on three,” she nodded encouragingly to me. “One ...” I picked up my letter.

“Two ...” Held my breath, bracing for the outcome.

“Three!” she squealed, and we both ripped our envelopes open at the same time.

There’s silence then as we quickly scanned the page. Dear Maria St. Jones ... we appreciate your interest ... unfortunately ... I stopped reading then, and schooled my face into neutrality. I knew this was coming, but deep down the sting of rejection still sliced me deep like a knife.

“Yes!” she exclaimed, throwing her hands up and her head back. There was a large smile on her face, and she squeezed her eyes shut as though she couldn’t believe it. “I did it! I got in!”

My heart squeezed at her excitement. And though I might not have gotten in, I’m still beyond proud of her at that moment and I don’t want to take away from it. I looked back down at my letter for another moment and realize it doesn’t say rejected, it says waitlisted.

Noticing my silence, she finally looked at me. “What does yours say?”

And I decided, at that moment, to lie to her. “It says I was accepted!” I smiled at her. “Wow, D, we both got in!”

I knew that if I were to tell her the truth, even if I was only waitlisted, she would never go without me. And I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if I was the one thing keeping Danny from her dream.

“Oh Mare,” she jumped up and rushed around the table, “I knew we could do it!” She pulled me into a hug and I couldn’t help but laugh, despite the guilt that settled into my stomach like a stone. “I’m so proud of us.”

“No, I’m so proud of you, D. I had absolutely no doubts that you could do it.” She pulled back and I could see tears forming in her eyes. “Come on,” I say, trying to keep her happy, “this is cause for celebration!”

Laughing, she nodded her head frantically. “I couldn’t agree more. Tonight, we can finally sneak into that club you’re always wanting to go to downtown and I swear I’ll buy all our drinks.”

“Awe D, you don’t have to do that. I know you hate drinking.”

“No no, we will, because I love us and I’m so proud of us. C’mon,” she grabbed my arm and pulled me from my chair. “I’ll even let you pick out my outfit!” In my head, I already knew what I was going to pick for her: silver. Silver so she would shine bright like the moon.

By mid-July, I still hadn’t told Danny that I wasn’t fully accepted yet. Parts of me kept holding out in hopes that I’ll get a call or email any day telling me that a spot has opened up, and then I won’t even have to worry about it anymore. But May had quickly slid into June, and June into July, and still nothing. But I couldn’t tell her now, partly because she still might decide not to go without me, but also because I knew she’d be pissed.

“What do you think of this color?” she asked me that afternoon, holding up a lime green comforter. We were downtown scouring the strip mall stores for dorm decorations.

I scrunched my nose at the bright color she’s holding. “I love you, Danny, so I’m going to ask this from the bottom of my heart—are you color blind?”

Sighing, she set it back on the shelf. “You’re right, that’s ... too much.”

I returned my attention to the shelf I’m in front of, half-heartedly feeling throw blankets. She thought we were picking out everything we would need for move-in day in August, so I tried my best to seem invested.

I’d begun formulating a plan at that point, what I’m going to say and do when that move-in day finally does arrive. Luckily, I managed to convince Danny that single rooms would be better than sharing a double room together. Think of how sick we’d get of each other, I had told her, and she agreed. So, I no longer needed to worry about her getting assigned to a roommate and it not being me.

I would have to be really careful until she leaves, though. Danny is a smart girl—she always has been, from the first day I met her. I’ll never forget being terrified out of my mind, walking into that fourth-grade classroom. But then I saw her, sitting in the back all by herself, and I realized maybe there was somebody else out there who was as scared as I was. But I was wrong, Danny might have been shy, but she was never scared of anything. In fact, although she always thought that I was the brave one, I’ve always drawn my bravery from her.

During our last year at junior high, I started to get worried that she would realize how much better she could do when it came to friends. And in my fear and insecurity, I became hostile at times. I went through a whole phase where all I wanted to do was tear down everyone else around us to convince her that I was the best option, times where I even wanted to tear her down a bit so she couldn’t see how much better than me she was.

“How about this?” She held up a metallic silver comforter, and I grinned.

“That’s perfect for you, my moon.”

Danny

That morning, I woke early to the sound of my alarm clock beeping incessantly in my ear. With a groan, I rolled to my side and slammed my hand down on top of it, quickly shutting it off. 6:15 a.m., right on time. I couldn’t help but grin as I rolled onto my back and stared up at the ceiling. My whole life officially starts today with move-in day.

After showering and eating breakfast, I checked my phone for any messages from Maria. I hadn’t heard from her all day yesterday, despite the several messages I had sent out of excitement, and as of this morning still nothing. A bubble of anxiety appeared in my stomach for a quick moment, but I blamed it on pre-move-in jitters. I’m sure that everything will be fine.

“Are you ready, hon?” my mom called from the kitchen.

“Yeah, I’ll be down in just a sec and then we can head out!” Dialing Maria one last time, I shut my door with my heel and surveyed my now mostly empty room. As the line rang, I thought of all the memories she and I had created here over the years. The time in high school when we spontaneously dyed our hair red, leaving a large splotch on my beige carpet that still hasn’t come out. Her mom was so pissed at her that she had to go to the salon the next day and get it all removed, meanwhile, I kept mine for a couple of months.

“Hey, you’ve reached Maria’s voicemail. You know what to do.” Sighing, I ended the call without leaving a message. If she wanted to be late to move in then that’s on her. I took one final look around the room before heading out, ready to drive the 76 miles it takes to get from our hometown to the campus.

During the drive, I still didn’t hear back from Maria. In my frustration towards her, I reflected back on all the years we’ve spent together. Part of me was disappointed to find out that we had both gotten into the college, a dark and twisted part of me that would never admit it out loud.

I love Maria more than anything, but I secretly hoped that college would finally give me my time to shine. My turn to be the sun, and not just the moon as I’ve always been in our friendship. It’s not her fault, I would always remind myself. She can’t help that she glows radiantly, that everyone else just exists to bask in her presence. But when will I get my shot? I always wondered.

I continued to reflect on our differences as I unpacked later on, having already arranged the furniture in my room to exactly how I liked it. Maria has always had an outgoing personality, I thought. She was outgoing from the moment she approached me in fourth grade, taking the lead in our friendship from the very beginning. Sure, at times she could be impulsive and moody, but for the most part, she was always smiling and happy. At least, it’s always seemed that way.

I finally decided that maybe this year I’ll put just a little bit of distance between us when a note fluttered from my last box. My name is written across it in Maria’s loopy handwriting. Taking a seat on the edge of my mattress, I carefully opened it.

Dear D,

I’m sorry that you have to find out this way, but it’s better for both of us. I didn’t get accepted—I got waitlisted. I’m sorry. But I knew that you would never agree to go live your dream without me there, and you need to, D. You need to live that dream for both of us. Maybe someday, we’ll

find each other again and get to live it together, but for now, don't try to get a hold of me. I've decided to travel, and I've ditched my phone. I love you to the moon and back, D.

Maria

For a moment I just reread her words over and over again. She never was accepted, not fully. Then, before I could stop myself, I laughed out loud. Loud bursts of laughter bordering on hysterical.

Of course, she would do this, I thought. Of course, she would decide that the best course of action would be to lie to me all summer, thinking the whole time that my choice would depend solely on her. It's comical, really, how hard I laughed at that thought. She must think me so shallow, I thought, to think that I couldn't make a decision, especially one as large as this, for myself based on myself.

And as I sat there, still laughing, a thought occurred. And the thought is so liberating, a wave of calm instantly washed over me. I'm free. I can finally shine the way that I want to shine, not the way the moon can only shine when the sun is looking at it. I'm free.

Last Day

Payton Brodie

It's a real bumner to go see The Doctor and have some pill pusher in freshly pressed scrubs tell you that you have a terminal disease with only a few days to live, but the upside is that I got to name it. It's truly an enlightening experience—dying slowly. It gives you a fresh perspective. Normally, people would cry and beg, or cry and hope. Hope that The Doctor was wrong, beg for a treatment, or pray for a miracle. This wasn't one of those cases. I didn't get one of those highly treatable cancers. The unmistakable confidence in The Doctor's posture, from his slid-back shoulders to his slightly elevated chin, told me there was no begging, no hoping, and no praying. It's not like I would have anyway. I'm surprised I made it as far as I did.

Sitting silently in that waiting room after getting the news, I watched two sniffing kids playing that weird game where you slide blocks of different colors and shapes across crazy-straw wires from one end to the other. There are no winners. The game has no objective. It's merely a distraction. The Doctor and his scrubs called me over to the window where The Receptionist was clicking away, stabbing the keyboard all day long, leaving her mark on this world in that rolling chair. He handed me a sheet of paper and there it was, in black and white, my diagnosis and expiration date, all neatly typed out with his signature and seal of approval. I never saw a smile on his face. I jammed the paper deep into my coat pocket, not trying to bury it or forget about it, but more like keeping a souvenir tucked away. He also prescribed pharmaceuticals to keep the pain to a minimum, but after he sent me on my way, I never went to any pharmacy.

I think Nickelback had it all wrong. "If Today Was Your Last Day," I wouldn't do any of that shit. I'm not going to call the friends I never see. There are reasons we don't talk. I'm not going to forgive my enemies. Hell, I wish I could take them down with me. I'm sure as hell not donating every dime I have. I'm the unfortunate one and those dimes are going to the only family I have when I'm gone. It's interesting to think about though. It's like fantasizing about winning the lottery. What would you do with all that money? What would you do if you only had a few days to live?

The first thing I did was go back to The Store where I work, just as a farewell, not that they'll miss me anyway, but I had a moral obligation to do it. I made sure to give my boss a farewell present before leaving. It was a bird. Not one with wings or feathers or even a beak, and he really didn't appreciate it, which made it that much more fulfilling. If I hadn't been dying, then I'm sure I would've died in that miserable hole contaminated with mindless automatons following their paychecks like a worm on a hook. People are a lot like fish. No matter how many times you throw them back, they always come back for the bait. The only difference is that a fish sometimes gets away with the bait, while people are stuck on the hook.

It was late autumn now. The once verdant leaves among the trees had been through their glorious cycle of changing colors and were now wilting away and detaching from their limbs, falling gracefully to the ground. Watching the leaves is like watching a supernova. A star born from dust and gas starts with a spark of hope before it shimmers with light, and as time passes it slowly changes and collapses in on itself until it erupts into a fiery burst and either starts anew or floats around the galaxy as beautiful remnants. That late afternoon I came home with a surprise.

I crossed the threshold and hung up my coat on the same hook just like any other day and was greeted with two kisses: one from The Dog and one from Annie. Annie was my dream girl who actually crawled out of my dreams and came into reality. Either that, or I'm still dreaming. The intermittent chest pains and the fluid in my lungs feel pretty real though. We've known each other for as long as I can remember but we didn't officially start dating until a couple of years ago. I still remember the crush I had on her back in grade school. I can't remember what I was trying to prove, but my group of friends and I would chase her and her friends around the schoolyard until they either kicked the shit out of us or we made a tactical

retreat. Looking back, I was really worried those stomps from the flashing light-up shoes would give me epileptic seizures.

“How was your day?” she asked, still holding tightly around my waist.

“Hey,” I started, managing to twist my way around to get a better look at her. “I actually took some time off work and I wanted to take you somewhere special.”

Her eyes cycled from happy, to concerned, then back to ecstatic and a smile drew across her face from ear to ear. “Are you taking me to The Theme Park!?”

It’s her favorite place in the world and she’s never even been there. It’s been a dream of hers since she was a child to walk through Magic Place and bask in its glory. She never stops fantasizing about getting her very own wand that can interact with the exhibits, trying their exotic candies and drinks, and sharing that experience with her loved ones.

“What’s Theme Park?” I teased, “I was going to take you to Movie Theater to watch that new Masked Killer Stabs People movie.”

She hates horror movies. Annie sent a playful right hook into my shoulder, and I cowered to the floor, screaming, “You broke it! My arm! It’s broken.” She crossed her arms and scowled. “Get up you big baby.” I shot back up and she took both my hands in hers. “So, what’s the occasion?”

Telling her I’ve only got a few days to live, while it is the real reason, would really throw a wet towel over the magical moment.

“I just really needed a break from work, and I think this would be really good for us.” I had to force out a grin at first but when I saw that little twinkle in her eye, the warmth came naturally.

The plane tickets were ordered that night, and we had a flight ready for the next day. It would’ve been a crazy coincidence had I not broke the bank to get our seats as early as possible. Money doesn’t mean anything when you’re in a box in the dirt. Might as well make it count now. Annie didn’t sleep that night. She stayed up mapping out loud where we were going and how much time we’d be spending in each district, what treats she would try and the order she’d try them in, and of course, her very own wand.

The flight sucked, to say the least. It was long, the seats were uncomfortable, the airport was busy, and the flight attendants gave us these paper squares that looked and felt like the bib dentists give you if you’re a bleeder. I still don’t know if it was a napkin or a pillowcase or some other device that I just couldn’t figure out. I spent the entire flight staring out the window, watching the wings slice through the clouds, and I don’t remember having a single thought.

I started hearing snapping, then cheering, then the growing sounds of festive music. “Hey!” I quickly snapped my head toward the yelling to see Annie. “Hey, everything okay?” she asked, the world came back to me in a rush. I had been standing in the middle of a cobblestone path outside the Candy Shop, completely zoned out. “Yeah, sorry. Just spacing out.”

How long was I out of it? Is today the big day? No, it’s only day two. We rode the rides, got sick on candy, drank exotic sodas that fizzled on our tongues, got sick on those too, and we laughed the whole time.

Annie got her wand and she held it like losing it would be worse than losing a relative. She could barely contain her excitement in the store when she bought it. Her hands were shaky, and I could’ve sworn there had to be two fairies yanking her cheek muscles back like Botox with a smile that big. She waved that Bluetooth piece of plastic around everywhere in Magic Place, dancing around like one of the characters it was based on, except her glass slippers were untied Chuck Taylors and her extravagant, sparkly dress was a pair of denim overalls with a band tee underneath. She changed the colors of every streetlamp, altered the murals on every wall, and even opened a “secret” entrance to the gift shop. She marched out of there with a stuffed animal so cute it could’ve melted a heart of steel. I got something special out of that gift shop too.

Only one thing could’ve made that day even better than it already was. When we left the Theme Park gate, I halted for a minute and looked up at the stars. I don’t believe in any of that

horoscope crap, and maybe it was just the flickering lights from Magic Place and not actually stars at all, but I stopped. Annie was still holding my hand and stopped abruptly. I grabbed her wand and asked if she wanted to see a real magic trick. She's well-adjusted to my pranks at this point so she let me have my moment. I rolled my sleeves up and took up a fighting stance like something spectacular was about to happen. I gave the wand a twirl, muttered some nonsense, reached behind her ear, and pulled out my gift shop souvenir. It was a black ring with a gemstone that glows, detailed with her favorite district from Magic Place. Slowly, I dropped to one knee and presented the ring to her. She dropped her massive bag of goodies and even let the stuffed animal drop too. I couldn't even mutter the words before she was bursting with tears, cupping her hands over her gaping mouth, and nodding vigorously.

The judge at our local Courthouse got us married the day after we came home on account of my condition and never said a word to Annie. He asked us both something about sickness and health, but we were both speechless from being lost in each other's eyes. He gave one of those grumbled throat-clearing noises and we both came back and simultaneously said, "I do."

She spent the night celebrating with leftover candy and fizzy soda, while I celebrated with bloody vomit in the bathroom. The pain was unbearable by that point. I was sweating, which led to shivering, which led to coughing, which led to more blood. I told her my stomach was hurting and I was going to go out to get some Stomach Relief, which technically wasn't a complete lie.

My stomach really was in a different part of my body, and I did get medicine for it. An old buddy of mine was a dealer and with only a couple of days left, why the hell shouldn't I try it? It'd be like getting a life sentence or the death penalty. That was my first time getting high and I have to say, it felt really good. The chest pain drifted away, and everything felt so warm and cozy. I never noticed all the green and red lights lying over the city like a Christmas blanket because there was always so much noise that drowned out the color. I got doped up for the next couple of days after that. It was another one of those little white lies that wasn't going to hurt anyone and if it did, I wouldn't be sticking around for the repercussions.

