

ENGLISH '57 SERIES



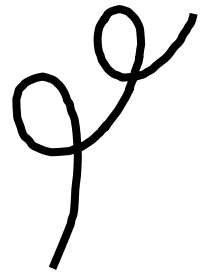
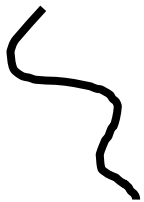
Sense of ♥
Community



The absolutely
bananas conversations



WORDPLAY
FALL 2024



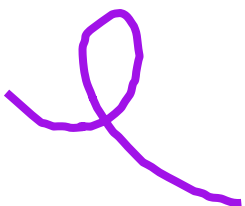
Seeing learners
improve either
in their writing
or in broader
skills



All the
besties +
vibes



having coworkers
i feel safe + happy
with, who make
even the worst days
brighter.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Hi, party people!

This semester has thrown so many challenges our way, but one thing has been consistent through it all: the TLC. I'm so proud of the community we've created together, both tutors and learners, and all of the hard work we've done really shows in this edition of *Wordplay*.

I want to thank our associate director, Jen White. After several rocky semesters, Jen has gotten us to a place that feels stable, and has worked hard to revive and sustain our program. Day after day, she spends time getting to know us all, sits through *so* many meetings, and supports each and every one of us with anything we might need.

Thank you to Amanda Meidl, our RID and academic coaching coordinator. Though her job description has changed a bit over the past few semesters, Amanda has always put her all into every project, and has showcased her unwavering commitment the TLC. This semester, she has done incredible work with the PSL program and has truly transformed it into something brand new.

And, of course, thank you to our administrative specialist, Bethany Kobiske. Without Bethany, literally nothing would go as planned. She is both our grounding force and our biggest distraction, and we wouldn't have it any other way. There is so much that Bethany does for our space, our tutors, and our learners, and we are so lucky to have her!

I also want to thank all of our student staff for their hard work this semester. Our front desk staff-Abi, Isabelle, Katie, Jarita, and Sophie-keep everything running smoothly, even when we have fifteen OWLs at once. So many of our tutors have put in extra effort when we were super busy, and I can't appreciate them enough. Everyone stepped up their game when we needed them most, and it was great to watch you all grow and adapt. Our student managers-Jarita, Kacey, and Katie-have shown incredible dedication, creativity, and leadership skills that have helped the TLC thrive.

Finally, we have to say a very sad goodbye to some of our most valuable staff-Andrea, Lindsey, Ella, Kylie, and Elliot. They will be insanely missed in the TLC, but I know that each of them are off to do incredible things!

This has been an amazing semester, and I'm so proud of all of you! Thank you for being the best community I could ask for :)

-Reilly Crous
Writing Center Intern

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BRENNA BAILEY

Throughout our time together this semester, Brenna has consistently impressed me with her ability to seamlessly blend intricate world-building into the narrative she is telling. I found myself consistently excited to watch her characters, Aia and Neilphlm, bond and grow together. Most of our sessions were found excitedly figuring out the intricacies of her world and deciding what the reader should know about it and when. I'm truly sad I wasn't able to see the entirety of her novel and I hope to read it once its on the shelves of bookstores everywhere.

—Elliot

Ayasyn

Chapter One: Cireah

The sound of flowing water fills my ears as I walk towards The Unnamed. My magic detects my daughter as she swims.

The Unnamed is a beautiful blue river, flowing into The Shimmering Waters. Light reflects off the surface, making the water shine like crystals of all colors. My daughter, Aia, is in her true form swimming beneath the surface.

Her wings are pointed, transparent, glittering and pale rainbow. Her skin is made of blue-green scales. Her brown hair flows down like the waves. Her eyes match her wings, pale rainbow with dark pools of black as her pupil. Her claws match her skin, beautiful blue-green. Her tail ends with two, large points and also matches her skin. Even though she has a tail, her legs are in front of it.

Once Aia sees me, she smiles and walks up onto the beach. “Mother! Hello!”

I smile and nod. “Daughter, may you please change to your normal form?” With my magic, I summon her a muted hunter green dress.

Meanwhile, my daughter changes into her human form. Her skin changes to be pale white. Her tail, wings, and claws all disappear, making her look human.

I throw her dress at her. “I have a task for you.” I sigh. “My..worshippers have been falling out of faith. I need your help to...” Even as a Goddess, I struggle to find the word. “Spread my religion back into Ayasyn.”

Aia looks up and nods. As my daughter, I trust Aia to help me. I could do it myself, but I have a lot to take of as a Goddess. She looks back at me and nods. “Mother, I don’t think I will be able to do this alone. Ayasyn is a very big world. It would take me months.”

I nod. “You want a companion?” She nods. “I will provide you with one. Meet me at the base of the mountain.”

With that, I walk away from her.

My domain, known by Mortals as The Rainbow Ladies Domain, is filled with forest. I walk north, watching the tree's leaves become red, orange, yellow, green, blue and purple. I smile. I have always been fond of colors.

As I walk, my nymphs nod to me. They have their private parts covered with leaves and their hair, though very beautiful, tangled with leaves and vines.

I nod back to them.

I get to the base of the mountain. It’s huge, it’s dark blue-black stone capped with

glistening snow. In this mountain is my daughter's protector and companion.

He'll have to do. If he refuses, I'll have to throw him back into the prison.

I use my powers to teleport in.

Chapter Two: Neilphlm

The cold presses into me like always. Shaking from cold and fatigue, I attempt to pull on the chains.

With my restraints, Cireah's priest began to chant. The runes that Cireah put into my wrist to seal my power glow and I attempt to scream. Nothing comes out though, I don't know how long they have been starving me for.... It feels like a few years of my life time....which is not much.

I see a flash of rainbow behind my closed eyes. "Enough!" A voice calls out. "Let me deal with the demon."

That's right. That's all I am to them. A demon. It makes sense though. I feel my demon wings twitch in pain.

The chains, which have been blessed by holy magic, finally release me and I fall to the ground. I crawl my way to the corner, using the strength I have left...which is that of a normal human. The runes that Cireah put on my wrist burn. They have been...burned? Carved? I really can't remember. But however they got onto the inside of my wrist, they have cut off my powers.

I make it to the corner and push myself up.

Cireah, The Goddess of All, yells to her priest. "Leave us!"

I hear footsteps as her priest leaves. I attempt to open my eyes and I find Cireah.

Her hair is long, pale white with a shimmer of rainbow. Her eyes are also pale rainbow. Her fairy wings are also pale rainbow....why does she like rainbows so much...? Maybe because...Ugh. I can't see her dress or her shoes in the darkness...even though I should be able to, being a demon.

Cireah smiles at me and offers me a bowl. It smells amazing, of spices and herbs. The broth itself is...I think pale brown...almost?

"Neilphlm of The Prophecy, I need your aid. I will make you a deal. My daughter, Aia, is going to be traveling through Ayasyn. I want you to go with her."

I feel myself attempt to laugh. No sound comes out. "Really?" I croak out. "After all you have done? After all I can do to Ayasyn, you want me to leave?"

Cireah puts the bowl down at my feet. "Do you want me to continue torturing you?"

I cringe and say coldly: "It's either that or Ayasyn is destroyed."

Neilphlm of The Prophecy. That has been my title since I was born. The Prophecy is a simple thing, just depicting a thing named Neilphlm destroying Ayasyn with darkness and despair....I can't remember what it says exactly.

I groan as I move my legs to cross underneath me. "You want me to protect her? Does she know how to fight?"

She laughs. "No. But you do."

I nod reluctantly. My father was the one to teach me how to fight. He was a demon, and was the Representative of Hell. While in Hell, he also taught me how to torture humans.

I spent four-hundred years in Hell before he banished me here. I sigh and look up at Cireah. "How long would I be protecting her?"

"As long as she needs. If you do this, I will make sure you will never be imprisoned again."

I can't help but laugh. Cireah was the one to find me and throw me underneath the mountain. Since I have been hung in the chains, she has not let me out...besides right now. I rub my wrist and frown. "What about The Prophecy?"

She smiles at me. "You can try to prevent it as long as you can, but it is a prophecy. It's bound to happen."

I nod once more and look down. "Is there someone else who can do this?"

She laughs. "Nope. A half-demon half-angel is perfect for the job! With your strength back, you will be a force to be reckoned with." I growl at her. She laughs again. "And it starts with getting your powers back." She summons a knife and throws it between the bars. "Cut your runes off. I will draw you a bath." She leaves me.

The barred door keeping me in swings open. I squint at it. I muster up enough strength to grab the soup and drink it. After...however long they have kept me here..feeling something good and warm down my throat feels amazing.

After a while of sitting, I force myself up. My wings brush against the wall and I fold them closer to my back. My black feathers are falling off and curling...I am not in good condition. If I am to fight for..this Aia, I'll have to get better and that starts with getting my powers back.

I grab the knife and, with no hesitation, cut the first rune off my right wrist. I feel a river of magic flood into me, I growl to keep in my happiness. No happiness for a demon. I switch the knife to my other hand and cut off the other rune.