The night before my big day was when it all went to shit. I came home after visiting Friend again and I wish what I saw was just the dope talking. I crossed the threshold, just like any other day, but there were no kisses. I saw my coat on a different hook and Annie was standing next to it with a familiar piece of paper in her hand, tears streaming down her soft, red cheeks. She promptly held it up and asked, "Were you ever going to tell me?" I was still freshly doped up and even if I wasn't, I wouldn't have known what to say.

"This date says you're dying tomorrow! Tomorrow! And I'm only finding out now? And not even from my fucking husband!" She was irate and had every reason to be.

"I just wanted our last days to be special." I tried to sound as coherent as I could. "I didn't want you to get upset and I wanted to be the one to take you to your favorite place." She shook her head back and forth like a pendulum, as if she was denying everything I said for some reason.

She told me it was her least favorite place now, and the chest pain I was feeling was different from normal. Annie dropped the paper, grabbed her wand, and snapped it in two across her knee. I was still speechless. The only thing I could think to do was hold her. Our dog loves country music and it's all we play on her personal radio in the living room. Some stupid, sappy love song about whiskey and tractors was playing, but that didn't stop me from holding her tight and swaying gently.

The crying turned to sobbing and the sobbing turned to silence. We held each other and swayed for hours. Time didn't exist in our little bubble. But the tighter she held me, the more time I felt pass. It was like waiting for the clock to strike midnight on New Year's Eve, except my

resolution was to keep this moment going for as long as I could. Just one more hour. Just a few more minutes. Like some piss-head kid who won't get off the Game Console and go to bed. The lights are going out kid, whether you like it or not. The longer you wait, the closer I get to pulling the plug on that damn console and making you go to bed. We didn't let go of each other until we heard birds start to sing and saw sunlight creeping through the curtains.

What's weird about having a time stamp is the fact that it's a give or take. The clock doesn't just turn over to a new day and you don't wake up. No, instead, you have to sit and wait patiently. It wasn't until late that evening that the internal suffocation took over and everything started shutting down. It was closing time. That special time of day when you get to flip that open sign around, turn off all the lights, and lock the doors.

The next thing I remembered was waking up in a hospital bed with Annie next to me. I really hoped she didn't call an ambulance. She'll be paying those medical bills for the rest of her life. She reached down into her purse and pulled out the wand. It was crudely taped back together. There were wires dangling from it and glue leaking from the tape. She started waving it at me and touched it to my chest. I looked at her and chuckled a bit. "You know that won't make me feel better, right?" I said to her.

She cupped my head with her hands and said, "It's not supposed to make you feel better."

I'm Planning Another Murder

Bryant Spencer

I know that sounds terrible, but hear me out. Every day I'd wake up at the same time, eat the same breakfast, and commit to the same schedule. The only variety I'd get was the mix of classes, and even then, I still felt like I was stuck in a loop. College was supposed to be the best years of my life, but unless you drink, party, or have any friends, it's basically high school without your family's support. I miss that.

It started not long after I moved into my dorm and developed my routine. Not the killing; I was doing that long before. I mean the itching underneath my skin. Not just in my hands, or my neck, this feeling ran through my entire body like fire ants through flesh. It'd start off as a minor, practically unnoticeable itch on my shoulder in the morning. When I'd ignore it, the itching would spread to my arms, a little more annoying but I could function through my afternoon classes. After a few more hours of nothing being done, my arms would feel like they were on fire, along with my chest and back. This wasn't pleasant, but it wasn't the worst of my symptoms.

Usually, when I get to this point, I begin my hunt. In the winter, and the later parts of fall, the sun would set early, providing me with a perfect natural cover in the night. Sadly, it was now late spring. Which meant I'd have to wait a bit more to give into my bloodlust. Once upon a time, I'd go out anyway—pull a guy into an alleyway. I quickly gave up on those kinds of kills. Not because I didn't enjoy them, they were up there with my favorites, but because they drew way too much attention. I had to be careful in a college town.

That's why I developed a more reliable way of hunting. I'd get the craving about once a week, so I had six days to plan things out. I'd start by scouting out a new hunting ground. I lived on campus, so I tended to set up pretty far to avoid students. Today, I chose a place just outside of town, specifically a hiking trail. I usually try to avoid hunting in the same location twice, but this place was something special. Now, I'm not dumb enough to give a name but this was a relatively easy trail to navigate, which meant it was popular in the day with one or two more experienced people hiking at night. Those were my targets. In this case, I was hunting a couple.

I had never hunted a pair before. Not consciously, at least. I'm sure some of my past prey had partners of some kind but they were alone when they died. That's what made this exciting.

Once I picked a location and targets, I had to learn about my prey. Nothing too crazy, just what time they'd arrive at the trail, the equipment they had if any, and most importantly, what routes they'd take. Once I was sure of that, I could plan more effectively.

The way I went about this was by exploring the trails myself. This was a necessary part of my process, but make no mistake, I enjoyed strolling through the woods. Making my way through the brush, taking in the subtle silence of nature, and feeling the cool air on my skin made me feel at home. I studied the trail without ever getting tired.

Of course, I had to choose how I wanted to kill, but that was best decided later. I found that no matter how well-detailed my plans were, I could never settle on a means of killing until the night of the hunt. Maybe that's how I kept things interesting.

On the evening of the hunt, I made my way through the trail. I was familiar enough with the land to know where every route would intersect. That's where I would strike.

The only issue with trails like this one was that the paths were mostly cleared up for ease of travel. Even in the dark, I had to hide deep within the tree line for concealment.

I waited for hours, as the symptoms of my condition worsened. Starting from my arms, spreading to my neck, then chest and back. By the time my targets arrived, my skin burned like no other, the peak of my condition nearing painfully. My hours of silence broke with a groan as I scratched at my body.

The couple wasn't quite in my distance yet. Even so, that groan was loud enough for one of them to acknowledge. It was the female.

My eyes were nicely adjusted to the dark. I could see her tug at him and point in my direction. It forced me to get lower.

I scratched and scratched, all while keeping my eyes on the pair. They were just standing there. Not even twenty feet from the intersection. From my striking distance.

The logical thing would be to wait for them to pass me, observe their route a bit then ambush accordingly. That's what an intelligent hunter would do. I was beginning to lose that title.

Seconds felt like minutes as they scanned their surroundings. These were experienced hikers, no doubt. But I was an experienced hunter. Not that it mattered now. Not when the peak of my condition was ever so close.

I suppose they expected a deer or animal of some kind to be passing by. They were wrong. The only thing here was a beast.

My hands shook. My feet dug into the ground. I could feel my teeth grinding together. The itching had reached my head. Not like a headache or migraine, this was far worse. It felt as though something underneath my flesh wanted to break free. I couldn't stop myself. I grabbed at my head, letting out a heartfelt scream.

Alerting them to my location? That was the worst thing I could've done. Why couldn't I hold out?

It didn't matter now. Nothing did.

I shot up in one quick motion and darted towards my prey, forgetting about any weapon I brought.

The distance between us was nothing to me. Within seconds, I was face-to-face with my first target. The woman.

Freezing was more common than you think. Fight or flight was natural, but the first reaction anyone had in the face of a threat like me was pure shock.

She barely made a sound before I drove my shoulder right into her chest, slamming her against a strong oak tree.

Between the two forces, I wasn't surprised she was knocked out so easily. Or dead. I wasn't sure if the crunch I heard came from her or the leaves beneath my feet.

I didn't have time to dwell on it. The man with her had time to react and chose fight over flight. His hands were already at my throat.

"You motherfu—" I shut him up with a kick to the knee.

His grip loosened enough for me to break free, but he wasn't stopping. A fist to the face reminded me why I plan ahead.

It was hard to see, but I dodged his second punch and hit him square in the jaw with my own. He stumbled but didn't fall until I charged in with another.

He was athletic, but clearly not ready for this.

I forced him to the ground and delivered blow after blow, occasionally having to switch hands when he grabbed at the other. In the end, he was overwhelmed by someone clearly superior.

My punches stopped when the itching did. He should've been dead by that point, but to my surprise, he could speak. Barely.

He struggled, but between groans of pain and wheezing, he begged me to let him go. That he wouldn't tell anyone.

This was new to me. Despite being a seasoned hunter, I'd actually never had any prey beg for their life. I'm sure many would if they were in his position, but I often wasn't this sloppy.

He continued to beg as I reached into my pocket. I had chosen a knife for my weapon of the night, and it wouldn't feel right not to use it.

I crouched down beside the man, listening to his pointless plea for mercy. His words were so wet. I didn't have to look at him to know how bloodied he was. He spoke like water flooded his lungs. It was only right to help him.

I drove my blade through his gullet, allowing the liquid flooding his throat to exit his body. No thanks were necessary. His convulsing body was more than enough.

When he finally stopped moving, I turned my attention toward the woman.

Usually when someone's knocked out, they wake up within fifteen minutes. That window increases indefinitely when they're stabbed through the throat. A quick jab helped me prove that fact.

My symptoms were gone now. The last of the fire ants left my flesh, replaced with new skin. For all intents and purposes, I was a new man.

I ran a hand across my face, checking for any potential bruising. The male had hit me pretty hard. Wouldn't want any injuries to explain.

As expected, I had little more than a scratch. A lucky hit could never leave a mark.

I checked my knuckles and saw similar damage. Nothing Band-Aids couldn't cover.

When I was sure nothing would last, it was time to clean up. I started by wiping my blade on the woman's shirt.

For the most part, there wasn't much that needed to be done. While the trail was beautiful, it was rarely maintained. Wolves were an expected animal. As long as I placed the bodies out of sight, they would be something's meal by dawn. To be safe, I clipped their fingers and applied alcohol to their clothing. Enough to clear my fingerprints.

A smile ran across my face as I made my way through the trail, back to civilization. Another successful hunt.

Third Place
Cordell Larner Award in Fiction

The Amorato Estate

Karissa Geisinger

Let's set the scene:

Brothers Wilder and Will Finch have returned to their pretentious parents' property, tucked away in the rolling hills of northern California. Their parents are dead. Newly dead. Killed in a motor accident involving a foggy road and a salesman who had had a few too many drinks after losing a promotion. Will was fresh out of college with a degree in art history. Wilder was fresh out of a very productive AA meeting. When Wilder got the call that night, he didn't even cry. Wilder called Will. Will did cry, but only that once.

That was a month ago. With the help of an elite and efficient team of lawyers, most of Mr. and Mrs. Finch's assets had been taken care of. All except the Amorato Estate.

This property had been a summer home for the Finch family – when Mr. and Mrs. Finch remembered it, that is – among the numerous (eight, as the brothers had just recently been informed) properties they owned. Wilder and Will remember catching bugs in its gardens and roughhousing in the pool and chasing one another through the mansion rather fondly. Most of the other Finch properties were boring and not suited for having children around. The same could be said about the Finches themselves.

Wilder and Will also remember this summer home being haunted.

The Amorato Estate was originally owned by a silent film star, who often threw grand parties in the mansion and beautiful gardens, until his untimely death; a heart attack while enjoying a nice bath. Then, for some time, the estate turned into a convent, complete with its own used-to-be-grand-living-room-turned-chapel, until the kitchen went up in flames and took two nuns with it. And then, after some much-needed repairs, it turned into a private school for two decades or so, until the headmaster took a handful of pain meds and was found in his office. The school promptly shut down once the school year was over, and the property went up for sale. Mr. and Mrs. Finch bought it when they first got married and seemed to forget about it until Will came around. The rest is history, and history had a way of lingering within the Amorato.

The groundskeepers and butlers warned the brothers on their first stay that ghosts were wandering about the halls. They told ominous tales of a certain antique bathtub filling up with water while no one was there, of pots and pans and personal belongings disappearing from the kitchen, creaking floorboards, and opening drawers in a bedroom that was once an office. If the brothers were completely honest, they didn't see what was so scary about them. They seemed harmless, if anything, a little noisy.

What the groundskeepers and butlers failed to warn the brothers about were the other ghosts; the ghosts who followed visitors to the Amorato and manifested into a sinister memory. They appeared as they pleased and when they pleased. These ghosts seemed to have no other motivations than to leave chills down the spine and remind whoever had the misfortune of encountering them of the past. They made the dead film star, nuns, and headmaster run and hide. As well as ghosts could run and hide, anyway.

These ghosts, if that's what you'd like to call them, did not make an appearance to the brothers until their very last stay at the Amorato Estate. They hadn't been made yet.

Let's get back to the present, shall we?

It was Wilder and Will's first night back at the Amorato. They had spent the day sorting through the very few things that their mother and father left behind and reminiscing about their warm, bright summers here. However, unlike the past few times they'd visited, the sun did not

shine once. Dark gray clouds hung over the property, resting on top of it like a weighted blanket, strong and unwavering.

Wilder was wide awake, staring at the ceiling, periodically checking the little clock that rested on the nightstand. Wilder was the oldest of the two brothers. He looked more like his mother: a round face, nearly black hair, a perfect nose. He acted more like her, too, having a flair for the dramatic and a taste for anything gothic (in every definition of the word). The only things he really seemed to inherit from his father at all were his hazel eyes and his drinking problem. Wilder, having neglectful parents and a tendency to get into trouble, had spent the better part of his late teens and early twenties in and out of addiction of pretty much every kind. It was only when Will held a one-person intervention and threatened never to speak to him again that Wilder got clean. That was eleven months, one week, and three days ago. The only person he knew he truly loved was Will.

He checked the clock again. 2:43 AM. Ever since he'd gotten clean, insomnia had settled into his brain like a parasite, like a replacement for the addiction, and refused to leave. He took the good with the bad.

Wilder sighed and turned onto his side, opting to stare at the door instead.

Across the hall, Will was also wide awake. Will was three years younger than Wilder. He looked like his father, all sharp features, and lanky limbs, save for his mother's dark hair. That was as far as any similarities to his parents went. He was smart – very smart – and one of the nicest people you would ever meet. He liked surrealist art and fantasy novels and old films and pretty much anything that wasn't the real world. Will spent the better part of his entire life trying to be a better person than his parents and to keep his brother out of trouble. Or alive. The only person he knew he truly loved was Wilder.

Unlike his older brother, poor Will had been sleeping and was rudely awakened by the sound of a voice and footsteps. It reminded him of times when Wilder would sneak into his room and ask for the car keys, hidden away by their parents so Wilder wouldn't get into any more trouble.

The thought of that crazed, desperate, addicted look in his brother's eyes made Will sit bolt upright. He thought he had woken up from a nightmare, until he still heard his brother's voice, whispering his name – trying to wake him – in that panicked way that haunted Will even during the daytime.

"Wilder?" he whispered, his eyes frantically searching the darkness. The only light Will had was from a distant lamppost he could see through the window and the dim, red glow of the clock on his nightstand. 2:44 AM.

"Will?" Wilder's voice answered in the dark, somewhere in front of him. Will sat up straighter. "Will, you gotta help me. Please, Will." Will reached for the lamp on the nightstand beside him, fumbling for the switch, staring into the heavy darkness past his bed.

"Wilder, I–"

Just as Will found the switch for the lamp, his brother's voice was right beside him. "Help me, Will." He felt a chill down his back and a hand grabbing his shoulder, squeezing tight. He switched the lamp on.

Wilder wasn't there.

Will pushed the blankets down and stood up out of bed, turning circles. "Wilder?" he called out, louder than before, more frightened than before. A wet handprint marked his sleeve where Wilder had grabbed it. Will rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands. "Wilder, come on, man, this isn't funny."

There was, of course, no reply. Will sighed, decided he must have been dreaming (or, at least, tried to convince himself that he had been), and slowly climbed back into bed, still watching for any signs of his brother. He switched the lamp off, pulled the blankets back on top of himself, and lay back down, facing the door. He lay like this for a while, his eyes wide open, adjusting to the darkness of the room. The clock on the nightstand read 3:02 AM. Will finally

felt sleep beckoning to him once again and he closed his eyes, settling and shuffling under the covers.