I feel my magic rush into me. I feel my strength come back. I nod as I stretch my wings and arms out, the movements ache and burn. I let my arms down and drop the knife. I won't need it now.

I summon some darkness and swirl it around my fingers. It obeys my silent command, I destroy it and walk out of my cell.

Just like my cell, the hallway is dark and dirty. Cell's as small as mine line the hallways. At the very end of this hallway is a long set of dark stairs leading to an even darker door.

I look to the cell in front of me. A bronze bath has been placed into the cell. A stone shelf has been installed above it, it has some pale orange soap on it.

Beside the entrance to my cell, are some folded clothes. The cuts into the cloth let me know these clothes are mine. The cuts are for my wings. I don't dare touch it with my dirt ridden hands.

I walk into the cell and strip off my clothes, revealing more runes around my entire body. They don't cut off my powers...so I do not know what they do. I sigh, throw my clothes into the corner and slide into the bath.

Warm water covers my entire body. I fold my wings into the bath and I watch as some of my feathers fall into the water. I growl. Pythonin would be pissed.

I grab some of the soap and sniff it. It's...orange. I think. I have never been to Ayasyn before. I spent most of my life in Hell and the first years in Heaven. But, it's not like I can go back. I have been banished from both.

It takes me a long time to fully scrub myself clean, and a lot of soap. I have to push my

fingers through my hair to untangle it. I have to scrub my wings to help my feathers heal...and I have to stop my wrist from bleeding.

I finally leave the bath, my skin scrubbed clean. I walk over to the clothes. I find some gauze and use it to wrap my wrist.

I could use my wings to fly away once I get stronger...or I could just work with the only Goddess in Ayasyn. I growl and finish my wrapping. I'll just do it. After I finish, I grab the clothes...

I frown at the black robe I am holding. A robe, really? Cireah must be playing with me. A robe is for a priest and angels, not a demon. I shake my head and put it on, pushing my wings through the cuts in the back. It fits perfectly. Of course Cireah would know what fits me. She is omniscient.

Finally, I look back down the hall at the door. This is my last chance, I could break down the door and fly away.

But, something in me tells me not to. I made a deal, I have to fulfill it. Reluctantly, I walk down the hall and through the door.

Cireah smiles at me. Now in daylight, I can see she is wearing a simple grey sleeveless dress and grey flats. She looks me up and down and nods. She turns away from me. "Come on, Exiled One, let me show you my daughter." She walks away.

After getting used to the light, I follow.

Chapter Three: Aia

After changing into the dress mother gave me, I head for The Untouchable. It takes me a few minutes, but it is worth it to get my thoughts in order.

My mother wants me to spread her word. That means she is losing followers. How? Why? Maybe she is becoming a myth. This must have been a recent thing too.

I was born because of my mothers faith in her followers, and her followers faith in her. That was twenty-eight years ago.

I get to The Untouchable and smile at my home. It's a simple town, not many people live on the island. Wood shacks line a dirt path. Up the path, it splits and circles. More houses are around the circle. I don't live in one of them. I prefer to spend my time in The Unnamed and its waters.

I walk into it and meet my mother in the circle. She is with someone I have never seen before. But, I can tell by his black hair he is a demon. I tilt my head at his gold eyes. The eyes of an angel. I smile. Half-demon half-angel...very rare.

His hair is longer than mine, going all the way down his back and ending at his waist. His face has a dark look in it, like he has been used to pain and suffering...or has seen too much of it. He does not look bothered by this though. The robe he is wearing is black, matching his feathered wings....they don't look healthy at all. Many feathers fall off of them, revealing cut, infected skin and bloodied bone. I take a deep breath and make myself not run up to him and attempt to get some herbs in his wings. Besides that, he has some gauze wrapped around both wrists...blood soils them. His skin is tightened to his bone, he looks extremely malnourished.

My mother smiles at me and gestures to the demon-angel with a wave. "May you introduce yourself?"

The demon-angel nods once. "Neilphlm." He says coldly.

My eyes go wide. Neilphlm. The Exiled One. He is the demon of The Prophecy meant to destroy Ayasyn. The Prophecy was written long ago by an unknown source, and since The Prophecy was written, the name Neilphlm was banned throughout Ayasyn.

But, of course, the people of Ayasyn can't dictate what angels and demons do.

I smile at Neilphlm. "I'm Faithful Aia. Goddesses Daughter. You can call me Aia, though." I shrug. I look back at my mother. "Mother, where shall we start?"

Cireah smiles. "You two will start in Mesa, then you can decide where to go from there."

Mesa is the City of Light in Cera. As the title suggests, it's a city that values light and good. I glance over at Neilphlm. He finds my eye and stares at me. He does not seem to know, or care about Mesa. I look back at my mother and nod. "What about currency? We will need money."

She nods again and hands me six leather pouches. "Two bags of silver, two bags of gold, and some emergency platinum."

I smile and nod. Silver is the least valuable out of the three, ten of them being worth one gold piece. Ten gold pieces are also worth one platinum. Most people in Ayasyn use silver, so I'll start with that once we get to Mesa.

Mother looks between Neilphlm and I and nods. "That's all you will need for now. Mesa has an inn that you two can stay at." She smiles and walks over to me. She gives me a hug and I hug her back. "Goodbye, my daughter. Stay safe."

I smile back. "Bye mother." We release each other and I gesture for Neilphlm to come to me. He walks over to me with little hesitation and stands by my side. I nod to him. "Thank you." I say.

He stares forward and says nothing as mother teleports us to Mesa.

Chapter Four: Neilphlm

The first thing I notice about Mesa is the light. I hiss at it and blink till my eyes get used to it. I look at Aia. "Why is it so bright?" I ask.

She smiles up at me. "Mesa is The City of Light. Every city in Ayasyn has a title." She looks around and points at a building...which I still can't see because it is too bright. "Let's get a room." She begins to walk and I follow her.

After a while, I get used to the light. Mesa is a city of...well light. Lanterns hang from tall, stone skyscrapers. In the cracks of the stone path we walk on, small lights linger. Floating in the sky are balls of light and even the people walking around have a bracelet of light around their wrist.

Aia and I approach a small, flat roofed building. Just like everything here, in the cracks of its grey stone walls are small balls of light. The doors of this inn is made of a bright wood with small glass windows at the top. Long, golden handles reach out for me...literally, they are shaped like arms and hands. I grasp one of them and pull open the door for Aia. I check the inside before letting her in.

The inside is what I think people would call comfortable. I would call it luxury. The walls are soft blue, and the floor is made of light wood. There is a dark counter in the back, being manned by a tall woman. The desk has a pile of paper on, as well as a pen and quill. Tan couches are around a fireplace to the left and to the right are the same couches. People sit on

the couches, talking with each other.

After I make sure none of them have any evil in them, I let Aia in. She laughs. "Are you sure you're a demon? You sure act protective."

I glare at her. "Just doing what I was told."

She smiles and walks into the inn. I follow her and we walk up towards the desk before I grab her arm. "One room."

She turns to me and says: "You want us to get one room?" I nod. "I know it would be better for you to protect me, but where will you sleep?"

"The floor."

While in Hell, the only place to sleep was the floor. The Demon King was the only one allowed to sleep in his castle. My father refused to let me meet this Demon King. He said that I should not see him, being half-angel. I sigh. Anyway, the floor was my bed for four-hundred years....and I was in chains for...I shake my head. I don't know. But I was in Heaven for five years before my mother sent me to Hell.

I shake my head, now is not the time to be thinking about the past. I finally let go of Aia's arm and we walk up to the counter. Aia smiles at the attendant and says in a cheerful tone: "One room please!"

The attendant looks between her and I, then back at her papers. She looks back at us. "There is a room available on floor six. Is that okay with you two?"

Aia glances at me and I nod. She smiles back at the attendant. "Yep! That's perfect! Thank you."

The attendant nods. "That would be four silver please."

Aia hands her the silver and the attendant hands her a gold key. Aia uses her other hand to grab mine and begins to pull me to a staircase I did not notice. It's a dark staircase, and I look to Aia. "Can you see in the dark?"

She shakes her head and begins the climb, still towing me. "Nope. Besides my knowledge, I am a completely normal human in this form."

"This form?" I exclaim and force my way in front of her.

She nods. "Yes." I can feel her looking at my shoulder blades. "And, you will not be sleeping on the floor. You need rest. A good rest. After so long in The Demon's Prison, you need to sleep in an actual bed."

I shake my head. "I don't know how long I was in there." I say quickly. "And you are the one who will need sleep, I don't."

Aia pats my back and I take a breath. "No." She says. "I take the couch, you take the bed." I open my mouth and she cuts me off with a small sound. "End of discussion, Neilphlm."

I frown and keep going up. Once we make it to the sixth floor-which is a hallway filled with bright lights and brown doors lining the walls- Aia takes us to a door three doors down and to the left. She unlocks it and swings the door open with a smile.

The walls of this room are just windows, letting light stream in. The floors are made of a plush, pale blue carpet. To the left is a few leather couches with a red fireplace. To the right is a kitchen...I can see it through the open door. I see white counters and dark floors. There is a coat rack beside the door we entered and two dark doors to our sides.

Aia smiles and looks at me, she gestures further into the room and I walk in. I check the rooms. No one here. I walk back to Aia and nod. She's...grinning at me.

Her grin fades and she nods. "We have to do something to help spread Cireah's word. Something good."

I groan. "You remember I am supposed to destroy the world right?"

She glares at me. "And yet, you are half-angel. I know there is good in you." She shakes her head. "Come on. Let's get settled first."

"I disagree." I tell her and I walk to the couch. "My father was a demon. My mother was an angel. She banished me first."

I barely remember Heaven. All I know is that it was bright and loud and every angel was smiling at me. Even though I had the hair of a demon, they smiled at me.

Then randomly, my mother handed me to my father and he took me to Hell. He told me that I was not allowed back to Heaven, that mother would hurt me if I went back.

I think she would kill me. I shake my head. Now is not the time. I look down at the couch. Aia walks over to me and looks down at the couch. "There is a school here. I think we should head there and tell some students about Cireah."

I laugh evilly. She pales and backs away from me. "Youth manipulation!" I say with an evil smile. "Let's go!"

Aia and I get ready and we leave for the school. We walk down the road and find the school.

It is a grey brick building, with a bright courtyard filled with flowers. Underneath these flowers, are small lights and sprinklers.

Aia looks at me and smiles. "Let me do the talking please." I nod and we walk in.

PAIGE BIEVER

This is my third year tutoring alongside Paige, and my third year being impressed with just how consistent she is, both in tutoring and writing. As I've gotten closer to her, I've noticed just how much work she puts in every day. It's been so much fun to work with Paige in the TLC, and I can't wait for our last semester together!

—Reilly

Priority Mail

She takes the small white 11 x 8.5 x 5.5 box, turning it to read the neat scrawl.

It is from her mom.

She knew this—she had been the one to ask her to ship some forgotten items to her apartment miles away.

And yet at the sight of her mom's familiar handwriting something tugs at part of her,
maybe her too sensitive heart or reaching mind, the kind always searching for meaning,
for connection.

She imagines her mom in the post office, the drag of the black pen, and contemplates the space that has grown between them.

She wonders what thoughts ran through her mom's head when she wrote the address, her daughter's name, in the same handwriting she's always had.

Was she remembering when they lived under the same roof for more than a few days at a time?
When they could talk, voices mirrors of one another, instead of confined to words on a glaring screen?

She believes some conversations aren't meant for text:

how she fears she will never be loved the way her mom and dad loved,

how she regrets how she acted that final month

when Death hung heavy in the high ceilings of their house,

some unpreventable, unnatural thing eating away at heart and mind.

how in the aftermath she wouldn't cry because she'd been led to believe

such a thing made her weak, no matter the intent behind it.

how she wondered if she knew herself, ever truly would, or if she was

destined to wander those dark and winding corridors in her head,

lost forever.

She wonders if her mom has ever felt these things, the inexplicable ache of one's twenties.

Surely she must have?

When she sets her fingers over the words on the box she almost thinks she can feel her mom's hand beneath hers, the skin warm and smooth,

but then the feeling fades fast and she is alone.

Pretty Little Things

His heeled feet
 click
 click
 click
on the linoleum tiles.

He smells like baby powder and slightly like shit.
It makes her gag but she doesn't bother to hide it behind her unfurled newspaper.
There's another article on that actor who dresses like he's asking for it,
his chest partially exposed by the rose-gold blazer.
His smile is too inviting or perhaps just the right amount of inviting—
she finds it inviting.

He makes noise in the dirty little kitchen sink.
She tells him 'quiet down.'
He's always a bit too loud.
The dishes clink together softly, almost imperceptibly.
When he is done, he makes dinner:

pomegranate-glazed salmon
oranges, olives
lemon, thyme,
rosemary.

The eat in silence.
By the time he eats, the food is a cold, putrid thing.
It gets stuck in his teeth and he knows he'll gnaw at it for hours,
wiggling at it with the tip of his tongue.

When she is done she says she is going out—Girl's Night, like most nights
 where the crescent moon does not shine its crooked moonlight grin down
 into their bedroom.

She returns after the moon has coerced the clouds over its pale, radiant face.
He stayed coiled on the couch, eyes flitting between the TV and the door, until her arrival.
The scent of skunk smoke wafts from her,
 Tuscan temporary tattoos dark on the milky skin of her neck—lip prints mouthing
 I can give her everything you can't anymore.
He hears them snickering behind their hands, faces grotesquely good-looking in the low pulsing
light.

He imagines a life like hers, the blessed blissful ignorance and easy pleasure.
When his hands curl around her neck it is a warm, immaculate thing.

The skin tears under his paint-chipped nails, the blood running slick through his calloused fingers.

Gnaw carefully through smooth skin, through soft bones and sinew
until it is you in that body.

ZOE BOYD

It's only Zoe's first semester tutoring, but she has already made such a big impact. She brings so many good vibes to the space, and is always patient and calm with her learners. More than anything, Zoe is always showing a commitment to learning and growing, and I admire that so much!

—Reilly

The Finch

The sun has set
I hear the hyenas cackle
“What’s so funny?” I wonder
I flutter quickly
Seething amidst the tall grass
Silently collecting twigs to feed the fire
I burn them one by one
Carefully.

So as not to let the smoke billow too high;
They might smell it and know where to find me

So as not to let the flame grow too bright;
I might see farther than I care to

So as not to let the embers jump too far;
I might set the woodlands ablaze

My eyes stay fixed to the orange satin
Folding in on itself
I hardly notice the sunrise again
I decide it’s better
To save myself this time
And throw this body to the dogs myself

Rejection

Unhinging their jaws
Laughter ensues; They will not eat me
Somehow this hurts more

The Hyena

The Finch sits atop her tippy top tree
That stupid old bird thinks she's better than me
For she sings and she coos
But it's all just a ruse
And I guarantee she thinks that she's better than you.

Would you believe if I said
That her and I were once friends!
Even sharing a bed
Even sharing a den
And she must've known then what I knew in my heart:
I could've plucked all her feathers
And tore her apart.
But she thought I was kind
And I thought she was smart
For somehow she knew
Without a word on my part
That I loved her.

But how foolish that was!
Surely one of her tricks
For a finch and a dog never would mix
And I knew this was so when I met a new beau
And she left me to go collect sticks.

A wretched bird really
Never laughed at my jokes
Unsure of herself
When she cooed and she spoke
A boring old chicken
Made of mirrors and smoke
Yet she thinks herself so highly
She could croak for all I care.

Now she sits alone atop her tippy top tree
I can't help but wonder if she's still mad at me.
All because I laughed
When she sang and she cooed
All because I left
When her singing killed the mood
But my beau laughed along
So that surely can't be. . .

Such a pathetic old bird
She thinks she's better than me?

ANGEL BRONK

I've had the pleasure of spending more time with Angel this semester, and it has been so much fun! No matter the project or subject, Angel will always give it his all, and I am always so impressed by the quality work he does. He has been such a strong asset to the TLC, and I'm so grateful that he shares his time, effort, and skills with us every day.

—Reilly

missed call: violent canine

they beat the dog from me.

chained me to the back deck and bade me to chase the mailman
at least then no one would dare approach
so one would see me dangle from the porch

muzzled my bark so I'd never learn to bite
kept the conversations with the counselor polite
and the doctor checkups from a CPS call

morphed me into that tiny rabbit under the bush
the kind that burrows from brutality and cowers under command

they forgot
when they beat the dog from me
that despite the lack of fangs
rabbits still have claws

message from: church parking lot

I gave my first breath there
In front of chipped gazebos and Judas statues
The gaze of the traitor mocking every rhythm
Under that baptized sky—sealed in tablet stone

I slipped my first confession there
Enshrined across my chest and bound in reverence thorns
Drowning prayer in punk and curse till the nearby homes turned on
A worship finally spoken—despite her ignorance

I'd be the booth
You'd be the savior

Is this what it meant to be holy?
To desecrate
To defile

To swear to the presence above that I would ignore its doctrine
Or turn to its teachings—to absolve—when it all came crashing down

Gay Cats? In My Young Adult Feline Melodrama?: Queering the *Warriors* Super Edition: *Tallstar's Revenge*

When scanning young adult literature for potential queer themes, a twenty-year-long series consisting of the drama between wild cats may not be the most likely candidate. Yet, Erin Hunter's *Warriors* has continually enchanted an eager audience over its two decades on store shelves through its expansive world, captivating characters, and endless potential for queer storytelling despite the series' rigid adherence to heteronormativity. The most well-renowned example of this tiptoeing into queer territory is *Tallstar's Revenge*, a 2013 Super Edition spin-off detailing the origins of WindClan's first arc leader: Tallstar. *Tallstar's Revenge* approaches the realm of queerness when examining Tallstar and his misguided effort to regain his masculinity through avenging his father's death, only to find happiness in his relationship with another tomcat. Tallstar's journey from miserable vengeance-seeker to paragon of compassion is rooted in four stages of his character: loss of masculinity, desperate reclamation efforts through hyper-masculinized vengeance, challenging and overcoming of toxic masculinity through the influence of a perceived opposite, and fulfillment in mentorship of fellow outsiders. Consequently, queering *Tallstar's Revenge* involves not just examining the in-text character relationships, but the theoretical concepts present in the novel that seek to illuminate and oppose the norms of the in-universe culture, and by extension, the norms of the real world experienced by *Warriors* adolescent audience.