The blankets were ripped downward and completely off him.

Will flipped the lamp on again and sat up. The covers lay in a crumpled heap at the end of the bed.

“Okay, what the hell?” Will shouted, his voice trembling with a vague sense of terror. Will climbed out of bed once again, crossing his arms like a scared child. Because, when it came down to it, that was really all he was, wasn’t it?

I digress.

He peeked at the floor at the foot of the bed. A puddle of water was pooled in front of it. It smelled like the pool outside. Will absently touched the still-damp handprint on his sleeve. His mouth flattened into a worried line and his brows furrowed. And then he left the room.

Wilder was still awake and still staring at his closed door when it was suddenly not closed anymore and was instead thrown open by his little brother, who looked angry – very unlike Will – and a little scared. He made his way toward the nightstand and flipped on the lamp.

“What the hell are you doing?”

Will ignored him. “Were you in my room?”

“What?”

“Were you in my room?” Will repeated, again crossing his arms tightly over his chest.

“Why would I have any reason to be in your room, right now?”

“Just answer the question, Wilder.”

“No! For God’s sake, no, I wasn’t in your room, Will.”

“Are you lying?” Will asked, out of habit.

Wilder rolled his eyes. “There are far more interesting things to do at 3:30 in the morning than go to your room.”

Will’s jaw clenched. His arms tightened some more. He wasn’t angry anymore, but he was looking increasingly scared.

Wilder looked him up and down. “Why are you asking?” Will looked out the door, into the thick darkness of the hallway. “Why are you asking, Will?”

“I heard your voice,” Will answered quietly.

Wilder scowled. “Okay? You were probably just dreaming.”

“Maybe ...” Will turned to look back at Wilder. “You were asking me to help you. Begging me. And then you grabbed my shoulder—” he pointed to the faint handprint on his sleeve “—and I turned the lamp on, and you weren’t there.”

“Why do you keep saying ‘you?’”

“Because it sounded like you, Wilder!” A pause. “Can I just ... can I sleep in here?”

“Wh—”

“I know it’s stupid, you don’t have to tell me that it’s stupid, but can I please just sleep in here?” Will interrupted.

Wilder stared at him. He stared at Wilder. Wilder sighed and pulled the blankets down beside him. Will shut the door, walked to the other side of the bed, and slid beneath the covers. Wilder flipped the lamp off. The brothers lay in the quiet for a long time, both staring at the ceiling.

“It’s weird being here without Mom and Dad,” Wilder said. “It feels quieter.”

“It feels more haunted,” Will replied.

“Maybe they’ll haunt this place, too.”

Will thought about this. “Mm, no. My money’s on the house in Maine.”

Wilder laughed. “You’re right.” Another pause. “You always did know them better.”

“Be grateful you didn’t.”

The clock on the nightstand glowed 3:53 AM.

The second day at the Amurato was much like the first. It was quiet and it was, somehow, even more cloudy. Wilder and Will explored parts of the property they had previously not been allowed in, like the attic and the east greenhouse. Wilder found a stash of cigarettes he'd stolen from their father and hidden away on their last stay, thinking they'd come back the next summer. They didn't, of course, but Wilder did spend the following summer in a rehab for teens.

Naturally, Will made Wilder throw the cigarettes away. He also avoided the pool.

That night, Will slept in Wilder's bedroom again, still shaken up from the night before. Whether Will was in his own bed or not made no difference to Wilder; he wasn't going to sleep, either way.

So, we're back to where we started. Wilder was wide awake, staring at the ceiling, periodically checking the little clock that rested on the nightstand. It glowed 2:25 AM. Will was very much not awake, instead breathing deeply and nearly snoring beside his brother.

Growing increasingly frustrated by his inability to fall asleep, Wilder decided to go for a walk. As slowly and as quietly as the old, old mattress would allow, he crawled out of bed and crept out of the room, closing the door softly behind him.

For a while, he simply wandered the halls, thinking. Mostly about his dead parents. About how he wished things had been different between them. Or different in general. He thought about how life had dealt him a shitty hand and he had bet all in anyway.

But his parents had left him in the will.

Against all odds, his name was in the will, and they had left him and his brother enough money that they would never have to work a day in their lives if they didn't want to. So, it was arrogant to say life had dealt him a bad hand because it had all worked out in the end. If this was the end. Will the rest of his life be rather mundane? Why had they left him in the will? He thought they hated him. He hated them. So, what the hell?

This was all too complicated and too depressing for Wilder to want to think about, at the moment. He wanted a cigarette. And he knew just the place to find them.

Don't judge him too harshly. Wilder has gotten far worse narcotics from far sketchier sources. An expired pack of cigarettes from an otherwise empty trash can is nothing.

Once he had retrieved the tossed cigarettes and a lighter from the office, Wilder meandered through the halls some more, strolled out the west doors, and, eventually, found his way to the pool, settled nicely in the center of the property. Wilder's room actually overlooked the pool, making for a pretty view during the daytime.

The night was warm and breezy and Wilder thought this was a good place to settle down for a few moments. He sat cross-legged next to the pool, staring at his reflection in the water, and took a drag. Little did he know, the clock on his nightstand, resting near the still-sleeping Will's head, struck 2:43 AM.

Something splashed at the deep end of the pool. Wilder sat up straighter, now staring intensely to his left. Another splash, coming from beneath the water's surface, he realized, sounded to the right, near the center of the pool. He scowled and took another drag, as the splashing sped up, swimming to the shallow end. Wilder was unconcerned. Weird things happened at this mansion all the time.

The splashing stopped right in front of the ladder about three feet to Wilder's right. Nothing happened for a moment, and he was about to get up and leave when a hand emerged from the dark water and grabbed the ladder. Then the other hand. They moved slowly upward and something – someone – climbed up and out of the water.

It was Wilder.

Except ... not.

This Wilder was skinnier. His hair was shorter. He was wearing a too-big, black t-shirt and black sweatpants. His lips were bluish, and it sounded like he could hardly breathe. He was ... familiar.

Wilder sat, frozen in shock, as this soaking wet, somehow paler, version of himself trudged over and sat down beside him. The Other Wilder said nothing as he grabbed the cigarette from Wilder's hand and took a drag himself.

"What the hell are you?" Wilder asked, although he already knew the answer.

Other Wilder rolled his eyes. They were vacant, lifeless. "I'm you." He passed the cigarette back. It was no longer lit, now soaking wet with pool water. Wilder scowled – he did this a lot, you see – and tossed it behind him.

They sat in the quiet for a long time. It was a weirdly comfortable silence. They did know each other, after all.

"Were you in Will's room last night?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Well, he's more haunted by you than you are," Other Wilder answered, rather matter-of-factly. He scratched at his arms. His fingernails were turning blue. His voice sounded like it hurt to speak.

Wilder pondered this. He was sick of looking at this vaguely gray other him.

"Just leave him alone, alright?"

"I can't make any promises. You know that."

Wilder had grown irritated. Is this what he was like? Before? Vague and annoying and horrifying to look at? He was starting to feel sick. He stood and left, not looking back at the other him even once. Other Wilder did the same.

He quickly made his way back to his bedroom, the ghost's ominous words ringing through his head. Thank God, or someone – Wilder gave up on God a long time ago – that they only had one more night here. He opened and closed the door silently. Will was still asleep. It didn't even look like he had moved. Wilder wanted to wake him up, tell him what had happened.

You were asking me to help you. Begging me.

He's more haunted by you than you are.

Maybe not.

Wilder, instead, crawled back into bed and willed himself to sleep, hoping his other self wouldn't follow him into his dreams too. The clock on his nightstand read 3:06 AM.

The third day at the Amurato was much like the first and second. It was even quieter and even cloudier, and the brothers revisited their favorite parts, like the flower garden and the used-to-be-grand-living-room-turned-chapel-turned-ballroom. They left some of their mother's rings in the kitchen to amuse the dead nuns. They pondered if the ghosts at this house knew their parents were even dead at all.

Wilder and Will both avoided the pool.

That night, Will, again, slept in Wilder's room because what did it matter? It was their very last night at the Amurato ever.

However, that night, neither of the brothers could sleep. Wilder hadn't fallen asleep at all, and Will had spent the night dozing off for only twenty minutes at a time. He felt a little ill. The kind of ill like when you get nervous waiting for something to happen. Jittery. Antsy. Anticipating. He could hardly stand it anymore. He sat up.

"What are you doing up?"

"Can't sleep."

"Hm. Makes two of us."

“I’m gonna go get some water.”

“Water?”

“I don’t know. Might help.”

Wilder was quiet for a moment. “You want me to go with you?”

Will was also quiet for a moment. “Yeah.”

They both climbed out of bed, Will following closely behind his older brother. They left the room, still quiet, not wanting to disturb the film star next door and the headmaster just a few rooms down. Neither of them checked the clock on the nightstand. It was 2:38 AM.

The brothers drifted down the halls, side by side, in no particular hurry to actually retrieve some water. They entered the kitchen only because they happened upon it. Will grabbed a large glass and filled it in the sink. The sinks, like almost everything else on this property, were very old and filled things very slowly. Wilder leaned against the doorway, his eyes closed, wondering how a person could feel so tired and still, somehow, not be able to sleep. The clock above the door read 2:42 AM. This clock was a minute slow, though. The clock on the nightstand read 2:43 AM.

Wilder and Will didn’t hear the dripping of pool water onto the old kitchen tiles over the sound of the sink. A wet, gaunt, bluish hand reached around Will and turned the sink off. Will’s eyes went wide, his heartbeat quickened, and the ill feeling in his stomach changed from that of nervous anticipation to churning nausea. He turned around. And he recognized the face staring back at him.

Let’s rewind a bit. Specifically, let’s rewind to eleven months, one week, and six days ago. If you don’t remember, three days after this is the day that Wilder got clean after Will promised he would never speak to him again if he didn’t. Three days before this intervention is the night that Wilder died.

It had been the worst drug binge of Wilder’s life, thus far, and he had no plans to stop. He was at a party, high off God, or someone only knows what, and surrounded by “friends” who were much the same way. There was an in-ground pool and a bit too many toxins in Wilder’s body and ... well, I’m sure you imagine the scene.

Will was close to finishing his junior year of college and was not at a party. He was asleep in his dorm room when he got a call from his parents in the middle of the night, saying that his brother was in the hospital. Mr. and Mrs. Finch were in a different country, a different continent, so could he please go check on Wilder?

His parents’ call did nothing to prepare Will for what he saw when he arrived. Wilder was hooked up to all kinds of machines. His lips and fingernails were vaguely blue. His skin was pale. He was nearly skin and bones. And he was in a coma.

It was a miracle, the doctors said, that Wilder was alive. He hadn’t been, for two and a half minutes, until one of his friends had just enough sense to drag him out of the pool and revive him. If the paramedics hadn’t arrived, he would have likely overdosed anyway. No one at the party had known what time it was exactly when Wilder fell in the pool and drowned. The paramedics got there at about 3 AM, rushed him to the hospital, and saved his life. He was in a medically induced coma for three days.

You know the rest. The rest is history.

The fact of the matter is that Wilder had died at 2:43 AM and that ghost of drowned, overdosed Wilder had followed the brothers ever since Will stepped into the hospital room and saw his older brother, the one person he truly loved, near death. It just hadn’t shown itself until now.

Okay. Let’s get back to the present.

Will recognized the face staring back at him because he had seen it, or, at least, the aftermath of it, in that hospital room. He recognized it because it had been haunting him for the last eleven months, one week, and six days.

The Other Wilder smiled a sad, sad smile at Will. “I’m sorry, you know.”

Wilder, who had thought nothing of the sink turning off, opened his eyes at the sound of that choked but familiar voice. He saw his brother staring in terror at the other him and the other him staring at his brother apologetically.

The Other Wilder turned toward him. "He is, too." The ghost took a final glance at Will, who had started crying, and turned around and walked out of the kitchen, somewhere into the darkness outside.

It was quiet, eerily quiet, until Will dropped his glass of water, letting it shatter at his feet, and crumbled to the floor in a sobbing heap. Wilder sped over and dragged Will off the floor, holding him by his forearms. Will wouldn't look at him.

"Will—"

Not knowing what else to do, he grabbed his brother's shoulders and pulled him into a hug. Will's crying stuttered and came to a stop. Confused, he tried pushing Wilder off him, but his older brother didn't budge, instead holding tighter.

"I'm sorry," Wilder said. "I didn't know."

Now, this is very ambiguous. There were plenty of other things Wilder needed to apologize for. There were even more things that he didn't know. Will had years of practice keeping his feelings bottled up for the sake of keeping Wilder alive.

But, before this, Wilder had never apologized for anything. Much like his parents. Luckily, he now had years to break that habit.

So, as far as apologies went ... this was a start.

Tentatively, Will, standing in a pool of cold-sink water, hugged his brother back. He could've been mistaken, but he thought, for just a moment, that he felt his brother crying against his shoulder. He didn't mention it.

The clock on the nightstand read 2:50 AM.

The fourth day at the Amurato was very different. The clouds finally cleared, and it was loud. Birds chirped, bees buzzed, and trees rustled in the breeze. The brothers packed their things, along with a few mementos from the house. They took a final look at the pretty stained-glass windows in the empty library and the huge oak tree near the gates.

And then Wilder and Will Finch left the Amurato Estate for the very last time.

As Will drove off, staring straight ahead, Wilder looked through the rearview mirror. A pale, short-haired version of him stood at the edge of the pool and slowly, slowly sauntered into the dark water.

As far as Wilder and Will know, the Amurato Estate was later purchased by an eccentric young woman who wanted to rename it and turn it into a fancy hotel. They didn't care all that much what happened to it, so long as the film star, nuns, and headmaster were treated nicely. They only hoped that the young woman didn't have any ghosts following her. Although, they considered, it did help them in the end.

The Diner

Abigail Golnick

There is a diner off the side of the highway, you know which one I'm talking about. It's the place that looks rundown, with one of those 'retro' jukeboxes in the corner that doesn't work until you hit the side of it just right as you drop a quarter into the coin slot. You stop there, knowing that they'll have the best pie around. Why else would you stop at a diner? You've been driving for hours, with no real destination in mind. You were upset when you left, and you still are. You thought the drive would help, that the music playing on the radio in your baby blue Volkswagen Beetle would take your mind off of things. But it didn't. The radio seemed to be playing the same five songs on a loop and you got annoyed about an hour in and turned the radio off. So, instead of listening to the radio, you're stuck ruminating over the thoughts that replay in your mind the same way the songs on the radio repeat.

The siding of the diner is wooden, the red paint of it peeling off from the sun. There wasn't enough money to be able to afford to repaint the whole place. Inside, there's a cook, a dishwasher, and two waitresses at the counter. One of them smiles, offering you a mug of steaming hot coffee. The other leans on the counter, chewing bubble gum, and flicking through a magazine while she ignores everything going on around her. The Dishwasher Boy watches her with puppy dog eyes as his weed edible kicks in. The Cook focuses on flipping his burgers, wiping the sweat off his large, greasy forehead with the back of his hand.

You sit down on one of the red vinyl stools at the counter, with the vinyl peeling off and flaking. You will walk away with red flakes on your jean pants. You order a coffee with a pie, was there really anything else to order? The pie sits in one of those large, curved glass cases at the end of the counter, just past the old cash register that you have to jingle just a certain way to get open.

The Smiling Waitress brings you your key lime pie with coffee just moments after you order it. The other woman—the one with the magazine and the frown—looks at you for a moment, her eyes raking up and down your body with something like disgust behind her eyes.

The moment that The Smiling Waitress puts your pie and coffee down in front of you, you realize that these four people working here have secrets. And then, you come to a second realization. You're the only person in the diner.

And then a third. That's not ketchup.