Tallstar's Revenge is a super edition from the young adult series *Warriors* by Erin Hunter revolving around the backstory of the WindClan leader Tallstar. From birth, Tallkit struggled to find a place in his home – especially as WindClan differs slightly from the remaining three Clans surrounding the forest. While the other Clans had the simple ranks of kit, apprentice, and warrior, WindClan divided their warriors into two positions: tunneler and moor runner. Tunnelers dig deep beneath the earth to create secret paths for catching prey in the barren winter months, a vital yet dangerous job wrought with discrimination by moor runners and Clan leadership. Young Tallkit is groomed to follow in the pawsteps of his tunneler father, Sandgorse, but his fear prevents him from stepping near the tunnels and results in his apprenticeship as a moor runner. During an annual visit by a group of rogues, Sandgorse perishes in a cave-in while sacrificing himself to save the rogue, Sparrow, leaving the now warrior, Talltail, wracked with grief and anger. Talltail leaves WindClan to hunt Sparrow down and avenge Sandgorse – accompanied by a kittypet, i.e. housecat, named Jake. Jake teaches the battle-hungry Talltail the importance of compassion and kindness, developing a close connection with the WindClan warrior. The question then lingers: will Talltail take the life of someone due to his misguided justice, or has the love and kindness brought by Jake unveiled who the true Talltail is?

The concepts of Queer Theory involved in *Tallstar's Revenge* are some of the most base when examining queer media. This analysis will primarily tackle the effects of masculinity, specifically the norms imposed within a society equating to masculinity, and the fragility of masculinity as parallel to Talltail's quest for vengeance. Talltail's relationship with masculinity is defined by his failure to live up to the legacy of his father as a tunneler, which he channels into a hyper-violent act as a means of reclamation – a path many who struggle with the expectations of

being a man, or in Talltail's case a tom, often endure. *Tallstar's Revenge* also approaches a queer lens through the relationship between Talltail and Jake, as this pair is not only one of the few assumed canon queer relationships present in the twenty-year-long series, but even outside the belief of canonicity, the two toe the line of homosexual affection. As a kittypet, Jake is simultaneously an outsider of Clan and masculine culture, as he is considered soft for his reliance on a human and his emotional intelligence, and, as a result, deals with frequent ridicule of his lifestyle. Jake serves as a stand-in for gay men, unveiling Talltail's true nature through his support and affection for the WindClan warrior, ringing a familiar bell for many queer experiences. Finally, *Tallstar's Revenge* briefly touches on intersectional solidarity between marginalized communities, as with the assumption of Talltail as queer comes the question of how his queerness may have influenced his leadership. As a mentor and a Clan leader, Talltail finds joy in mentoring fellow outsiders like himself: taking a disabled cat, Deadpaw, as his apprentice when no other cat would. This storyline finalizes *Tallstar's Revenge's* queer lens, as Talltail becomes a known queer member of his Clan willing to cross lines of marginalization to promote a brighter future for all.

Tallkit's ideal masculine identity resides primarily in the image of his father, Sandgorse, as one of WindClan's premium tunnelers. His self-image relies upon comparison of himself to Sandgorse, equating Sandgorse's strength and passion for tunneling with his self-worth and – by association – masculinity. Upon realizing Tallkit is utterly terrified of tunneling, his sense of masculinity shatters, and he fervently rejects the position Sandgorse has primed him for since birth. Tallkit's first experience with tunneling sets this failure to achieve masculinity into motion, as Tallkit commits the least traditionally masculine act of running away: “*Help! I'm being buried alive!...* ‘Are you okay?’ Sandgorse let go and stared into Tallkit's face. ‘No!’ Tallkit's muzzle throbbed and his claws burned. ‘I can't do this! I hate digging holes, and I don't want to be a tunneler!’ A wail rose in his belly as soil stung his eyes. ‘Palebird!’ Chest heaving, he turned and raced for the nursery” (18). Tallkit's rejection of tunneling relies on his fear of it, unable to conquer his anxiety around the possibility of a collapse and loathing the feeling of the dirt in his paws. He views the tunnels as the most unsafe place for him and thus cannot continue the path laid out for him by Sandgorse – turning tail to run back to the safety of his mother. This single experience with the tunnels defines Tallkit's self-image for the rest of the novel, equating his failure to follow in the paw steps of his father to a failure of himself as a cat. Tunneling becomes how Tallkit tries over and over to prove himself to his father and Clan, only to fail each time because it is not who he truly is – ringing a familiar bell for many of the arbitrary expectations of masculinity present within our modern world.

As *Tallstar's Revenge* continues, Tallpaw enters apprenticeship under the role of a moor runner, with his failures in the tunnels continually haunting him every day he spends in the grass. This defeat morphs into crisis following Sandgorse's death in the tunnels, in which the only survivor is the rogue Sparrow. Desperate to preserve Sandgorse's memory, Tallpaw rushes to become a tunneler despite his previous fears and failures. However, the recent tragedy has sealed the fate of the entire position of the tunneler and is no longer practiced in WindClan. Now a warrior, Talltail struggles to accept Sandgorse's death while simultaneously being unable to legitimize his masculinity despite reaching a fully respected status in his society. Using the untimely demise of his primary patriarchal figure and his rage toward the erasure of his father's

legacy as an ignition point, Talltail seeks to reclaim his masculinity through the hyperviolent, masculinized act of murdering Sparrow: “‘He killed Sandgorse.’... Didn’t any of his Clanmates realize what Sparrow had done? ‘But Sandgorse’s death was an accident,’ Barkpaw meowed, ‘It wasn’t Sparrow’s fault.’ Not Sparrow’s fault? Talltail’s anger swelled until he felt it block his throat... You’re out there somewhere, I know. He pictured Sparrow stretching happily in a pool of dawn sunshine. You think you can go unpunished forever, but I won’t let that happen” (271). No cat in the Clan has reason or suspicion of how Sandgorse died, with many regarding the act as a noble sacrifice by one of their own. In contrast, Talltail views Sandgorse’s death as one of injustice, and his frustration with his Clanmates is made clear through his internal monologue. The untimely death of his father, the ideal patriarchal figure, and the abandonment of the tunneling practice have left Talltail with no means of regaining his masculinity through previously known methods. Adrift, Talltail desperately seeks any reconciliation of his lost masculine worth by reaching for the most extreme act possible, one he claims will avenge Sandgorse and legitimize the legacy of his abandoned practice. Talltail’s quest for vengeance is born of a lie: one constructed in his head amidst a tragedy centering on the two pillars of Talltail’s masculinity. Like many youths, Talltail projects his emotions onto other individuals or scenarios, embarking on a quest under the guise of avenging Sandgorse’s demise. In reality, it is only through the most traditionally masculine method, violence, that Talltail believes he can reclaim the misguided masculinity long on his conscience and reconcile his inability to follow the path his father set for him.

Any storyteller worth their salt would take a character bruting in the world of hypermasculinity and pair him with his cultural and ideological opposite. *Tallstar’s Revenge* does exactly this, with its most blatant nod toward queer interpretation through the budding relationship of Talltail and Jake. As a kittypet, Jake is everything Talltail has been raised to avoid: soft, unable to fight in battle, and, most relevant to a queer examination, compassionate and communicative about his feelings – a dead ringer for many real-world stereotypes held about gay men. Fortunately, *Tallstar’s Revenge* takes these stereotypes and twists them into a valuable asset to Talltail’s journey, later using Jake, the embodiment of these traits, to outright confront and alter Talltail’s perception of himself as a violent, emotionless tom. Consequently, Talltail comes to understand his true self and the fragility of hypermasculine mindsets through his close bond with another tom. The contrast between Jake and Talltail’s lifestyles is, at first, comedic in its execution as Talltail stumbles through the kittypet world of dried kibble and vet carriers. However, Talltail begins to take it more seriously when Jake’s gentle assistance of an elder kittypet produces the very information needed to track Sparrow: “‘Jake trotted after him. ‘You found out what you wanted to know, didn’t you?’ ‘Yes. Now let’s get out of here.’ Talltail paused and looked back. ‘And thanks for your help, Jake.’... Jake shrugged. ‘It’s like dealing with housefolk. You get more out of them by being friendly’” (351). This is the first moment within the novel where Talltail is exposed to the benefits of a worldview outside his own: one built on compassion and empathy over violence and scorn. Prior, he internally mocks Jake’s consideration of the elder kittypet, breaking from his standoffish facade once Jake’s gentle touch produces tangible results – to which Jake earnestly remarks on the moral and logical importance of helping others. This scene first begins the unraveling of Talltail’s traditionally masculine mindset, one initially locked in the traditions of how ‘real men’ are to treat those beneath them.

Jake's continual kindness toward others appears to have truly changed Talltail's attitude on revenge, with the two discovering a new, comfortable normal together. This does not last long, unfortunately, as Talltail retreats to his vengeance plan once Sparrow is in a position of vulnerability. Having grown to deeply know each other over the last several moons, to the point in which their behaviors align with that of mates, Jake fully confronts Talltail, imploring him to scrap his murderous plot. As the opposite to Talltail's toxically masculine beliefs, Jake tries to reason with Talltail through the highly 'unmasculine' act of talking about one's feelings: "He never understood the damage he did.' Talltail curled his lip... 'Just tell him!' Jake's fur rose along his spine. 'Make him understand. How Sandgorse's death hurt you, and how you feel he's responsible.'... 'I know you, Talltail. You're not a killer. You'd die to defend those you love.'... Jake gazed at him. 'Don't do this, Talltail,' he begged softly. 'Please.' 'I *have* to!' Talltail snarled. 'If you don't agree, then go home. You're no use to me' (404-405). Jake's plea to Talltail, while the so-called weakest path by toxically masculine societies, is, in fact, the most vulnerable as it calls on Talltail to speak, not strike. Jake recognizes how violence has never been Talltail's true nature, identifying Talltail as a compassionate defender of his loved ones and how futile his quest to reclaim his falsified masculinity ultimately is. Talltail cannot fathom a nonviolent option as he is married to the belief that vengeance will bring justice to Sandgorse's passing and restore his lost masculinity. Thus, he pushes Jake away, shunning the blooming relationship between the two and the kittypet's ideals of reconciliation.

Despite rejecting Jake and all his entails, Talltail cannot bring himself to end Sparrow when the opportunity is in front of him. Talltail's good-hearted nature conflicts with the type of tom he has desperately tried to be, finally coming to his senses, saving Sparrow, and revealing the truth to the rogue. Now with his entire world crashing down around him, Talltail seeks comfort in the arms of, who else, but Jake. In their exchange, Talltail once again feels he has failed Sandgorse by not upholding the pillars of masculinity in Clan society, with Jake revealing the fragility of the concept altogether through his insight into who Talltail truly is and how fruitless his vengeance quest ultimately was: "You didn't do it!... Talltail sat down wearily. 'No.' 'Why not?' 'Sandgorse saved him.'... 'I let anger change who I am.' He gazed helplessly at Jake. 'No you didn't!' Jake argued. 'In the end, you let Sparrow live. That was being true to yourself, far more than you were when you wanted to kill him.' His gaze softened. 'I know you, Talltail. Your thirst for Sparrow's blood, your belief that only his death would change the way you felt - that was never really you.'" (417). Two falsities are uncovered through Talltail's conversation with Jake: the true reason he sought vengeance and the fragility of Talltail's concept of masculinity. Murdering Sparrow was never about avenging Sandgorse, as his death required no justice. Rather it was Talltail grasping for an image of himself that was, ultimately, unachievable. Talltail's efforts to cling to an idealized version of his masculinity had no grounds in fact, as he based it on arbitrary features like becoming a tunneler or avenging the death of his father - neither of which would have brought him true fulfillment. The moments in which Talltail strayed from these nebulous qualifications for masculinity, the ones he spent helping others with Jake, are the ones Talltail felt most like his true self. Only through his closeness to Jake, a cat embodying every trait Talltail has believed to be objectionable, had Talltail be able to alter the worldview he had long succumbed himself to and uncover the cat he always was, free from the shackles of his supposed failures and with a renewed sense of what truly makes him happy.

Jake and Talltail's relationship did more than save Sparrow's life, as Talltail would return to his Clan as a wholly renewed tom. While he could not spend the remainder of his mortal days with Jake, the lessons imparted on Talltail by Jake echo into the tom's personal life as the warrior fully embraces his queerness in WindClan society to help fellow outsiders. Using the compassion ignited in him by Jake and Talltail's previous experiences as a Clan outsider, Talltail finds fulfillment in mentoring those struggling with their worth just as he has – completing a journey incredibly common to the queer experience. Upon his return to WindClan, Talltail befriends and mentors a young, disabled kitten named Deadpaw. Deadpaw nearly died from a severe illness when Talltail arrived back in WindClan, with no one wanting to mentor a cat with three paws by the time Deadpaw's apprentice ceremony came around. Talltail steps up to be Deadpaw's mentor, fully confident in Deadpaw's abilities while reminiscing on the cat who made Talltail's journey possible: "Only a few moons ago he'd been living a rogue's life far beyond the borders of the Clan. Now he was helping to make WindClan strong. Deadpaw depended on him to learn how to hunt and fight. *We'll show them. Even on three paws, you'll be able to outfight a ShadowClan warrior!... I wish you could see this Jake*" (491). Talltail's evolution is evident in how he treats those around him compared to earlier in the novel. Instead of criticizing those who may be deemed weak or different by Clan society, as he did to even himself in the earliest pages of the novel, Talltail appreciates and guides these cats away from a path of rejection and anger toward one of happiness and acceptance. Whether Talltail's queerness comes from his relationship with another tom or due to the alternative path his life has taken, Talltail fully embraces those like him and takes a proactive step in creating an environment of acceptance and safety for them – all the while keeping Jake on his mind as the cat at the heart of his transformation. Talltail's renewed sense of self breaks the cycle many cats like Talltail could have fallen into, stepping into the shoes of a leader as a queer cat and bringing up many more outsiders to the forefront of WindClan culture.

Tallstar's journey involves more than just a homoromantic relationship between an early arc paragon and his adorably twee 'dear friend.' Rather, *Tallstar's Revenge* serves as a guide out of the pitfalls of any expectation adolescents may experience, whether gender constructed or not, and toward a path of happiness, fulfillment, and authenticity. Young readers can follow along with Talltail's struggle to live up to the legacy of his father, witness his desperate bid to regain his identity through vengeance, and find solace when Jake's influence finally reaches Talltail, resulting in a novel that speaks to the misjudged, out of place cat in all of us. *Tallstar's Revenge* not only gives *Warriors* adolescent audience a role model in Talltail but, through its theoretical framework, calls attention to and deconstructs the rigid expectations of any society – fictional or otherwise – seeking to condemn those who stray from the norm.

Work Cited

Hunter, Erin. *Warrior: Tallstar's Revenge*. HarperCollins, 2013.

MADALYN CARPENTER

Madalyn is a passionate, inspired, and hardworking writer. She is devoted to storytelling in all its intricacies and has developed a world in her stories everyone growing up as a girl can painfully relate to. I am so proud of Madalyn and know she is going to do wonderful things after graduation.

—Angel

Series of Firsts

Heart

It was the first time she could remember that sinking feeling in her heart.

There were only a couple of weeks before Christmas and Harper's body hummed with excitement. It was a bright Saturday afternoon. Snow barely sprinkled the ground, but it was still below freezing that day. She wanted to go outside and make a snow angel with the little snow there was, but dad insisted she stayed in and maybe played on the console. Mom, Harper's sister Brooke, and a couple of her friends went to a hotel for Brooke's birthday. No siblings allowed.

So Harper spent the day with her dad who was drinking (soda or beer she wasn't sure this time) and Luke, her brother, who was probably taking a nap. Mom had opened the curtains in the living room and kitchen before she left. She knew no one else would do it. The cold sun shone through the windows, doing nothing to warm Harper. The anticipation of the holiday was enough to keep her toasty for now, though. As she sat playing one of her favorite games, she thought about the new simulation game coming out that she was going to put on her Christmas list. Just thinking about it, she started swinging her feet against the slick carpet.

She was so zoned into the game that she didn't notice her dad had appeared from the narrow hallway.

"Can you pause the game?" Dad asked as he leaned against the nearest wall.

"Sure," was all Harper could think to say.

Her heart started to beat a little faster. She knew what it felt like to be distressed from a video game; a threat always just around the corner. This felt different.

The sun went behind a cloud as dad sat down next to her. Now that he was a bit closer, she saw the rosiness of his cheeks. His eyelids dropped halfway down his eyes. He was sad...and drunk, a synonym to each other for as long as Harper could remember. Even though Harper held his eyes, he couldn't stay focused on her and his legs were bouncing faster than they usually did.

"Christmas is going to be a little different this year. At my work...they just didn't need dad anymore. You, Brooke, and Luke might not get as much as you usually do, but we will try our best."

Harper's heart was pumping too fast. To distract herself from this uncomfortable conversation, she rubbed her chest where her heart laid behind all that flesh and veins and blood. What Harper would do to be able to maneuver around all of that and grab her heart to rip it

out. To be able to feel nothing in this moment. Even if she did get though, she would not be able to keep up with how fast her heart was sinking, and the sadness that came along with it.