You make eye contact with The Smiling Waitress. She sees that you see the 'ketchup' stain on the counter and her smile disappears. It's not red, flaking vinyl that's sticking to your pants either. That's your fourth realization.

You get up to leave.

"Where you going, sweetie?" The waitress with the disappearing smile asks, her name tag reads 'Marie.'

The Bubble Gum Chewing Waitress sets her magazine on the counter, her eyes now laser-focused on you. She stands up, her back straight. "You might want to run," her voice, sickly sweet.

You want to run. You can feel it in your bones. Your heart is beating so fast that you think it might explode. A lock clicks behind you. You turn to see that The Dishwasher Boy is standing next to the door, his hand falling away from the lock.

You want to run. Your feet feel as though they are locked in place. You can't move. But you so desperately want to. You hadn't even tried the key lime pie yet, and it had looked divine. The perfect swirl of whipped topping looked so appetizing.

"I just want to eat my pie," it's all you can think to say. You sit back down on the vinyl stool. You hear a faint dripping noise. You attribute it to the dripping faucet in the back that the dishwasher boy left running.

The no-longer-Smiling Waitress smiles again. It's a warm smile. The safe feeling in your chest is definitely a displaced feeling.

"Enjoy your pie." She disappears into the kitchen area.

The one chewing bubble gum leans back on the counter and picks up her magazine.

You do your best to believe that the 'ketchup' stain is just that, a ketchup stain. Your fifth realization is that you're happy you didn't order a burger and fries.

You think about your mom. Will she ever find out what's about to happen to you? Will she ever get closure? Probably not. You wonder how this place is still open. If they have regular customers, and if so, what happened to them? What happened to the people behind the counter to make them behave this way?

The lock clicks again. The Dishwasher Boy disappears behind the counter to wash dishes.

You dig into your pie and sip on your coffee, trying to drag out your limited existence for a little while longer. But you'll run out of both soon. You can feel eyes on you, watching your every move. The hair on your arms stands on end but there isn't anything you can do about it.

The bell above the door chimes. You turn, hoping that the look of fear in your eyes makes the person turn around and go to the next diner. The next diner where the same thing isn't happening. You wish that you had gone to the next diner.

The Man who comes in, a newspaper in his hand, sits on the stool next to you. He smiles at you. You smile back. You regret the decision. This isn't a safe place. He should have turned around when he had the chance. You tried to warn him.

He orders a hamburger and fries. You choke back a gag. He orders it with ketchup and pickles. You hope that it's actual ketchup, not whatever that 'ketchup' stain is. You know what it is. You do. It's not ketchup.

You finish your pie. Your coffee has gone cold.

"Can I get a refill?" You try to hide the tremble in your voice, but it's no use. You think you're too young to die. You're only in your early twenties. But plenty of people have died younger than you, you try to reason.

The Bubble Gum Chewing Waitress looks at you. The Smiling Waitress is still in the back, talking to The Cook. You wonder what they're doing.

"No refills." The Bubble Gum Chewing Waitress points at the sign above the coffee pot. She goes back to her magazine.

You go to the jukebox in the corner, digging in your pocket for spare change. Nothing. But. Lint.

You mumble a curse under your breath and look at The Man, reading his newspaper, eating his hamburger and fries dipped in ketchup. "Excuse me?" You try to raise your voice above a whisper.

He looks at you from under his fedora hat and raises his gray eyebrows in question.

"Do you have a spare quarter?" You gesture to the jukebox.

The Man With The Newspaper smiles. "Probably." He digs around in his tan blazer jacket pocket and produces a shiny quarter.

You take it from him with shaking hands. This will buy you at least four minutes. You won't touch your coffee until the song is over. You can stretch that out to last you at least five minutes. You think about ordering something else to eat, but you don't think it would be of any use. You're only pushing off the inevitable and there's only so much that you can handle eating before you make your way through the menu and stop at the hamburgers. Which you definitely don't want.

You scroll through the list of songs on the jukebox. Which one is the longest? You don't recognize any of them. They appear to be from your grandparents' era of music, which isn't music that you took much liking to when you were younger and spent holidays at their houses.

You choose one blindly. The music fills the diner. The Smiling Waitress comes out and looks at you knowingly.

You wonder if striking up a conversation will help. It won't.

You sit back down on your flaking, red vinyl stool. Your fingers drum against the counter as you listen to your song. The Bubble Gum Chewing Waitress glares at you over the pages of her magazine. You stop, setting your hands in your lap.

The song ends.
You sip your coffee.
The Man next to you has finished his burger and fries. He reaches for his own mug of coffee. The door lock clicks again. The Dishwasher Boy smiles. They're preparing.
The Smiling Waitress appears along with The Cook, who holds a meat grinder in his hands. You swallow hard, your throat dry.
The Man With The Newspaper looks at The Dishwasher Boy. "What are you doing?" He asks, but it's more of a demand. You can tell that he's someone who's used to getting his way.
You pray your mother doesn't miss you too much. You pray your father holds her tight when she cries. You pray that they don't find your body because they don't have enough money to pay for a funeral.
You reach for your cold mug of coffee.
You sip.
The Man With The Newspaper has set his newspaper down. He begins to stand. His coffee mug is empty. You hadn't realized that he finished it.
You see The Cook swing his arm out of the corner of your eye. You scream just before the meat grinder connects with the side of The Man With The Newspaper's head. He doesn't make a sound. The fedora hat falls to the ground. Blood splatters everywhere.
More 'ketchup' stains you suppose.
The Man With The Newspaper's body hits the floor with a thud. You feel as though you're going to get sick. You swallow down stinging vomit. You look down at your coffee mug.
There's maybe a sip left.
The Cook drags The Man With The Newspaper's body behind the counter.
You finish your last sip of coffee. The mug drops from your hands, shattering on the floor.
You curse under your breath again. You wish again that you had kept driving.
The lock on the door clicks again.
"Have a nice day." The Smiling Waitress says. She brings out a broom and sweeps up the pieces of your mug.
You stand up slowly, wiping your sweating palms on your jean pants.
You walk to the door.
The Dishwasher Boy watches you carefully.
The Cook watches you.
The Bubble Gum Chewing Waitress watches you.
The bell above the door jingles as you pull the door open.
Your baby blue Volkswagen Beetle seems to purr as you start it. You breathe out a sigh of relief and drive.
Your seventh realization is that they won't just let you get away.
The road in front of you looks familiar. Too familiar.
You drive well into the night, trying to put the thought of that red diner out of your head.
Your stomach growls.
There's a twenty-four-hour diner up ahead. Your body shudders. You drive by, no matter how hard your stomach growls.
Hours pass by. You feel faint. You have to stop at the next place with food that you see.
There is a diner off the side of the highway. The paint is peeling. The sign light is half out. The fluorescent lighting glows from inside. You park your car out front, right by the door.
You might make it out again. But you can't get lucky twice. You want to up your chances.
Inside is a Smiling Waitress.
A Bubble Gum Chewing Waitress reading a magazine.
A Dishwasher Boy watching the Bubble Gum Chewing Waitress with a sense of hunger whose weed edible just kicked in.

A Cook who concentrates on flipping his burgers, wiping the sweat off his large, greasy forehead with the back of his hand.

A Man is sitting at the counter wearing a tan blazer jacket, a fedora hat, and reading a newspaper. He smiles at you, flicking a shiny quarter your way.

You can't escape.

Second Place
Cordell Larner Award in Fiction

Hitboy Cole Miller

Fizzle, crackle, pop. There goes the first of three lights inside of the dingy, moldy, sickly motel bathroom. Within a cracked porcelain bathtub is a boy of high school age. He lies slumped in a pool—a sea of lukewarm, torso-high water. In it are the tequila bottles that act as buoys and the rice-shaped follicles of throw-up that scatter amongst the surface like schools of fish. The boy's frame, more skeleton than muscle, floats with no energy and no effort. His mind screams static as blurry eyes try to make sense of the colors and shapes inside the congested, humid box he has awoken in. The word “yellow” tries to force its way out of his throat—for the stained wallpaper and sippy ceiling radiate the nauseating hue of lemon—but gets caught by the frayed, bleeding flesh inside. The boy cannot muster the strength to conceptualize, to think, and to act. For who knows how long, he simply exists amongst the worn tiles, the running sink, and the two buzzing, blaring bulbs above a mirror.

Until he hears a knocking—no, a slamming on the fragile wooden door to the bathroom. The boy zips upwards, his soul lagging behind his weary body, and tries to grip the towel holder above him in a futile motion.

Deep, raspy, strained breaths follow as an even coarser, gravelly, bellowing voice speaks from beyond the walls, “Get up. It’s time.”

The boy slowly crawls out of his pungent, pitiful bath and presses his pale body against a toilet. He reaches below him for underwear, jeans, and a t-shirt. He owns nothing else. While donning the clothes, the child tries to look at the misty, grimy mirror. Any features of his face cannot be seen through the dense fog. It’s better that way.

Finally, the boy turns the doorknob and enters the motel bedroom. It is pitch blackness ... besides a man sitting on the edge of a single king-sized mattress, his face illuminated by the scratchy, warbling static of an old television. This man’s pure white buzz cut adorns a blocky head with rugged features and creases, a Velcro textured stubble, and thin, razor-sharp lips. Two squinting eyes focus above a bulky, scarred nose on a combat knife he tends to with a sharpening stone.

After many still seconds of silence—only interrupted by that grating shinggg sound—the man raises his weapon and admires the handiwork, before his torn, ruined face turns to look the boy up and down with a raised eyebrow and a strong snarl.

“Whatever. Took you long enough. The job’s downstairs, directly below us. He’s a mutant, too, so don’t fuck up. Can’t help you.”

The boy rubs his flimsy arms with his gangly hands and diverts his gaze from the daggers being stared at him. After a while, he looks at the man with a rabbit’s eyes—small and quivering—and tries to form a weak sentence. It is instantly snuffed, however: by weakness, alcohol, and fear. All he can manage is “Da ... D-da ...”

“Don’t say a word, boy. There ain’t shit to be said. What else is there to talk about? I know that look ... What else are you?”

The instinctual, booming tone of the man shuts down the frail soul to whom he speaks, as the child limps over to the front door, shivering and then collapsing. He has to catch his body on the windowsill before him, which involuntarily starts to recover from the blissfully ignorant paradise of the buzz. Doing so with such force from the fall inadvertently breaks open the scabs from the needle scars on his forearm. Some came from pleasure, but most others from business. From the gaping, oozing holes in his arm seeps a gas. It leaves his body at a snail’s pace, weighing down the air it begins to occupy. The spreading collection of dark crimson starts to corrupt the bedroom, and no matter the frantic attempts to cover the openings in his vessel, the

maroon mixture makes a sizzling sound as it pushes its way out of the boy. To him, it burns. It always burns.

The man's eyes widen with rage as he bursts from the bed and grasps the boy by the nape. The pressure almost kills him.

"The fuck do you think you're doing?! No human trees here, dumbass! You're completely wasting it." The man's grizzled arms lunge forward to pull open the front door with intensity, after which he pushes the child out of the room.

The boy's small being slams against the metal railing outside and crumples like a link of chains, leaving him looking akin to an abandoned marionette. The man plugs his nose and swipes his large hands, airing out the gas from his space within the motel. He releases his clenched fingers and looks down on the young man in front of him. With caustic, unsure, yet damning eyes.

"Don't try that ever again. I'm all you have. I'll kill you. Finish what you were made for." He slams the door closed. The foundation of the rickety, decaying motel creaks with a wail beneath that monstrous power.

And there the boy lies. So much control—so much resolve is lost in that moment that his gas begins to seep from his eyes. It burns the wet layer protecting his oculars; they recoil back into his head from the pain. The child looks down after quickly adjusting back to the norm, looking through sight mired in suffering, at the plumes of smoke pulsating from his veins. They are filled only by salty water, colored a fleeting red.

Jacob's Ladder

Jael Henning

Irene sat high on the roof-top, alone, suspended in the flat steel plane of the sky. Her view was the sole privilege of being tasked with organizing her supervisor's office as a "favor". Six weeks prior, she had found the key granting access to the roof, mingling with the detritus of his desk. Testing every door in the building during her breaks occupied her until finally, the last door she checked swung open onto the concrete field of the roof. Since then, Irene had picked her way through every lunch break while looking down the swollen brick face of the ceramics factory where she worked, spending her art degree mass-producing sculptures.

She was casting off the stale edge of her sandwich for yesterday's birds when she first saw the cliffs jutting off into the sea. They were the sole indicator of a horizon; the dull iron sky mirrored the water below it. Irene never thought of them prior; they were simply a certainty she knew of, a landmark unbeholden by those who toiled each day in the windowless ceramics dungeon. But she was enamored the moment she managed to spot them; staring at the cliffs was a revelation of first love. They stood resolute, unashamed to be such an imposition. It seemed that all light, all air bent towards and around them, wavering under the sheer gravity of their presence.

Irene thought of the cliffs throughout the repetitive work-week cycle of sculpting uninspired simulacra of the piece she was meant to reproduce (modern, contrived as an emulation of a tumbling waterfall.) She began mentally plotting her way out to the coast. The factory was on the outskirts of town, cast furthest from the sea in a fruitless attempt to prevent smog from spilling into town. To reach the cliffs, Irene would have to trudge seven miles through the monotonous husk of the far-flung industrial district, the serpentine streets containing the only semblances of life, and finally, mercifully, the slopes leading to her destination. The trip would be demanding, consuming time and energy that she could not spare in the undulant heat of summer. Yet the pull of the cliffs was too great to ignore; the attraction sat in the hollow of her throat, immovable and urging.

On Friday evening, Irene labored purposefully towards the coast. Her legs twitched and burned despite their years of honing upon the factory floor. She collapsed upon reaching the base of the cliff face. The taut skin of her knees was broken on the limestone, her blood running off in streams to wet the craggy dirt. She was grateful to have something to offer to the land, for she knew that she would intrude on its solitude often.

Irene remained where she fell, bent in a relaxed recreation of her childhood genuflections. The cliffs did not demand the unkind worship she had known as a child, when she had to kneel through Adoration with sprains and headaches; rather, they compelled her to rest. The sun was late in its descent when Irene arrived; it was not long before she fell asleep amidst the scraggy grass and rocks, stained with her own blood.

She had always kept her hair short, lest it find itself trapped under newly stacked boxes or between the palms of overeager coworkers. Colette used to do the cutting under the exposing fluorescents of their cramped bathroom, sighing wistfully about old beauty and new scars (It's really a shame that you feel the need to keep it so short and What happened there? and the occasionally delightful I should make paintbrushes out of the clippings; they're too nice to toss out.)

Irene would sigh in response, noncommittal; she had to focus on the feathers of hair falling through her eyelashes. There was something significant about the way they fell in clutches about her neck. It was as though the future could be divined by where the dead wisps of hair chose to settle, as though the path they traced upon her neck could be followed to the certainties of unconditional freedom and love without labor.

Of course, Colette was no longer there to cut Irene's hair; she had left last year in a tearful cloud of questions (What happened to you?) and accusations (You're the most selfish person I've ever met.)

So Irene herself trimmed her hair above the kitchen sink, locks gathering in its basin. Where once her lover's voice mourned her changing appearance, Irene heard the cliffs telling her to cut ever shorter; her view out to sea couldn't be impeded by the frivolities of bangs or breeze-blown tangles.

Without the mirror, Irene could not notice her changing appearance. Her skin, once sickly sallow, tanned and reddened with the suffused blushing of the wind. She became drier, harder; from the heavy waters of her wanting, wasted as it was without an object of direction or of Colette, precipitated a perfect crystal of purpose. All the hours of her life, collecting dust as though they were the solid sculptural pieces she could help produce but never own, gained new meaning. What time is wasted when it is spent preparing for pilgrimage, becoming one worth loving?

Irene came to the cliffs every day after work, regardless of weather or circumstance. She liked to lie on her belly right on their edge, looking out at the inscrutable horizon, or down on the jutting rocks below. Often, she would sleep there, exposed in the lukewarm light of early evening. It was a burden to leave before the sun came up so that she could stop by her hated apartment and prepare for work.