She was taken out of her thoughts (that were too young for her) after dad kissed her forehead and stumbled back to his room. She waited a while on the couch after her dad left. The game she was playing was constantly telling her to choose the button to resume. Her life felt surreal, like everything was paused around her. The snow seemed to cease descending, but Harper knew this couldn't be true. She realized quickly it was her tears that obfuscated her vision. After the sun lowered a bit more, she finally shut her console off, quietly. She didn't want her dad to know she had stopped playing. Even though she heard him close the door behind him, Harper was nervous that they might run into each other again.

As she turned the corner to the hallway, tears started to form again, but she refused to blink until she got to her room. If she blinked, and a single tear fell down her cheek, she wouldn't be able to stop. As quickly and quietly as she ever had, she twisted the knob as she shut her door, and the tears came down heavy. The room was only dimly lit, the sun behind the house and the clouds made it darker than it really was. The lime green curtains Brooke got to pick out lit the room in an ugly color Harper couldn't stand in the moment. She ripped her favorite maroon blanket off the top bunk of the bed and clumsily got onto their swivel desk chair. Maybe it wasn't the best idea while she was still crying and trying to be quiet, but she just needed everything to be dark.

After hanging the blanket over the curtain rod, Harper was able to calm herself a little bit, finding comfort in the darker room. She wasn't upset at dad; she was upset for him. Harper had never had a sit-down talk like that, which she knew must have been difficult for him with how red his face was. She slumped into the chair and pushed her legs across the carpet to get herself in front of the orange oak nightstand that held their TV. The girls along the boarder of the plastic were the only comfort to her right now. That was until Harper realized they were all friends getting to hang out together. Instead of hanging out with friends herself, she had to stay home and have that conversation with dad. The one-sided conversation replayed, and the tears came back.

She felt out of control of her body. Her tears came sporadically, and she couldn't force herself to stop. Her skin became itchy and after one spot was satisfied, another one would tingle. The way her hair rubbed against the fabric on the chair even upset her. It felt like no one in the world could understand what she was going through. She did not move from her seat the rest of the day. She didn't eat or drink because she was too obsessed with replaying the conversation in her head. What could she have done differently? She watched new and old episodes of the same show, that being a comfort for a heart she didn't know could physically hurt.

After all those hours in her room staring at the TV, she heard the garage door open. Mom and Brooke must have been home. She let out the biggest sigh of relief knowing she wasn't alone in her sadness anymore. Dad hadn't knocked on her door to see if she was okay. The most he did was come out of his room to check on Luke, restock the beers in his mini fridge, or make a pizza. Harper would've liked a slice.

Harper didn't know if she was going to bring up the talk to her mom. What she did know was she was excited for dinner to be made, and she didn't have to carry the weight of the news on her heart for a couple of hours. At least until she would try to fall asleep that night.

Stomach

It was the first time she could remember feeling like she was going to throw up without actually being ill.

Harper was sitting in her fifth-grade social studies class when she got the crumpled note passed to her. Her heart started to beat a little faster because she didn't often get passed them; just the passer. Harper had been talking to a classmate, Daniel, again. He was someone she's had a crush on since last year. Kids in her class were already making out at sleepovers. Harper knew what her parents would think of her if they ever found out she did something like that. So, when Daniel went in for a kiss with his chapped, food-stained lips during one outdoor recess, she gave him a hug instead. This resulted in the immediate end of whatever relationship they had. At the beginning of this school year when she brought him a bag of chips she took from home for his birthday, he decided they could give it another shot.

Harper had fully expected the note to be from Daniel and when she opened it quietly as the teacher talked about tariffs and taxes, she was shocked to see Renea's handwriting. It was a simple note, but Harper dreaded the possible meaning behind the dainty words:

We need to talk.

Harper's stomach immediately started to do somersaults. Her fingers became tingly, and her breathing staggered as she slipped the note into her desk. As much as she wanted to turn to look at Renea, her neck refused to move from staring right at her teacher. At this point, she had never been more interested in the topic he presented: the US constitution.

Mid-morning dragged by as Harper could barely wait for recess. Not of excitement, but fear. In her head and heart, she knew that this talk couldn't be good, but she only felt it in her stomach. She was beginning to think it was an actual possibility to throw up. Harper had heard about anxiety, but was this what it felt like? If it was anything like what she was feeling now, she hoped to never feel it again. She caught herself focused on a thumbtack that was uneven or digging her nails into her palm, forearm, shoulders. Doing anything she could to distract herself.

She and her classmates decided to have indoor recess that day. They each recently got their personal school laptops and were allowed to explore them during the first few recesses if they wanted to. Harper watched as Renea and Tess grabbed their computers from their lockers after lunch and Harper was left with a decision: did she ignore the fact that her for-now friends were clearly going to indoor recess and Harper go outside, or face what was coming sooner or later? With the sickness in her stomach almost too much to bear anymore, she grabbed her laptop and headed to the gym, alone.

"Is everything alright?" Harper's eyes surveyed the thin layer of dust covering the gym floor as she asked this. She sat crisscross applesauce in front of Renea and Tess, and it felt like she was waiting to be scolded by a teacher. The three of them had been sitting in silence for the first five minutes, all of them unfamiliar with how to navigate this situation. Harper was on the verge of crying, which is why she decided to speak up first.

"What do you think?" Renea asked sarcastically, her lips pursed, and eyebrows raised.

"I'm not sure what to think, did I do something wrong? I can fix whatever it was that I did!" Harper felt the small beads of sweat start to fall down her face. She became frantic and no longer felt like she was going to cry.

"There's nothing you can do Harper. We don't like how you act and since Tess and I are

cousins, we just want it to be the two of us as friends.” Renea nudged Tess in the ribs. Tess refused to look up and continued looking down at her laptop; her face blushing and her curly hair hiding any semblance of what was going on right now.

“Renea, just tell me what I can do to fix this and I will!”

“Harper just stop, go by someone else. We’re not friends and we won’t ever be again.” Renea opened her laptop now and seemingly erased Harper from her existence.

Harper did go by someone else. Another clique in her grade. She didn’t want to seem any more desperate than she already made herself to be, so she played it off to the new group that she was bored with Tess and Renea’s conversation. After the last recess bell rang, she walked to the bathroom and thought about what had just happened within the past thirty minutes. She let herself cry a minute’s worth of tears before going to her next class.

...

It was already dark that early evening by the time Mom got home, the only source of light being the automatic stove which Harper never learned its actual arrival time. Harper tucked herself in the very corner of the couch, wrapped in her burgundy comfort blanket. The pressure of her arms around her provided calmness that she desperately needed. She had not moved since she got home three hours ago.

“I don’t get why you guys sit in the dark. It wouldn’t kill you to turn a light or two on before your father and I get home,” Mom said as she shedded her work garb. Coat, purse, keys, and shoes all went into their respective places before she noticed Harper.

“Where are Brooke and Luke?” she asked looking down at her phone.

“In their rooms,” Harper’s eyes focused on her siblings’ pictures hanging on the wall. All of them had equal opportunity to shine, but Brooke and Luke’s pictures always seemed to be hung in the center. A light from the living room that her mother turned on shining directly upon them.

“What’s wrong with you?” her mother had questioned, finally paying some attention to Harper.

“Just a bad day at school.” In her head, she was begging for her mother to pry for more answers.

“Must have been a bad day if you couldn’t put your shoes where they belong.” This sarcasm was common with her mother.

Dad had just gotten home when Harper had the courage to ask her mom to talk. She was busy watching TV, but since Harper was persistent and never asked to talk to her like this, her mom agreed. They walked a couple of steps apart to her brother Luke’s bedroom. Brooke was holed up in her room as she usually was. It was a race between the two sisters who could get to their room first and hide from the day’s doings.

Her brother’s bed was comfortable beneath her, but nothing was soothing enough to help her forget about today. She knew her mother wasn’t going to help much either. Unlike this afternoon, Harper couldn’t muster up the courage to be the first one to speak. She used up everything she had in the earlier 10-minute altercation.

“Harper, what is going on.” Her mother demanded. There was no sympathy behind her voice. No interest or concern. It was annoyance, Harper decided.

“Renea and Tess stopped being friends with me at school today.” Harper and her mother sat an uncomfortable distance apart. She turned to her mom who was looking at a picture on

the wall that her brother had colored.

“Well, what did you do? What did they say to you?”

“I didn’t do anything mom, that’s all they said.”

“I find it odd that they just up and stopped being friends with you.”

“That’s just how girls are now, Mom!” With each sentence Harper and her mom went back at each other, they spoke a little louder.

“Harper, no girls just want to stop being friends.”

“Yes, they do, that’s what they did to me!” Harper was almost yelling.

“Well maybe it’s for the best, you complain about them all the time any-”

“You don’t fucking get it!”

The swear word seemed to be an anchor attached to Harper’s heart. It slowly made its way to the pit of realization, and Harper thought she knew what was coming next. She thought wrong because mom did something unexpected. She patted one of the camouflage pillowcases for Harper, indicating for her to lie down. They laid back on the bed together and Harper began to cry violently. Loud enough so her mother understood how upset she was, but not loud enough for her father to question in his drunken stupor later. Her mother had started to run her hand through Harper’s tangled brown hair, a product of her messing with it all day in nervousness. This touch calmed and saddened Harper at the same time. She knew this was fleeting, as many moments in her life were. This was her mom’s default reaction to anything that made Harper sad. Harper was beginning to think this was the only thing her mom knew how to do. That’s why it calmed her. She knew her mom was trying her best, but her best wasn’t good enough anymore.

They were silent; enough was said earlier. Just as Harper was starting to calm herself down, her mother sat up.

“I need to make dinner. Everything will be okay.” She opened her door, bringing in a cool breeze with it. She did not turn around as she closed the door behind her.

...

A few days later Harper was approached by Renea and Tess asking if she wanted to be friends again. No explanation as to why, just that they talked and decided they wanted to hang out again. Even though Harper talked herself up for this exact moment on how she would stand her ground, she immediately folded.

“Yeah, I hope everything is okay. I’m sorry for what I did.” Of course, Harper didn’t know what she was apologizing for, just that she felt the need to.

“C’mon, let’s go catch up on the blacktop,” Tess spoke up for the first time since before the incident happened. Harper felt that feeling in her stomach again. Nervous they had all the power and could drop her again if they wanted to. Excited that she didn’t have to wait until high school to find new friends.

Coincidentally, Brooke’s friends dropped her a couple months later. Harper felt that same sadness radiating from her sister. Their reactions to the scenario were almost identical. Harper didn’t have any of her own money, but she grabbed a couple of dollars from her father’s coin bowl in the kitchen cupboard. With this, she bought her sister’s favorite lemonade and sour candy at the school’s vending machine. After arriving home the next day and knocking on their door, she presented the items to her sister.

“I don’t want it.”

Mom had asked right away where Brooke and Luke were, as usual. Harper let her know something was wrong with Brooke. Mom's items did not get set in their normal places as she absentmindedly placed them wherever she could when going to their room. Mom ended up taking the next day off of work and while Harper was at school, Brooke and mom spent the day together. Harper didn't ask what they ended up doing, but she felt the pit in her stomach, knowing her place.

REILLY GROSS

So, I'm not Reilly's tutor, but Reilly is a tutor, and especially a writer, I admire greatly: their editing process, their voice, their everything. I remember how cool I thought Reilly was when I first met them, which was my first English class during my first semester in college (and I just sat behind them, never saying hi). I've been so lucky to get to know them more this past year and a half and work alongside them, learning from them. Reilly's an amazing writer and friend <3

—Katie

From the Doorway

"The theme of the week is imposter syndrome," I said. *Theme of the week* is a recurring motif in my life that I had noticed around a year ago. Every week has something tying it all together. Sometimes it's stupid stuff, like cows or pizza, and sometimes it's heavier—death, assault.

Imposter syndrome.

I said it like it was supposed to be funny. It *was* funny. Having your weeks be arbitrarily themed is funny in the same way that reading a scarily accurate horoscope without believing in it is funny. Nothing about it feels real, but the coincidence is enough to make you rethink some things in your life, and that's enough to freak you out, which is enough to laugh about it with other people. Take the heat off. Feeling untalented in every space you occupy isn't scary if you refuse to think about it. Waiting anxiously every second of your life for the other shoe to drop isn't nauseating if you pretend.

I was never in a drama club, but sometimes I think I should've been. Stage performance makes me nervous, though. That's probably part of the imposter syndrome.

See? Theme of the week.

My closest friends laughed. My semi-close friends did, too. The outskirts looked at me in confusion and an emotion that was probably vague concern.

After a beat, my friends paused, still smiling, and asked, "Are you good?"

I shrugged and raised my eyebrows. I didn't really know what that was supposed to convey to them, but I hoped it got my point across. "Yeah. It's kind of been the theme of my whole summer? Like, everything in my life is run by the thought that I'm never actually good enough and everyone is lying to me all the time."

"Wow," someone said. There was an awkward silence and a few genuinely worried looks, and I realized I had been a little *too* honest.

The only thing I could do was keep talking. Lucky for me, I've always been good at that. I spewed nonsense and asked a bunch of questions that didn't matter, but hit the sweet spot between an obvious distraction and fun conversation. "Have you guys answered the question on the board? This week it's *What was your song of the summer?* One song only. I'm gonna make a playlist at the end of the week with everyone's. It'll be cute, I'm excited."

The open mouths closed. The skeptical eyes went back to their laptop screens. They fell into something easier, and I kept course correcting.

Smile and nod. Babble, babble, babble. Distract, distract, distract.

Something has been following me around since middle school. Lately, it's been looming

closer, with hotter breath and sharper teeth.

When I can feel it creeping toward me, I turn my attention outward. Instead of thinking about it, I ask everyone around me question after question.

“What’s your third favorite color?” I ask. “What’s your least favorite animal? If you were a kitchen utensil, what would you be?”

They’re silly–borderline nonsensical. Most times, they get responses like, “My *third* favorite color? That’s a funny question. I’ve never thought about it before. Um . . .”

The answers are interesting, and something about them feels important. Everyone has rehearsed answers to classic questions, but mine catches people off guard, and it makes them feel very human. Seeing my friends who are usually so put together fumble and wrack their brains for an answer puts us on more even ground. Their confusion makes me feel normal.

Funny enough, they all give similar answers. Various shades of green, fish or something scary, obscure utensils. Even the ones I don’t talk to that much say something similar. I guess it makes sense–great minds think alike, right?

But what would I say? Pink, birds, soup spoon. My answers don’t match.

The creature from middle school leans over my shoulder. It whispers in my ear. “You’re different.”

My roommate and I do everything together. Last week, we started binging *Supernatural*, and so far, we’re about six episodes into Season 2. That’s at least twenty hours of TV, all of which we spent melting into the couch with our legs tangled around each other’s.

The show is about two brothers, Sam and Dean Winchester, who lost their mother to a supernatural (Roll credits!) force. In the wake of the tragedy, their father raised them to track down terrifying demonic creatures, which they continue doing into their adulthood while navigating their strained family relationships.

For both of us, watching five episodes late into the night has been the highlight of our days. I think about this show *all the time*. Seriously, at least half of my waking thoughts have been consumed by *Supernatural*. I bring it up whenever I can, whether that’s just a one-off reference or connecting it to a conversation or just a thought in my head, *Oh my god this is just like Supernatural*.

Thankfully, the show came out in 2005, which means that a lot of my friends have seen the whole thing. And when you bring up something that everyone in the room knows about, one inevitable question comes up: Who’s your favorite character?

“Sam Winchester,” I answer. He might be one of my favorite characters *ever*. I haven’t seen a character so much like me in a long time, maybe since middle school, and it’s equal parts horrifying and gratifying to watch.

Fictional characters are interesting. He’s not *really* anything like me, at least not when you compare our lives. My mom wasn’t killed by an evil demon, I don’t pick my way through abandoned houses or graveyards to find spirits, and I definitely don’t hunt anything, not even normal human stuff.

Somehow, though, he is me. Sam is a younger brother, one with interests and values so different from the rest of his family that you can feel it, but something draws him home. He chooses them every time. He’s impulsive–emotionally and instinctively reactive, and even his intentions don’t always make his actions right. He makes mistakes over and over, changes his life then longs for the old one, and suffers every consequence along the way. He loves his

brother more than anything, even though he's clearly hiding things from him. There's a trust between them that cannot be broken by anything—not by monsters, or fathers, or secrets. And Dean *does* have secrets. They drive Sam crazy, outcasting him from his own family. Something is different about him and he knows it, but he can't quite pin it down.

If you were to look up a dictionary definition of me, written by me, that would be it. That might sound dramatic. Obviously, I'm not some sci-fi thriller main character, but Sam has an emotional core that almost perfectly mirrors my own, and that feels important to me.

Needless to say, when you say Sam Winchester is your favorite *Supernatural* character, you're met with a chorus of, "Wrong answer! He's *boring* and *whiny* and can't do anything for himself. I guess he's okay in the beginning but he just, like, sucks. He's the worst."

And that's definitely something to sit with.

Being 21 is weird. It's being 13, but again and worse. And this time you can do anything you want in the whole world (besides rent a car).

I feel like I'm in the doorway of a big room. It can be any kind of room you want, take your pick. The people I know fill the room full, everyone from best friends to coworkers to classmates, and they're all talking to each other. Couples are holding hands and kissing, friend groups stand in big chatty blobs, and everyone else is walking around and mingling.

I'm really happy for them. I mean, it looks pretty fun in there, and my friends are smiling in ways that I haven't seen in a while. Their easiness is refreshing.

I stand in the doorway and watch them. Sometimes, they notice me and throw me a wave. A few times, they tried to tell me about all the fun they were having by shouting across the room. I couldn't hear them very well, but nodded anyway.

From behind me, the creature from middle school hisses. It curls its fingers protectively around my shoulder.

For the rest of the night, I lean against the door frame and watch.

DEZMOND DONNELLY

Dezmond was a wonder to have this semester, as he is an extremely dedicated and passionate writer. The evolution of his writing style, taking critique seriously and earnestly, and his love for Bob Dylan were some of the highlights of working with him this semester.