Irene observed her ritual through the remainder of summer and late into fall. But one November evening, there was a ladder sacrilegiously disrupting the singular gray wash of sky and sea. Despite the palely rising moon, it shone with an internal golden light.

A voice echoed through the structure from some indiscernible position on high, fraught with a metallic dissonance. Its atonal clanging carried no trace of age or origin; the voice could have been anyone's, even Irene's own. At first, it seemed only concerned with the trivialities that other people bothered Irene with, the well-acted questions on how she was doing, her plans for after work, whether or not she would be bringing a plus-one to the holiday party. These small annoyances tugged at the edges of her remoteness but were not enough to unravel it into thread. She would tolerate the interrogation as she always had: through pointed silence and an inward retreat.

But her aloneness was quickly consumed by the demands of whoever lurked upon the ladder. The sonority soon turned to her guarded secrets, scattered them across the cliffs: the fatalistic thrill she felt upon looking down the center of a stairwell; the yellowing reams of unused paper pilfered from work; her desire to be alone, entirely alone, in the world. It shamed her, made a farce of her feigned emotional ignorance and carefully constructed isolation. More and more the voice, lacking as it was in definition, came to resemble Colette's. It was hostile in its desire to know Irene, to consume and thus improve her. Irene felt that she was losing something that could never be returned to her.

This entitled perversity pulled at Irene, the soft beast of her cliffside piety unfurling into a delicate rage. Her vision shook out the static white of anger, blinding her. Mindlessly, Irene picked up one of the rocks bloodied so many weeks ago, still impressed with that first ferric kiss. Her muscles swung of their own volition, flinging the small boulder into the ladder like clay upon a wheel. The metal stopped carrying the voice of whoever sat upon it; the echoing impact rang appalled. Fearing the voice's return, Irene flung another rock, then another, the clanging of hammer against blade against anvil.

Irene stood panting as her wrath subsided. She watched a shapeless, feathery form tumble gracelessly from the sky. It made no sound when it hit the ground.

Lying on her stomach as she had so many times before, Irene peered down at her murder. Where there should have been blood and viscera strewn across the rocks, a martyr skewered upon stone, was nothing but a darkly empty sheet. It was seemingly caught on some crag; it strained in the wind, a curtain desperate to be free from its rod.

It took a minute, an hour, for Irene to understand that she had wronged the cliffs, to feel their sacred presence subside. She knew that she was to be exiled for her hamartia. Where would she find that watchful purpose again? Certainly not at work, or within the confinement of her apartment. There was nothing Irene could align herself against without the cliffs; she was detached from all meaning, nude in her nondefinition.

Irene walked towards the ladder, tested the first rung, then began her descent. The bars, still golden and shining, hummed with an unpleasant heat despite the lashing cold of the wind. She felt that falling was an impossibility, yet she still clung to the ladder with the desperation of a lover. It warmed her hands, her face when she rested it for a moment on a rung. Please, she thought, don't let me go. Don't make me leave.

Too soon, Irene reached the bottom. She could see that she had marked the cliffs as much as they had her. The many rocks she had thrown off lay as passive detritus, soft mounds of sand embracing them as if such violence were natural, permissible. The largest she picked up and stowed in her pocket; she would want to cast it off wherever she ended up. Then she turned toward the object of her descent, the sheet.

It took little effort to extricate the sheet from its snag. The fine embroidery covering its surface spread like veins without a heart, carrying the same singular warmth as the ladder. Irene spent a minute balancing there upon the rocks, stroking the raised thread while deciding what to do with it and with herself. The warmth was encouraging; the fabric deliquesced into the roughness of her hands as though both were made from the same material.

Irene wrapped herself in the shroud, her spoil. It enveloped her in a faintly infernal perfume, soft sulfur masking the seaside smell she carried. She then returned to the ladder. Ladder, shroud, and girl; all remote, all warm. Without looking back at the cliffs, Irene began to climb; she intended to see where such radiance was spurned, see if she would be spurned in kind.

She soon surpassed the cliffs, once hers, and the town. All that she had ever known passed by quickly. What in that life would notice her absence, mourn her? Her muscles sloughed off under the approaching sun, their soft char falling inevitably to the rocks scattered beneath the cliffs. It was difficult for Irene to care; she would not need them in the place she would be spit out.

REMINDER!

Ajayla Ries-Ennells

I was diagnosed with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder on my eleventh birthday. Mom had suspected it for a while, I guess. Her own mom was diagnosed around my age, after all, but I can't say that I saw it coming.

The air was stale in the way that only the segue from late Winter to early Spring could be. Mom watched from the porch swing as I, seated on the polished wooden steps, pulled my pink tennis shoe off and on again. I tied the laces up only after it felt like my sock wasn't scraping into my skin like sandpaper. It had taken eight tries that day, one of my lower records. Her lips were pressed together tightly, a gleam of curiosity and concern radiating from her eyes. She sat snug in a baby blue hoodie, her arms crossed from the cold, or maybe the inconvenience.

When I'd finished my ritual, I stood up quickly, balancing myself on the railing to the right of me. I looked down at my tiny, pale hand against the finished wood, and realizing what I had just committed myself to, I shot my opposite hand up to the left railing before my brain started to scream. Once the feeling of boiling water in my stomach subsided, I let go with both hands, at the same time. I felt myself let go of a breath I hadn't realized I'd trapped inside my lungs and turned over my right shoulder to look back at Mom sitting behind me.

"I'm all ready now, Momma," I said, giving her my toothiest smile. She nodded her head and quickly stamped the butt of a cigarette out under her left foot. Seeing my eyes widen—or maybe just seeing the expression coming—she shifted weight between her hips and stamped on it again with the opposite foot.

"The same, doll. I know," she said, reaching in her pocket for the car keys.

We pulled up to a tall, brick building with three parking lots immobilizing it on all sides. When we entered, we were led down a long, white corridor with a mural of a jungle. I counted six monkeys and one tiger and three toucans. One, two, three. Four, five, six. Six monkeys. One tiger. One, two, three toucans. I wondered what kind of hands had crafted its design. A lady spoke to my mom in a low whisper for what seemed like hours while I fisted two blue crayons, one in each hand, and drew circles on a white sheet of paper in front of me.

"It seems she's displaying several signs ... each subtype can interfere with the others ... do you notice that she's having any thoughts of harming others or being harmed?"

A deep sigh escaped Mom. "If we don't do ... extremely distressed ... we just end up getting out of bed and doing it so she'll sleep. It's beginning to make her late for school, as well. She's missed the bus eight times just this month."

"I see," I heard a scribble on a clipboard and a thoughtful hum. "I understand that your own mother was diagnosed around this age. Have you found yourself exhibiting any of the behaviors or stress responses you've been seeing with your daughter?"

"I never used to, but now I think I'm succumbing to her anxiety more than she is at times!" A distressed sob echoed through the room and out into the hallway. It bounced off the walls painted with greenery. The walls with six monkeys and one tiger and three toucans. I set my crayons down carefully, but the left one hit the table first. So, I pinched them both between my thumb and forefinger on either side again and placed them back down, the clack of their weight against the table rang in my ears simultaneously. The same.

"I assure you, we will do everything we can. I think the best course of action from here is ... and you can't play into it because you're affirming ... I know it's going to be hard, but she has to ... you'll teach her to sit in the discomfort."

That appointment enters the blank space between my brain and the outside world more than I'd like to admit. And the diagnosis shouldn't still come as a shock to me, especially as I feel my phone buzzing against my right glute, an agonizing reminder that I don't have two things of

equal proportion filling both sides of my pants. It's 9:15 AM on the dot and my clammy fingers reach into the pocket of my light wash jeans. A sage green box fills the screen as soon as I bring it up to my face, white, sans serif letters spelling out one of my greatest anxieties of every day. I know it is the first of many.

Did you remember to unplug your hair straightener?

A picture flashes in my mind, smoke rising in my bathroom like a ravenous snake approaching a field mouse. Sparks turn into flames engulfing my entire dorm room, from the ashy grey carpet to the tapestry of a star map detailing the Northern Hemisphere in the summertime. I hear the haunting melody of the hoarse screams of my neighbor, the one with bleach-blonde hair who's never kissed a boy. I see the bandaged and disfigured bodies of the Arab girls down the hall who look like sisters but swear they'd never met until now. I feel the heat of a sweltering disassembly of lives in my hands and they burn like I am holding hot coals, the same amount on both sides. I am sprinting down the path opposite my Botany class before I can register that I've turned around, my buzzing phone mocking me as it sticks to the sweat pooling in my left hand. I am reminded again of the sandpaper socks scratching at my feet.

Salt Stars

Grace McGill

The tablecloth of my childhood home was made of velvet. It wasn't even supposed to be a tablecloth, it was a dusty old bolt of fabric leftover from my mother's old costuming days that just happened to fit neatly over the tabletop, hid stains, and cost no extra money. It's the color of the night sky, just blue enough to not be pitch black but dark enough that it's not distinguishable. I was the first to notice the blueness of it when I was four, and my mother patted my little head and told me very good, now eat your fish.

Shortly after that night, my brother spilled salt across the cloth, and it was as if a galaxy bloomed before my four-year-old eyes. Each grain was so apparent against the darkness. In the places where the salt clumped, stars appeared. Their own universe, never seen before and never to be seen again as my mother swept the mess into her hand, grumbling at my brother to please be more careful. The next dinner, I spilled the salt on purpose to see the galaxy again. My mother leaped to her feet but I insisted no, don't clean it, I want to look. I pointed out the window over the sink, and proclaimed, stars!

A week after that, my brother brought home a book about the solar system that he said I could keep. It had words I couldn't read, but lots of scientific pictures, and he told me what the words said anyway. Ten years my senior, he knew more about the stars and planets than I could even fathom was possible to know.

Our mother didn't like making a mess on the tablecloth. Every Tuesday and Wednesday night, when she worked late, my brother would stand me on a chair and lay out our own makeshift Milky Way: an orange for Jupiter, a penny for Mercury, a swirly green marble for Earth, and so on. Then he would hand me the salt canister and tell me which constellation we would create. The Big Dipper, the Little Dipper, Ursa Major, Orion, all thirteen zodiacs. My preschool mouth formed the foreign-tasting names. My neck ached after looking down for so long. Week after week, he made me start from scratch with the Sun and build the universe based on the pictures in my book.

When I was eight, life changed a lot in only a little time. My brother moved away. My mother agreed to marry a man named Frank. Frank moved into the house and all the oddities of my early childhood began to disappear. My mother's own eccentric paintings came off the walls and, in their place, came cheap-looking IKEA photographs. Our mismatched dishes were replaced with matching ones that came mailed in padded cardboard boxes. My favorite clothes, the hand-me-down shirts and cargos from my brother disappeared from my closet. Frank was nice to me. He called me sweet and told me the itchy dresses and tight sweaters my mother got from Kohl's looked nicer than my old clothes. I told him I liked his bald head. I didn't, really.

Frank and my mother married when I was ten. The makeup stung my eyes. My brother didn't smile in the photos. Now I should call him Dad, my mother said.

By the time I turned twelve, the tablecloth had been thrown out. The book from my brother had been donated. Frank didn't like salt on his food, so the salt was stored in a cabinet above the oven instead of on the table. My mother didn't work anymore, so there were no nights to sneak a universe, even though every detail prickled in my mind, my hands.

It's been fifteen years since my brother cracked open my world. Eleven years since Frank came into my life and tore it all down. I've finally left the house that stopped being mine a long time ago. There's a balcony where I watch the sunset every night that's warmer than twenty degrees. If you squint at the stars, you can almost see each individual salt grain. For hours at a time, I can find those grains, trace those constellations. Even still, my neck cranes up and it aches in the wrong direction.



Flutter
Molly Borth

Nonfiction

Beautiful Mom

Ajayla Ries-Ennells

I love to look at her.

My mom, I mean. We are sitting in a clinic waiting room and she is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen. She's got two pieces of paper in her mousy hands, with words I cannot even begin to understand filling the pages, front to back.

I watch her every mannerism, in awe that she exists in this lifetime and that I get to know her. I look at the cracking foundation on her young face. I trace the cracks of her lipstick on her lips, its color only accentuating the already pink tone. I think back to when I play with makeup and she says that you have to be clean and neutral. That if you want to look like a hooker, then you're no daughter of hers.

Her hair is slicked back with hairspray that smells of flowers and rubbing alcohol, and I breathe her scent in as though I cannot survive without it. She keeps two little pieces of hair out at the edge of her forehead, parted like curtains and tucked behind her ears; behind the hearing aids that sit atop them like angels on a Christmas tree. She is always full of symmetry this way. Nice to look at. Nothing ever stands too far out of place.

I think back to myself in the mirror this morning. My blonde hair, a mess of waves I can never seem to tame. Not the way my mom can, anyway. I feel tall and a little chubby and my shirt feels like it doesn't fit the way it's supposed to. It's white with a scene of horses, a pastel cloud of pinks and purples and blues behind them as they run. Their manes mirror my own wild hair. I stare at my face, at the three freckles on my left cheek like an American Girl doll. The same constellation is absent on my right side. I am always asymmetrical in this way. I look at my nose that feels too big and my mouth that feels too small.

I am told that I look like my mom, but all I see in myself is the mistakes she's made. The antithesis of the dream daughter she'd expected when the doctors told her she was pregnant with her second child. I see the joke I was born to be, an April fool. I see that I am not the daughter she wanted but the daughter she got, the one she is stuck with even when she's tired of my asymmetry, even when she's tired of the reminder that the life she wanted is far, far gone.

I come back to the waiting room, and I am staring right through her. She finally catches my eye and gives me a timid, warm smile that makes me feel weepy for reasons I am never sure of. I smile back, and her left eye winks at me as if to say: You are beautiful, too.

The image of myself in the mirror flashes back into the empty space in my brain, the part that isn't taken up by how much I love my Beautiful Mom. And I almost succumb to it again, but the way she tilts her head at me and scrunches her nose makes me giggle. I feel a tear roll down my cheek and it makes me think that I still don't get myself the way I get her.

Breathing her in once again, I catch the scent of mint gum and watch her jaw move slowly, perfectly. I ask her if I can have one too, pretty please? She pauses a moment, then pulls the piece she's chewing out of her mouth and places it against my tongue. I bite down on the blue-green wad, and I know that I am her as much as I am myself.

Mother, Determination

Jael Henning

I often write in cold and pale sunlight, the unforgiving sunlight of a convalescent; it's the sun of when I was a 17-year-old child shaking in bed on the last legs of a yearlong cold excuse. It's the time when I would stare upwards and out through the broken blinds and see the sky of the world I was missing. That's all I remember of that year. How could I forget? I live it all the time.

Do you remember? Did you see the lamb-thin branches of the trees, barren with the weight of winter, that fracture the sky into a creature of edges?

Each time I wake up from a too-long nap and feel that light again, I think of you, of what you must have thought of the daughter lying upstairs. You once heard a story on NPR about a woman whose psychiatrist asked her if she had ever considered making peace with the fact that she would never be happy. Maybe you're just like that, you said. Maybe happiness is different for you.

I want to say that you needn't worry, because I love her; I love her and will never complain of her shortcomings to my daughter. I will swallow it all until the pit of the grapefruit that sits in my chest germinates and bursts under the frozen 17-year-old sun. I will be happy because I have proven myself capable of having someone. Someone will have me, they'll have me over for dinner, and might come over in return.

When I first told you this on our trip to Chicago, just us, you looked over at me reclining in the passenger seat, arms crossed like the dead. Smiling, I didn't think this would happen for you. And in my indignation, I thought that I would be happy enough for the both of us.

First Place
Lois C. Bruner Creative Nonfiction Award

To Not Forget

Karol Sheese

I have a story to tell, and it's not happy—but it's important because we forget, I think, the importance of stories. Of hurts, of triumphs, of family, of strangers. Because life happens, it's sad and happy, terrible and wonderful. We don't live to share stories in a competition of which is more terrible, and which is less painful, because when we live through the painful and terrible, their context doesn't matter. We are meant to tell stories, we are meant to find solace in getting those moments out of our minds and into the world. When life is painful and terrible, I think we forget that. We shrink away and pretend that it doesn't matter because we know, we know we aren't special. And we fear that we'll bare our souls, and a voice in the back of the room will scoff and jeer, "Big whoop! Tell us something actually interesting next time!"

And then we lose those stories. And I don't want to do that.

We just closed an estate to a house, once a home I once visited weekly. I learned to play pool in that basement jammed between the table and the tight corner of the bookshelves. I had impossibly wonderful Christmases and Easters there. That was my second home.

That home is gone—sold recently. And I wrote this a year ago, a week after the initial pain and terror. And right now, it's all I can think about. So, I offer a story, one I wrote down because I didn't want to forget. I want this held close, and I want this kept forever. This way, I don't ever have to let it go.

May of 2022. I was as a recent high school graduate. My mother shook me awake. She was so gentle about it when everything on her face and in her mannerisms screamed urgency. My grandmother had a stroke and had fallen down the stairs in the middle of the night, and we needed to tell my brother to come home now (I had his Snapchat—he answered that fastest). Neither of my grandparents thought to go to the hospital and instead returned to bed, not seeking medical attention until the next morning when my grandmother was unable to string together a coherent sentence. By this point, they'd both been in the thick of my grandfather's continuous fickle battle with lymphoma, a cancer caused by a combination of smoking and fighting chemical warfare in Vietnam. They were a team, and they were each other's ride or die, come hell or high water.

The stroke doesn't end this story. It was the "After"; that's where everything painful and terrible lived.

"After" was dementia, accelerated by that untreated stroke. "After" was ignored stage four colon cancer. "After" was the realization that my grandma had given up on her care, not wanting to deal with the signs that something was wrong. "After" was finding countless notes from when she'd begun to write down the thoughts she was afraid to lose because she knew. She knew something was wrong.

"After" was consoling my mom's rage against her mother, rage at a woman who left this life the moment she fell. "After" was visiting a woman in a nursing home who looked and spoke like my grandmother, a ghost of one of my favorite people reduced to mumbling at the sitcom on TV. "After" was hearing my grandmother in that woman's voice in the most fleeting moments, her wonderful, wonderful laughter amid that muttered nonsense. "After" was my brother's refusal to visit that woman, wiser than I, knowing that she'd never return to us. "After" was whispering goodbye to that stranger, realizing that I'd never get the chance to say goodbye to my only and favorite grandmother after 18 years of her steady presence in my life. "After" was knowing that my grandfather was losing to lymphoma again because he wanted his wife back and couldn't ever have that.

"After" was my parents coming to Macomb because my mom hates to give bad news over the phone, and when they left I had to go back to class and pretend that my brother hadn't just hidden my tears from an empty lobby. "After" was going to school, preparing for a funeral three days before I turned 19.

"After" was hell. The funeral was beautiful, and I wasn't strong once, for all my efforts. A year later, I still can't listen to the hymns that we sang because they hurt, and that's a shame because my grandmother and I had the same taste in hymns. We have the Same name. I have her hands—too big for the bony wrists she also gave me. I hated it, though, for the littles of my family, my cousins, sitting behind me and whispering kind words back and forth because they couldn't stand to see each other so sad, even through their tears. And if I had been more put together, I'd have turned to face them. But they'd already seen too much sadness, and I couldn't look them in the eyes. I hated that they saw me and the rest of their older cousins so sad. I hate that they carry that with them. I didn't tell any of my friends at school about it, I was unsure of how to approach explaining what had happened.

There is nothing to bring the mood down at eight am like blurting out news about a funeral instead of the cursory answer, "I'm doing pretty good. How are you?"

However, whatever "After" became, it ended all the same. Life moved on, and things were okay. My grandpa was sad, devastated, really. We all were. They were a team. For over fifty years, he had his "Fuzzy," and she had her "Georgie-Porge," and they were never far from each other. They survived his military career in a war, five kids, several moves, a variety of job strife and poor patches, and countless stories they'd never tell their grandchildren. They survived together, and I knew my grandpa hated to be without her.

But for all his sadness, he was making new plans. He was looking forward to a new adventure with his family and looking forward to finding a new normal. And for all that, we were all still processing the fact that we'd lost my grandmother—perfectly healthy a year ago, the one we worried for most because it was clear my grandpa, the one fighting lymphoma, would leave this world first - we were excited at my grandfather's excitement. He made friends wherever he went, as he did my whole life. He made jokes about my driving skills for his wheelchair during hospital visits (for the record, the problem was those pesky public sidewalks. I was an excellent charioteer), he told my mother about his wildly unrealistic plans for the garden at his house come spring.

He was okay. The lymphoma was exchanged for another cancer, another worry, but he had no plans to leave anytime soon.

I was convinced that we'd be alright for at least a little bit. Maybe one more birthday, one more school project, one more Christmas if the Lord was feeling generous, one more genuinely sweet and ominously kind text. Then he could go back to his wife. We'd get through just a little bit more each day, and he'd be alright.

Not even four months later, I got a call that my grandpa was back in the hospital, sudden and unclear on the cause. My mother wouldn't give me details, too worried about distracting me from school. It was so kind and so frustrating, so I didn't press.

But that was okay. It wasn't the first time; as far as I was concerned, it wouldn't be the last. It'd be okay. I hoped to visit home that weekend and say hi, morbidly concerned that I wouldn't have the chance again before the next break.

That Wednesday, I saw my father enter Browne Hall with the saddest smile on his face, and I knew I'd once again missed my chance to say bye. Another class attended, but this time, I didn't falter; my grandpa would have been so proud. I told myself that all he had to do was get to the weekend. I'd leave campus for just a little bit, I'd drive to say goodbye, and hope that I hadn't actually waited too long to visit. I'd make it. I didn't.

That Friday, a little over a year ago now, he was gone. The funeral was a week after, my mother wrote the most beautiful eulogy I've ever read, and I secretly, so secretly hated her for it

because it hurt. And I was tired of hurting. I wore my grandmother's coat in the frigid cemetery while a twenty-one-gun salute rang through the air, startling nearby geese. I half convinced myself I was too cold to cry, proven wrong once more by the frozen tracks I brushed off my cheeks on the walk to the car. He loved winter mornings, and he loved camping. I like to think his final gift was a sparkling, undisturbed, beautiful winter morning for us to say a final goodbye on.

I should have known that it wouldn't last: for all his plans, I should have known that he wouldn't last without his only love since college. They met here, at Western Illinois University, on their first day of freshman year. He'd served his country, purchased a set of china in Japan, and mailed it to his mother's house "so my wife has a good set of china" for a woman he'd not met (that set of china lives in our garage, for our brother and I to carry with us when we have our own homes). And then he did, and he didn't leave her for over fifty years, and I should have known that he needed her. I should have known that he'd never stray far from his favorite person.

I wish I had been right, though. All my life, I was the youngest granddaughter. To my grandfather, I was his "little buddy".

"How's my little buddy?" "Hiya, buddy." "Love ya, little buddy."

I have a coat from each of them, a crewneck from my grandfather, flannels from my grandmother, socks from them both, small collections that are so so precious to me. I wear them when I need to feel like that little buddy again. And I wrote this to reread because it was painful and terrible, and I didn't think to tell my friends. They would have understood; I know they would have, because many of them are going through or have gone through very similar things, and it's painful and terrible. And I want this published somewhere, somewhere connected to the school that mattered so much to my grandparents and their children (also students here—I'm a double legacy!). Because this little buddy really wishes she'd gotten the chance to say goodbye.

A Better Granddaughter

Abigail Jones

In memory of Mary Lou and Frances

When I was a freshman in high school, cancer was only a plot development tactic. I knew it was real, of course; I had heard about distant relatives that had battled the disease plenty of times at family holidays. These relatives were as real to me as Izzie Stevens on *Grey's Anatomy*, however, and I hadn't really thought about what was at risk. I think that must be why I was so unbothered when I heard the news that both my grandmothers had been diagnosed with cancer. They would get sick, maybe even lose their hair like in the movies. But, just like Izzie Stevens, they would make it through. Of course they would.

That week, the first week of January 2016, was the start of it all. I know it's a little dramatic to hold a grudge against seven squares on a calendar, but I just can't help it. On January my mother traveled to her hometown of Kirksville, Missouri, to help out her mother, my Grandma. I didn't sleep for the first three days of her trip, perhaps why I stumbled and rolled my ankle in gym class on January 4th, our first day back to school in the new year. I didn't know it yet, but this rolled ankle would lead to a year-and-a-half-long injury that ended in surgery and difficulty walking to the day. A year-and-a-half long journey eclipsed by the news my mother told me on January 7th.

Grandma had cancer. Bad cancer. And, because when it rains, it must pour, so did my Nana, my father's mother.

If you were to ask me the specifics after this week, I would have to pick up my phone and dial my mom's number. Somehow, the things that felt so monumental in the moment have blurred. I don't remember when they figured out that Nana had a type of blood cancer called Light Chain Deposition Disease or when she decided to start the risky treatment. I couldn't tell you when the doctors figured out that my Grandma's ovaries, which had previously been believed to be removed during her hysterectomy years before, were indeed still inside of her and the source of the cancer. The name of her ovarian cancer, just as rare and terminal as my Nana's, escapes me. I know she had an operation to remove the cancer, I know it was unsuccessful. But I cannot, for the life of me, remember when I learned that she had decided not to undergo any treatment. Chemo would have given her, at most, a year of hard life. She wanted to enjoy her last months.

Nana passed on February 20, 2016. Her treatment was going well, until it wasn't. By the time I arrived, she was unconscious, the only sign of life—the steady beat from her heart monitor. My family stayed with her until the end, but I only remember flashes:

Getting a muffin from the cafeteria. Declining my cousin's offer to hold Nana's hand. The cry my Papa let out when she was pronounced dead. Kissing her before we left, one last time, and wondering if she knew I had given up the chance to hold her hand one last time, while it was still warm.

I wasn't going to make the same mistakes with Grandma. When my mom asked me if I wanted to accompany her to Kirksville to care for Grandma, I accepted without hesitation. I cried at my best friend's locker, telling her how I was going to audit classes until she passed and that I probably wouldn't be back in time for finals, only a month and a half away. I slept on the floor next to my mother's bed each night, both of us squeezed into what once was her childhood bedroom. I took night shifts, having always been a night owl, and spent each night in front of the TV, some retro television show keeping me awake while I sat near Grandma's bed. Grandma had been paralyzed on her right side after a stroke she suffered when my mother was the age I am now. Her speech was difficult to understand and, after growing up so far away from her, I felt

like I spoke another language. Any time she'd start to speak, or if her breath became labored, I ran off to wake my mom. She'd go back into the living room, as my Grandmother insisted her bed be next to the great big picture windows she loved to look out of, and I'd stay in the bedroom praying please God, not tonight. Not yet.

I had grown up since January. I knew what was going to happen now. I was determined not to let it catch me unaware like it had with Nana. Nana lived down the street from me since before I could remember, and we often had lunchtime dates or sleepovers. Just three months before she passed, on our last Christmas together, she had promised to have me over when she felt better. It was hard knowing that we'd never have that sleepover. I kept thinking about how I didn't hold her hand. One night, when everyone had gone to bed, and it was just me and the gurgling breaths coming from Grandma's bed, I walked over and held her hand, determined to learn from Nana's passing. Her hand was cold and thin, unfamiliar since we'd never held hands before. Somehow, it only made me feel worse.

I was back in school by the time teachers started passing out final review packets. Grandma passed on April 24th, 2024. A few weeks before, we'd had one last family reunion, cramming every relative into my grandparents' minuscule one-bathroom house. Both the front and back doors were open, a steady flow of family entering and exiting, laughing at old family memories from when my mother was still young. Cousins I hadn't seen since I was three years old came up to me, embracing me and asking how I was doing. Someone could have stolen the TV and told me they were my Great-Uncle Bob and I would have said, "Would you like the DVD player too, Uncle Bob?" It was the last truly good day that I can remember.

Afterward is just as much of a blur as during. Things happened quickly. My ankle injury was getting worse and doctors didn't know what to do, school was piling up, and, concerningly, I hadn't had a period in a long time. Because of everything, I couldn't even pinpoint when I had last menstruated, a fact that concerned my pediatrician. After some testing, they determined that I have PCOS, a condition that messes with my hormones and makes things that come easily to others a little harder to me.

It felt a little unfair to get such a diagnosis so quickly after my grandmothers' deaths. Nana's death had wrecked me, had proved to me that life was not some happy movie, where the bad diagnosis is only to make the protagonist's happy ending that much sweeter. Grandma's had scared me. No one knows why she still had ovaries after her hysterectomy, though her surgeon had noted that they were so deformed he almost didn't recognize them. The thought of being so sick for so long and without having any idea terrified me.

PCOS doesn't go away. Neither do responsibilities, however, and on a list of my priorities, my health ranked last. It occurred to me earlier this past January, exactly eight years after my grandmothers' diagnoses, that I hadn't gone to any sort of health checkup since before I graduated high school. I was always too busy, or had just gotten over a sickness and didn't want that to affect things, or just forgot. Suddenly, as I lay in my bed, all alone in the late night just like I had been back at Grandma's, I started bawling. Nana had passed barely a month after her diagnosis. Grandma had miraculously survived a whole four months, but, as beautiful as they were, it had only been four months. For the first time in my life, it occurred to me that I could find out the same news at any moment.

I've booked my appointment for my check-up, and I've started regularly taking the medicine I'm supposed to use to manage my PCOS. I get jealous sometimes when I hear women talk about how well they know their cycles, how they can tell from a single craving that their period will start in a day. My own cycle is as much a stranger to me as those cousins that came up to me during that last good day. It's a bitterness that I often feel when comparing lives with the girls around me. Girls who have grandmothers or, even if they don't anymore, remember them. All I have is what's listed over: blurry timelines and regrets. Most of it I don't even know if I would classify as remembering; it's more of a recalling what has been told to me so often.

A better granddaughter would have held her Nana's hand. A better granddaughter would have stroked her Grandma's hair as she slept, not tried to recreate a moment she missed. A better granddaughter would know exactly when each of them got their diagnosis, and would know the name of the cancer that killed them. A better writer would wait until she had a better ending to her story, wait for her clean bill of health to come back, or when she no longer felt jealousy swell up inside of her at a classmate's story about taking their Memaw out for lunch.

It is too late to be a better granddaughter. It is too ingenuine to wait for a better ending. It is better to write what I have than wait too long and never write at all. Because sometimes stories end suddenly, without a pretty bow to tie up the loose ends.

Second Place
Lois C. Bruner Creative Nonfiction Award

With Spurs and Spear

Gerry Garcia Campos

In late March of 2018, I was just weeks from deploying for the first time with my unit. I had found my way to a tattoo shop with a friend. It was a small shop nestled in between the countless other tattoo shops and cash-only businesses that surround all military bases. I was already planning to get tattooed as a type of war paint, and the ending of my first ever serious relationship pushed me to do it faster and cheaper than perhaps I should have. Despite this, I was pleased with my two tattoos. On my right shoulder: the thirteen colonial stars. I got them for love of country. On my left wrist: A short tepoztopilli, (te-pos-toe-pill-ee) or short-spear made of wood and obsidian razors. I got it to focus me.

My parents both hail from the former Aztec empire. There are many different native cultures in Mexico that survive today, but the Aztecs were the dominant tribe. They discovered and built the modern capital of Mexico City, originally Tenochtitlán. This is why they are a symbol of our national identity and heritage. Aztecs were some of the best warriors in the world. Too much for even the Spanish to handle alone. Still, they were not heroes. They were completely heartless, and completely blood thirsty. The tepoztopilli was designed to kill, but gave an experienced warrior the option to disembowel his enemy instead, leaving them helpless on the battlefield. This way, his comrades listened to him die slowly, all night, instead of resting for the next day's fighting. If somehow you survived a campaign against the Aztecs, a lifetime of slavery awaited you. If you were very unlucky, you'd have the honor of having your heart removed from you as you screamed and offered to the god of the sun, even as it continued to bleed. This happened every day, lest they fail to conduct a sacrifice and the sun never rise again. **Define Aztec: A former indigenous empire of Mexico. Warriors, slavers, conquerors, engineers, astronomers.**

Their weapon was struck on my skin in rough Americana style ink. Forever a part of me. I sought to summon the warrior spirit from my genetic past as I continued the tradition of warfighting. The United States Marine Corps is the largest and truest warrior culture that exists in modern America. It was full of the most remarkable men I've ever met. It was the strongest concentration of intelligence, professionalism, and physical excellence I had ever known. They were devoted fathers, loving brothers and husbands. They were the most selfless friends I've ever had. These descriptions are in stark contrast to what you hear from the other branches that worked with us. "Abrasive...brutish... morally bankrupt... savages." Make no mistake, these accounts are also completely accurate. Some of my colleagues happened to lack any redeeming qualities past their capacity for violence.

It takes a certain type of person to do what we did. Live in foxholes for days at a time. Sleep in temperatures nearing sub-zero with the minimum amount of cold weather gear I could legally be issued. Complete what is supposed to be an eight-hour movement up a mountain in less than five hours as the Mountain Warfare instructors begged my commander to give us a break. Sacrifice the only opportunity for sleep you'd had in over a day to raid a building in the middle of the night to clear it of Royal Commandos.

We crept along a brick wall under our night vision. I didn't feel tired, nor hungry, nor cold, although I was all those things. I felt completely awake, excited even. The Royal Marine Commandos are some of the finest troops in the world. They are considered to be special operations in the U.K. But everyone needs to rest. Everyone needs sleep. Except for us. My team leader raised his rifle towards the door as I gently pushed on it. I felt it give way. He shone his laser in the crack to check for wires. There were none. We looked at each other and he nodded at me. He kept his barrel pointed inwards as I turned around and kicked in the door.

Mission of the Marine Corps Rifle Squad: To locate, close with and destroy the enemy by fire and maneuver. Or, to repel the enemy assault by fire and close combat.

For us, there was nothing else. We didn't do it for the pay, and it wasn't nearly enough. We didn't do it for the "thank-yous," or even for each other. First and foremost, we joined the Marines to destroy the enemies of America. We wanted to fight more than anything. Through the next two years of service I would stare at my tattoo when I began feeling sorry for myself, when I started considering that maybe I wouldn't reenlist after all. I reminded myself that warfighting was my birthright. But we don't always get what we want.

After four years, I had deployed, but I hadn't seen action. Many of our team and squad leaders had seen fighting, but never participated in combat. It was getting time to decide whether to get out and start a life, or reenlist and wait for a war that might still be a decade away as I felt my youth slip away moment by moment. I left the Marines in July of 2021. Like many of my peers, I was bothered at having dedicated four years to the Marine Corps and without having experienced the combat we were promised. As I moved to a small town thirty minutes from my university, I felt lost. I found myself staring at my tattoo. I'd never tasted battle. Does it still mean what it meant when I received it? Did I still deserve it? Did I ever?

In December of 2021, I was driving around the square of a quiet, little town of Carthage. I'd gotten an apartment there and even started a relationship. The square was lined with shops, and their light gently streamed into my little, grey, Nissan Versa. My girlfriend, at the time, was looking at the "Los Charros," sign, dimly shining. Los Charros is a Mexican restaurant I never heard of until I moved to the country. Then, it seemed they were everywhere.

"That means cowboy, right?" my girlfriend asked. I didn't know for sure.

The clues as to what "Charro," means are the cowboys and lassos found on the signs. I had heard "Charro" before, but I didn't know what it meant. I did know this: vaquero (va-ke-roe) is a cowboy. Caballero (ka-ba-ye-ro) is the Spanish word for gentlemen. The literal translation is "horseman." It came to mean gentlemen because only noblemen, knights, and landowners could afford to keep horses. Peasants, if they somehow acquired one, would have been discouraged from riding in public. Many Americans detect the word "caballo," in the word. It has led to many, like my old co-worker, Lance Corporal Caballero, to earn his nickname —cowboy. I asked him if he bothered correcting them. He had, but the name stuck. A former friend of mine, Lori Caballero, grew to hate questions about her name. She wasn't offended that people didn't know what it meant. She was offended at the thinly veiled approaches from customers at work and frat boys at parties. This, however, was the extent of my knowledge. The only other connection to my heritage was represented in one of my two tattoos.

I had no real interest in expanding my knowledge until 2022. That year, I joined the Equestrian Team at Western Illinois University. I immediately fell in love with riding. A horse, weighing over a thousand pounds, has free will. We don't command horses to move, we ask them to. We squeeze our legs to ask them to walk. We open our reigns and push with either leg to turn. When they choose to comply, as they carry our weight, it's unbelievably exciting. Each horse strides differently, and likes to be spoken to and touched differently. It is very much a sport because it is physically and technically demanding, and it is all built on a relationship with an animal that can easily buck, kick, and stomp us into the afterlife. My first competition would be a Western show and I was given a list of the required attire: Western boots, matching jeans, Western belt, button-down shirt, and a Western hat.

I asked, only half joking, if I was allowed to wear a sombrero. Both team leadership and my coach said no. Curious, I looked up the rules, and there were none expressly prohibiting sombreros. I was tempted to try my luck and buy one anyway. Though I ultimately decided against it, I was reminded how the Mexican and American western cultures are strongly intertwined as I shopped online for my outfit. I found myself running into that word again. Over

and over. “Buy Western Clothing at CharroAzteca.com” “Camisas Charro. Botas Charro.” Distinctly Mexican clothes with elaborate, at times gaudy, decoration filled my search for quality riding clothes. The more I saw, the more I found myself wanting to incorporate my heritage in my outfit, but I realized that I didn’t understand what the link was. What came first, vaqueros or cowboys? Who copied who, if at all? So, I typed it into the search box: Charro, history.

The Spanish rallied a coalition of native nations who had suffered slavery and war from the Aztecs for their entire lives. With their help, the Spanish conquered the Aztec empire in 1519 and enslaved every surviving Aztec. Other non-allied tribes were also enslaved. Over many years, conditions saw some improvement. Many Mexicans were free, even before independence from the Spanish. However, conditions never rose above indentured servitude for those bound to farms and ranches. Some of these slaves were trained to ride horses and manage herds and properties. Riding was their entire life. Despite their exquisite lasso work and horsemanship, they were called Charros. The original meaning of the word was not unlike the word “hick,” or “yokel.” They were prohibited from wearing Spanish style saddles or clothing to ensure they were never mistaken for gentlemen. So, the Charros made their own equipment from scratch. This was the origin of the western saddle, leather chaps, and sombrero. These would be adopted by American cowboys over two hundred years later.

When the war for independence began, Charros rallied to serve as cavalry and scouts. Their role was absolutely critical as they were the only Mexicans who knew how to ride and maintain horses. Had it not been for them, a revolution of peasants and slaves may well have failed against one of the world's premier armies. After the war, these units of Charros splintered away. Some returned to life on the ranch. Some became well intended vigilantes and others turned to lives of banditry.

A particularly notorious group of banditos began decorating their outfits with silver to display their wealth. They were called “Los Plateados,” or, “The Silvered Ones”. This inspired the modern Mariachi outfit we see today, which more or less implies Mariachi players are dressed as bad boys.

Eventually, all Charros were called on again to help form a national police force. They became rangers, tasked with maintaining order, and to suppress power vacuums as the brand-new country found its feet. Without order, Mexico could have succumbed to infighting or the predations of another empire sensing weakness. Since then, they have been called to action on several other occasions, but less and less, until finally fading to living legend in what remains of them: Charrería, the national sport of Mexico.

Charrería may look familiar as it was the original inspiration for American Rodeo. Charrería consists of cow-roping, riding bucking broncos, and more. The culminating event for a Charro is El Paso de la Muerte, The Pass of Death. In this event, a charro rides his mount bare-back, meaning without a saddle. He must then pursue an unbroken or wild horse inside the ring and leap onto its back and ride it until it calms. This event has since been banned as crippling injuries and death are commonplace. However, this event is still practiced in many circles. Some do not consider someone to be a true Charro until they have completed this final task. It is a great honor to be considered a Charro in Mexico as the title only applies to experts proven in competition. To this day they compete in beautifully embroidered shirts, leather chaps, and giant sombreros.

To define, Charro: Expert horseman, bandito, soldier, Ranger, cowboy, folk-hero.

Me? I ride pleasure, and not particularly well. Pleasure is a discipline that focuses on the appearance of the ride. Posture, form. The goal was to make your ride look effortless. It is the least interesting category within the sport for spectators, but can be quite entertaining to the initiated. I was so excited to improve my riding that I leased a rescue horse. She was a sweet, white (or grey, in equestrian terms) mare named Claire. Before rescue, she faced slaughter after years on the track. Despite being older, she had plenty of energy and absolutely no quit, although, she was brimming with anxiety. I loved riding her at the canter, a speed between a trot

and gallop, with a gallop being a full sprint. Tight turns and a spirited gait made for exhilarating rides in the ring, but she would always want to go faster. She always wanted to escape the reins. I would sense her toss her head and quicken her step and I'd tighten on the reins. She then sped up further and tossed harder to escape, causing me to tighten them again. It was a vicious cycle that, at times, I was not able to manage.

A mix of her frantic behavior and my, still, novice ability meant I fell out of my saddle on several occasions. One March evening, I was enjoying a ride in the ring by myself. It was backlit by the sun setting on the barn and rolling fields, waiting to be planted again. I hadn't fallen off Claire in a month. I was without my helmet, without a care in the world. I was so relaxed and Claire's erratic behavior came on so quickly, I was not able to keep my seat. I couldn't slow her. At almost fifteen miles an hour, she tossed her head and pivoted sharply. I was thrown from my saddle. From almost fifteen miles an hour, I came to an instant stop as I landed flat on my back. The soft dirt of the ring instantly compressed under two hundred and forty pounds of equestrian. With my first, weak, breath I both grunted in pain and gasped for air. It was at least ten minutes before I could draw a full breath. Fifteen minutes after falling, I gathered the energy to mount Claire again.

We did not canter. We walked. We even trotted a bit before I realized my back couldn't take it. She behaved, sensing something was wrong with me. It took a long time to remove her tack and groom her afterwards. I moved like my spine was completely rusted in-place. I was in so much pain that I couldn't even walk down the stairs that night. I would later find that the muscles immediately surrounding my spine had absorbed the entirety of my fall. Miraculously, I had not injured my spine, neck or anything else. The muscles in my back were mercifully intact, but damaged and in terrible pain.

I missed class for an entire week. I had to mentally prepare myself for the pain that would come just from rolling over in bed. Getting dressed or walking down the street was physically and emotionally draining. I should have rested for a month, if not several, but I had started competing very late. My first Western show was in less than two weeks and it would be the last western show that year. I was not willing to wait until fall to compete again. My family had been so proud I was on the team. Proud I was learning to be like the rancheros they grew up with, and like the Charros of old. I wasn't willing to wait until next year to bring my mother a prize.

Against the entire team and my coach's advice, I practiced. My muscle relaxers nearly put me to sleep in the saddle. I brought my old dog-tag with me. I hung it around my neck before I mounted my practice horse. At one point in the practice, we would take turns conducting a pattern like we would have to do in competition. When it was my turn, my coach always asked me if I was okay to go. I would say yes, and I would put the metal oval in my mouth, biting down on it.

As I rode, I used every possible muscle in my body in an attempt to reduce the shock I'd experience in my back. It took significantly more effort than it did to ride normally, and yet it was still not nearly enough. Every jolt caused pain that would override my autonomic impulse to breathe.

I brought my horse from a walk to a trot. I trotted a straight line along the fence into a right turn. I asked my horse to extend his trot by squeezing my legs and turned him in a circle. I slowed his trot and terminated the circle at the fence. I rode the fence to a corner, turning right again. I asked him to extend one more time before slowing to a walk, and then we stopped. I backed him up three paces and turned him 180 degrees. Still biting on my tag, I looked down at my coach. She was a short woman who commanded respect from man and mount alike. She had a combination of tan skin, brown hair and green eyes unlike anything I'd seen before. Despite looking up at me, she stared me down as she took a moment to take in my performance. She had the uncanny ability to know exactly when to be patient and gentle or cruel and demanding. I held my breath, wondering which it would be.

“...Good,” she said, releasing me. The silver dog tag fell out of my mouth as labored breaths escaped me. My posture slouched and my head drooped low.

A teammate rode beside me as I walked my horse around the ring. She looked at me, looking both confused and concerned. “Do you want to take a break?”

“No,” I said. “I want to do it again.”

The pain in my back dulled significantly by the day of the competition. We showed up to the equestrian center in Kewanee, Illinois. It was part of the Blackhawk Community College campus. The school was extremely wide open with only a few buildings, flanked on almost all sides by wide open pastures. A gloomy, spring morning did not help ease my anxiety. Once inside, the in-door arena was bustling. Over a dozen horses were being warmed up in the ring and other riders were in the stands, inspecting outfits and taking notes on the horses.

With the staff, competitors, and spectators, there were easily a hundred people present. I went into the bathroom to get ready. I put on my black Chelsea boots, my black and white Charro belt, black jeans, and a black, pearl-snap shirt. Finally, I put on my black Stetson hat. The western hat was made with buffalo felt and a black leather band with a silver buckle. I was all too excited as I secured my shirt garters in front of the mirror. Shirt garters keep your shirt tucked in. Sometimes, they snap, and they did as I adjust myself in the mirror. I reacted to the sudden jerk and went to catch the clasp. I bent down too quickly and immediately set off my back. The pain was breathtaking and it did not improve by the time it was my turn to show. I took my muscle relaxers for the first time in a week.

As I rode to the starting position, I could feel the pills start pushing me towards sleep again. So much so that I nearly missed my cue to begin my pattern. The judges and a hundred others looked on as I asked my horse to walk forward. The trot felt very rigid. It shouldn't have, but my line was straight. At the corner, I was to stop and pivot. I hadn't practiced that enough and the horse turned instead. We trotted into a circle, which went well, but was a bit tight. By the end of the pattern, I was to stop and ask him to step back two paces. I postured and asked him to stop, but he hadn't come to a halt until we had already passed my mark by a few paces. Without having asked, he immediately stepped back, diagonally. He didn't stop walking. By this point, we were both confused and before I had brought him back under control, the judges had had enough and dismissed me. After the pattern was done, my coach showed me a video of my ride. I was absolutely mortified to see how sloppy I was in my seat, bouncing, and forgetting basic fundamentals. No more pills. I had to be conscious for my second and last pattern.

As the time neared, I snuck away to have a cigarette and clear my mind. Outside, I found a spot behind some horse trailers. With every drag I drew in self-pity, a bit of doubt as I stared into the countryside. I did not reflect on how I was the only Mexican there. I did not consider how alien the country still felt to me. I just felt sorry for myself. As I took one of the last drags from my second cigarette, I noticed an obsidian blade peeking out from under my shirt cuff. I opened my cuff to examine my Aztec spear, as if noticing it for the first time. I grounded myself in the little spear as I had many times before. I was still tired, and I was still in pain, but this was not new to me. I took a moment to remember that and looked down at my boots and belt. Handmade in Mexico. I don't think my ancestors were with me, and I couldn't feel them near, but I considered that they might be watching and I expelled my self-pity with the cigarette smoke. I dropped what was left of it in the gravel and smothered it underneath my leather sole.

I came back to the show ring. I was as focused as was possible at the time. After my second pattern was done, I was beginning to sweat through my shirt, having used every ounce of energy to concentrate through the pain and anxiety. As I exited the ring on the last ride, my coach stared me down from the ground again. Seeing the frustration on my face, she made me thank my mount, humbling me. I was thankful for my stout, white and tan horse. He had a fairly gentle stride and was very responsive when I asked him to trot and turn. I smiled and stroked his neck. Had he been more stubborn, less gracious, I would have had to squeeze more with my legs. I would have been in significantly more pain. When we stepped away from the horse, Coach

asked me what I did well, and what I did not. I gave the same answer I had given the practice before I got hurt. I was audibly frustrated that I had made the same mistakes I had fixed a month ago.

Coach reminded me of my condition and to be proud of whatever I had earned. To my shock, I placed both times. Not well, but despite what was, frankly, a terrible ride, I placed seventh out of a class of eight on my first ride. I placed seventh again out of a class of nine on the second. Seventh place was the last position that earns you points in your class-progression. My coach nodded at me approvingly.

A month later, I returned to do an English show. Being a larger man, some of my equipment had to be bought at a premium or custom made, particularly, my tall leather boots. I spent nearly three thousand dollars on my equipment alone. This was money I could have easily spent on a number of other bills, but I wanted this instead. And it was worth it. I was terrified that I would don my outfit and find that I looked like an imposter, but I looked in the mirror and felt that fear fall away like ashes. I dare say it looked incredible and I felt even better. That competition I performed better than the last. I hung a new 5th place medal next to a 7th place medal on my bed as reminders to be humble and continue riding.

Riding has since become a passion, only tempered by my financial inability to pursue it as an obsession. My coach jokingly offered a lesson on a horse she said would fidget the entire time and almost definitely buck me off. To her surprise, even after my injury, I jumped at the chance. I had no misconceptions that I would stay on the horse, but I craved the challenge. She eventually convinced me that there was no training value in it and I conceded. She was right, I wasn't ready.

I would later ride another horse that was still new to lessons and had grown tired of work. He was a tall, handsome horse with a tendency to go fast. One day he made his discontent known. He tossed his head, threatening to buck me and ripping the reins from my hands. Eventually, he refused to respond to my pressure. I sat tall and squeezed and suddenly he reared onto his hind legs. I instantly had the sensation I was several feet higher in the air and I was hyper aware of how far away the ground was. I kept my posture and landed well, mostly out of shock rather than discipline. My face showed as little emotion as possible, but inside stirred the beginnings of panic.

My coach looked at me and urged me to keep going. I wanted to obey her, but I only halfheartedly squeezed and opened my reins as he tossed his head again. The truth is I didn't want him to move. I wanted him to stay still. I was afraid. My body ached so bad that morning. It ached from the gym, from four years of punishment in the Marines, from falling off horses. Every part of my body pleaded with me to just get off the horse, not to abuse it any further, but I had to stay in the saddle.

I took a moment to collect myself as he fidgeted and eventually I sank my weight into my heels. I sat tall and gathered my reins and squeezed. I squeezed and he resisted. He tossed his head and I desperately wanted to slump forward and hold on to his mane for dear life. But from somewhere, I found the courage to sit and I refused to let him bully me. I squeezed and he moved forward. I squeezed further as I spoke to him and he picked up a trot. For a moment, my mount challenged my resolve and in that moment, I won.

As quickly as I began to savor my victory, the moment passed and the horse protested yet again. Again, he threw his head and reared. As I was elevated into the sky for the second time, I did not have the sensation of being thrown, but that he and I were flying. When he returned all hooves to the ground my coach looked at me again, having sensed my anxiety.

We landed in good order and my eyes watched his head. I finally looked my coach in the eyes and a smile began betraying the look of concentration on my face.

She smiled back at me and I laughed.

"That was fun!"

When I began riding, there was a novelty to putting on my boots, and to the sensation of the saddle. I waited for it to go away and in two years, it never has. Though still a novice, something about the western saddle always felt right. Even the English saddle, with the fancy leather and the aristocratic posture, never felt alien. I have to wonder, what in the world could a Chicago-suburbs kid find natural about a western saddle? What could a boy raised on food stamps possibly find familiar about thousand-dollar boots? How could I possibly justify how entitled I feel to these things?

My mother often passes for white, and her heritage is mostly Spanish. My father is mostly native Mexican, producing me: Curly haired, broad built, brown-eyed with skin the tone of caramel. Perhaps it is possible that in my lineage I have real Charros along with a Conquistador. Perhaps something locked away in my genetics does stir when I sit in the saddle and find that it recognizes the sensation.

Maybe I just wanted to validate my tattoo and chase the next challenge so badly that it had never occurred to me that I might not belong. Like so many of my cousins, I've surrendered entire portions of my heritage to assimilation. It's important to me now that I live up to our legacy of war fighting and adventure. And as much as I chase satisfaction, it is equally as likely that I will never have it. Aztecs, Charros, Marines. They all build their culture off an insatiable hunger for the next challenge, the next fight. We are constantly drawn to the inherently difficult and the dangerous. For those like us, there is nothing else.

Define, Gerry: Professional soldier, child of immigrants, novice writer, novice horsemen. Short for Gerardo, which means, "brave with a spear."

Third Place
Lois C. Bruner Creative Nonfiction Award

Sweet Treat

Grace McGill

To set the scene: It is 4:00 PM. The sun has just begun to set in typical February fashion. I am in a lull: class ended at 3:15. Work starts at 4:30. My bed is soft, my eyes are closed. And my stomach grumbles. From deep within, a dark and insatiable craving grows like a fungus, quickly spreading into my entire body to the tips of my fingers and toes. My eyes open. A sense of sinking dread partners with the craving and consumes everything, inside and out, painful and gnawing.

I need a sweet treat.

But I do not have a sweet treat.

Nowhere in my room is there a sweet treat. Not a candy bar, a baked good, or even a piece of fruit to be found. I haven't gone grocery shopping, and I have no options. What to do? What do I do? The dining hall doesn't open until 5:00. It's too late to leave and make it to work on time. The minutes pass, consuming the twenty-minute window I have before work.

Work.

I have work.

And then I remember.

Today, there's a staff meeting. What comes with staff meetings? Sweet treats! Not just any sweet treats, but delicious homemade sweet treats, baked by my boss.

The dread in my body begins to thaw as I prepare for work. I will arrive a few minutes early, and snag one of these delicious treats. I pack my dinner—leftover pork chops and potatoes—with the knowledge that I will be able to cap off this mediocre meal by fulfilling my craving once and for all.

With my bag zipped, my jacket on, and my water bottle full, I leave for work, satisfied in the knowledge that all is well, or will be very soon.

I arrive at work, and here's where things get sticky. My shift starts at 4:30. My boss leaves at 4:30. She takes the treats with her when she leaves. Which means that I have a very delicate three or four-minute window to arrive, settle into my seat, clock in, and not-too-eagerly jump back up to grab something from the main table.

As I walk in, I can see a large open Tupperware on the table, and while I can't tell exactly what kind of treat is there, I can tell my opportunity will be short. When the treats have been moved from an open plate to the confines of that clear plastic tub, the lid will be placed and that will be the end. It's 4:27. My boss sits nearby, her laptop still open. I have a chance.

I chose a table near the back, with a clear view of the table. With deliberate caution, I partake in my unpacking routine: taking off my jacket, unzipping my bag, and taking out my computer. It's 4:28. I see that my boss has closed her own laptop, but I can also overhear a conversation between her and another consultant. I have time. I need to clock in.

It takes the library's WiFi three tries to connect which knocks another minute off of my opportunity. As I frantically type in my password, I can see out of my peripheral what has transpired. The conversation has ended, and my boss is nearly ready to leave, with a closed computer and packed bag. I stand, ready to strike, until I see my downfall blink onto my screen.

My 4:30 appointment is here.

He's standing next to the front desk. I see the desk manager point back at me. My client smiles at me and starts to come over to my table, and my chance dissolves before my eyes. All at

once, my boss snaps the lid onto her Tupperware, says her goodbyes to the center, and sweeps out.

I sink into my chair. I've been defeated.

Over the rest of my shift, I meet with two clients, eat my pork chops, and wade through my grief. That sense of dread comes back, and it throbs in my temples with every breath. I still want a sweet treat, and that wanting grows with every passing minute.

With ten minutes left in my shift, I get perhaps the best text I've ever received from my girlfriend.

We're going to walmart do you want anything?

I text back. yes please ice cream

What kind?

surprise me

I quickly calculate the timing in my head—if they are leaving now, they would be back in the dorm maybe ten minutes after I did. Just enough time to unpack, change into comfies, and relax after my day. It was the perfect solution, plus it involved free ice cream.

By the time I'm back in my room, sweats on, bag unpacked, and coffee brewing for the next morning, my girlfriend and our friends have returned, and I get a knock on my door. It's her with a pint of my favorite flavor of ice cream and a spoon, and the hours of endless, impossible, grueling suffering have ended, just like that.

I spent the rest of my night on my girlfriend's couch, wrapped in a blanket and watching the musical episode of Henry Danger. Finally, my need for a sweet treat—unlike my ice cream—has melted away for good.

When I was a Child, I Remember

Nicholas Rush

When I was a child, I remember the many moments spent playing with my older sister, Emma, laughing and screaming while our parents watched, amused by our giddiness. My sister and I were very close, not only in relationships but also in age. We spent our childhoods doing what siblings do best: playing, arguing, laughing, fighting, screaming, crying, comforting, and repeating. I wouldn't change a thing. When I was a child, I remember running down to the creek at my grandparents' farm, peering into its cold waters, and intensely wishing something would jump or swim, or splash. I couldn't include Emma. She was far too grown to be looking for frogs. At least that's what she would tell me before turning up her nose at my fun.

When I was a child, I remember watching my mom ride Piper, our pretty bay Arabian. I remember being filled with love and admiration as I watched her from my regular perch on the old corral fencing. I remember the black paint, which had not weathered well, biting into my palms as I fixated on my mom. Her blonde hair whipped in the wind, and her eyes laughed as she smiled back at me. I remember wanting so much to be like her: her gentle care with the horses, her soft voice that could erupt into contagious laughter, and her hugs that always smelled of Biolage shampoo. She was everything I loved about the world.

When I was a child, I remember riding along in the golf cart while my dad attempted to interest me in the sport. He would coach me as he swung a seven iron, skillfully lobbing the ball onto a well-groomed green.

"It's all in the hips," he would tell me.

I remember being more interested in the butterflies that flitted by. My dad tried stubbornly to include me in his hobbies, but my focus couldn't be pulled. I'd rather go running through the woods along the golf course, looking for cool bugs or pretty flowers.

When I was a child, I remember growing older. I remember the glossy and sparkling veil that sensationalized childhood slowly being drawn away. I remember moving from childhood innocence to curious observer to guarded cynic. I remember growing out of touch with my sister, neither one of us sharing much in common anymore.

When I was a teenager, I remember a shift in dynamic with my parents. I started seeing them for their personalities, rather than just as mom and dad. I remember feeling scared, always nervous, always worried I might reveal too much of myself. The self that I was growing into, not the self they had swaddled tightly in a blue-buttoned blanket or bounced lightly on their knees.

When I was a high schooler, I remember always being bullied by a secret. I remember craving, needing, and incessantly reaching out for relationships. I felt nostalgic for the days when my parents understood me, and I understood them, and for the days when I was not hiding something. They would often ask me:

"How was school? How are your friends? Are you meeting anyone special? Who was that girl you hung out with the other night?"

I never knew how to answer, so eventually, I stopped trying.

When I was freshly a senior in high school, I remember coming out to my parents. I remember, after a particularly revealing summer vacation to Key West, feeling as if I no longer had a choice. On a random Saturday morning, I remember just blurting it out. I was brushing my teeth in the bathroom we all shared when the overwhelming urge to be seen overcame my defenses. My mom, who sat in her home office right beyond the bathroom, was blindsided:

"Honey... How can you be sure? I bet you just haven't met the right girl yet."

I remember my dad joining us, taking the steps two at a time as he always did to reach the second floor. I remember the confused look on his face that quickly vanished behind a mask of suppression. I remember crying. There was so much crying as I begged my mom to understand, I begged her to explain to my dad. I remember the look in her eyes and not being able to see my dad's as he wouldn't meet mine.

When I was 18, I needed my parents the most. I remember my dad not speaking to me for months. Even when we shared the same vanity—brushing our teeth, trimming our beards, clipping our toenails—all acts stalled with tension. I remember many nights excruciatingly working up the nerve to ask him how his day was, only for him to hurriedly wipe his mouth on his bath towel before disappearing into his room. I began waiting later and later to begin my nighttime routine to avoid these painfully awkward encounters altogether. These painful encounters picked and pulled at my heart as if there was an embedded, infected hair that needed to be removed.

I remember one night, after sitting on the edge of my bed and calculating when my dad would be finished brushing his teeth, hearing my mom cry. I crept into the bathroom, hoping to sneak in and out without an altercation. My mom, depleted by her attempts to understand me, was sobbing to my dad, weeping for my future. “What kind of life can he live?” I remember hearing her say. Silently, I left the bathroom, my teeth unbrushed.

I began anticipating college more and more. My childhood home no longer felt comforting. My sister was already away at university and had missed all the fun that had been happening at home. I needed to get out, too. When I left for college for the first time, I remember tension. I remember my mom stealing glances at me from the rearview mirror as we rode to Chicago. I remember my dad inhaling sharply, as if he wanted to speak, to break his silence, but wasn’t sure how. I fumbled with my phone, willing the trip to go faster. Then, something different. I remember them trying. My dad spoke to me for the first time in almost a year. It was as if he’d opened the floodgates, and all the things he had wanted to say to me for the past year came pouring out at once. I remember his apology, which brought him closer to crying than I’ve ever seen. I remember the tension leaving the car, spilling through the open windows with the remnants of my dad’s verbal flood. I remember my mom’s smiling eyes in the rearview mirror, wistful with regret and love. I’ll never forget the feeling of blinking away tears as I genuinely smiled at my mom for the first time in years.

When I was finally seen, I remember a tearful goodbye from my mom and a tight hug from my dad as they left me in Chicago to start my academic career. I remember standing in the shadow of James Stukel Towers, my few precious belongings teetering in a glaringly red move-in cart. I watched as my parents, who just recognized me for the first time, climbed back into our faithful Honda Odyssey, its white paint catching the sun as my dad pulled away from the curb. I followed the van with my eyes, preparing to hold tight a fist to my heart, a callback to one of my favorite childhood stories, *The Kissing Hand*. My mom would have immediately recognized the gesture and probably clambered over my dad to blow me a kiss. My dad would have just smiled and waved goodbye. But I don’t remember that. I remember a large family entering my line of sight, blocking my view as they kissed and doted on their college freshman, who seemed eager to be released from their loving hands. I remember a stab of desperation as I stepped away from my move-in cart, hoping to bid my parents farewell for a final time. But it had been too late. I only managed to glimpse the rear end of my childhood van before it turned the corner at the end of the block, disappearing behind another row of student housing. I stared blankly at the empty space that my parents’ van had occupied just moments before. Remembering *The Kissing Hand*, I looked down at my closed fist. My heart filled with warmth. Even as I stood there, more alone than I had ever been, I remember feeling grateful. Although we continued to grow and change, alone and together, my parents were still the same ones I remembered from when I was a child.

The Wanderer
Kieara Morey





2024 *Elements* Staff

Managing Editor: Natoya Raymond

Poetry Editor: Ajayla Ries-Ennells

Fiction Editor: Nicholas Rush

Creative Nonfiction Editor: Carter Myers

Art Editors: Jaci Oest and Cora Wolford

Editorial Assistants: Emma Henderson, Ainsley Eskridge, and
Austin Knutson (Fiction); Jael Henning (Poetry & Nonfiction);
Austin Knutson (Nonfiction)

Copy Editors: Ajayla Ries-Ennells (Poetry), Ainsley Eckridge and
Nicholas Rush (Fiction), Carter Myers, Jael Hennings and
Austin Knutson (Nonfiction)

Production Manager Extraordinaire: Dr. Ashley M. Beardsley

Acting Faculty Advisor: Professor Barbara Lawhorn