—Angel

Their Story

Before Ken Schroeder died in 2019, he was married to his Vi for 63 years. 63 years filled with love and hardships. The hard times never lasted but their love for each other always did. Their love was like something out of a movie, only this love story is true.

Ready to move out of the house, Ken and his brother Rodger were looking for a house to rent. The two of them came across a newly built house that they were both interested in. The two of them were ready to move in but were denied. Vi's mother didn't want to rent out the house to Ken and Roger because she didn't want to have Ken's milk truck parked outside every day. Ken and Vi never get to meet.

Ken and Vi would get to meet during a chance encounter when in 1955 Vi began to work in a creamery in Sauk City. It was her job to count butter and to make sure the milkmen were getting the correct orders out to the customers. Ken was a milkman, and it was Vi's job to make sure he was getting the correct orders out, so they began to talk to each other quite regularly. The two initially only talked about work, but over time they began to talk about themselves and their own interests.

Ken had seen a poster up in town for a new movie and decided to ask Vi what she thought of it.

"Did you see the new Clark Gable movie?"

"No, but I want to. I might ask one of my sisters if they want to go if I can't find anyone else to go with."

"I might go with my brother, Rodger. He doesn't care for westerns as much as I do though."

Ken began to realize that he was developing feelings for Vi. Ken was always finding a reason to bring her up when talking to his friends and family. As all good cousins do, Ken's cousin had to give him a hard time about his developing crush.

"Look at you! Little Kenny has a crush on the cute girl at work."

"Oh, shut up. I don't have a crush on anybody."

"So, when are you going to ask her out and introduce us all?"

"I'm not going to ask her out because I don't have a crush. And even if I do, you're not going to be meeting her because I can't control what nonsense you might spew out of that big mouth of yours."

Despite living his life as a very confident man, Ken was beyond nervous for what he had planned. Ken was a nervous wreck, but knew he had an important question to ask Vi the next day he saw her at work:

“Vi. . . Can I take you out on a date this Friday?”

“I can’t go out on a date with you.” Ken began stammering,

“Oh. . . I see. . . That’s alright. . . I shouldn’t have asked.”

“Hold on, you didn’t let me finish what I was saying.” Ken didn’t take gruff from anybody, but he knew when Vi spoke to listen, “I would love to go out with you, but it’s my father’s birthday this Friday.” The hope that vanished from Ken was back!

“When works for you then?”

“I could go out next Friday.” Ken chuckled to himself.

“You won’t believe what I am about to say. . .”

“What?”

“I can’t go next Friday. . . It’s my father’s birthday.” Ken and Vi share a laugh at their situation and plan for the first Friday when they were both free and had no other obligations.

Ken started the night of their date by having to drop off his brother Roger at the theater. Ken then went to pick up Vi. When the two of them got to the theater Ken bought tickets for The Tall Men.

After enjoying the movie together Ken took Vi out to her favorite restaurant in Sauk City. The two of them talked about the movie as they enjoyed their dinner together. They end the date by sharing a milkshake the cute romantic way they always do in the movies.

Ken and Vi were in for quite a surprise when they got back to Vi’s house. Ken walked Vi to the front door and said,

“Roger?” Ken and Vi both shared a look of shock and confusion, “What are you doing here?”

“You left me at the theater.” Ken realized what he had done and leaned in so only Roger could hear, “Go back to the truck and I’ll explain.” Despite being somewhat upset, Roger went back to the truck without making any fuss.

Vi turned back to Ken to say goodbye, but Ken was the first to speak,

“I had a great night with you tonight.” He leans in to kiss Vi on the cheek, “Have a good night.”

Over the next few months, Ken and Vi continued going out on dates. They also spend every moment together they can while at work together. Ken makes up excuses to talk to Vi, even if only for one extra minute.

Valentine’s Day 1956 was a particularly nasty day. The blizzard was blinding, but Ken was determined to take Vi out. Ken’s truck struggled but fought through the blizzard to get them to the theater to see the Frank Sinatra film The Tender Trap.

When the pair finished the movie, the roads were covered in a thick layer of ice and snow, but the storm itself had paused. Ken took this opportunity to take Vi out to the same restaurant as their first date.

Dates between Ken and Vi were usually filled with constant chatter and laughs. This dinner was the exception. As the two of them finished their burgers Ken got down on one knee,

“Virene Ellery, will you do me the great honor of spending the rest of my life with me?”

“Ken. . . I would love to!”

On June 19th, 1956, it was a sweltering 98 degrees, even into the late night it remained an unbearable heat. It didn’t matter. Ken and Vi’s love was enduring. Like the blizzard on the day Ken proposed the weather would eventually pass.

The church was filled with Ken and Vi's family and friends. Everybody was soon going to witness one of the most successful and happy marriages that could ever be shared by two people. Ken and Vi both imagined the lives they might live together, but neither of them truly knew just yet how special it would be.

As Ken and Vi shared in their daydreams of the future, the church quieted as the pastor began to speak,

"Ken, do you take Vi to be your Wife?"

"I do." The pastor speaks again,

"Vi, do you take Ken to be your husband?"


"I do."

ELYSE EDENS

This semester, Elyse and I both had a hard time writing without stakes. To avoid overthinking, we did a lot of funky writing activities and tried to make writing fun again. The result was this silly little slideshow about Big and Small, two friends just doing their best. I love *all* of Elyse's writing, no matter how unserious, and am so proud of her this semester :)

—Reilly

Big and Small





Big And Small

Small wants to travel the Whole World, and Big is scared because one time, Big fell in the ocean. That made Big very sad. Here's what Small did:



1. Small pointed at Big and very sternly said, "We're traveling the world!" Big was like, "But what if we explode?!" Small thought this question was very valid.
2. Small brought Big a cactus as a gift as a sacrifice in exchange for travelling the world. *Everyone* knows that if your friend doesn't want to travel, you bring them a cactus as sacrifice!

Here's what Big did:

1. Big's gears turned. Big thought hard about the cactus sacrifice.
2. Big mentally traveled back to the ocean and was scared again. It was still valid.
3. Big decided to go down the stairs to think alone and consider the sacrifice.



Downstairs . . .

 <p>01</p> <p>DENIAL</p> <p>Big couldn't believe the trip would be okay . . . Big had a Breakdown.</p>	 <p>02</p> <p>ANGER</p> <p>Big was SO MAD at Small for not respecting any boundaries.</p>
<p>03</p> <p>BARGAINING</p> <p>Big starts to think of things Small would accept as a sacrifice for the trip.</p>	<p>04</p> <p>ACCEPTANCE</p> <p>Big decided Big must go on the trip with Small.</p>

"Small, you know I love
you, but I'm scared.
What if the ocean gets
us? Gets *you*? What if I
lose you . . ."

—Big



The Whole World



The Whole World is mostly ocean.
There are many turtles in the ocean,
and they spend time eating jellyfish.
In addition, the turtles are very
dangerous to Small creatures.

Our Big And Small

In order to get to the Whole World, Big and Small had to stop on the moon. Small goes to look at a crater and falls in. Big frantically looks for Small, but can't find Small anywhere. From afar, Big hears Small calling Big's name. Big rushes over and jumps into the crater, hurriedly lifting Small out of the hole. When they're finally out, Big screams at Small: "AL;KFDJSA;LKJ!!!" Big was so worried.



ELISE FULMER

This was my first time working with Elise on a writing project through all of its stages, and we had so much fun. It was incredible to see Elise's vision come to life week after week, and I hope that she's even half as proud of herself as I am of her. I can't wait to read all the other amazing things she'll write in the future! <3

—Reilly

A Fruitful Yield

Lenny wiped his sweltering forehead after harvesting another bushel of wheat. He was old fashioned. Machine farming had been a thing for nearly a hundred years now. Though Lenny was barely pushing twenty-four, he was an old soul.

He was never the same after the death of his beloved wife. That pesky Scarlett Fever claimed her as a victim. Farming just was not the same without her. He wiped his teary eyes at the thought of her.

Today was going to be hard. It had been twelve days since his wife had passed away and his first day back on the farm.

* * *

Lenny wiped the skim milk off of his thick lensed glasses in the Pleasant Mart dairy aisle. Around him lay the carcasses of two plastic gallon milk jugs. The milk amplified the stringiness of Lenny's hair and the sliminess of his face. Several customers carried on with their shopping endeavors as a bewildered Lenny stood like a park statue covered in bird shit.

"Leonard! What did I tell you about jerking off on the clock?" His manager, Marc, popped out from a nearby aisle.

Milk continued to drip from Lenny as he daydreamed about wheat, grueling physical labor, and the dead wife he never had. Marc continued to berate Lenny as he hand harvested four more bushels of imaginary wheat.

* * *

Lenny was rarely allowed to be on register duty at Pleasant Mart. He had only been on register only three times in his nearly six years of working there.

His last stint on the register was practically three years ago. He was just as pockmarked as he is right now, like a nearly rotten gourd. To add on to the myriad of hygiene problems that he already had, Lenny was a chronic nailbiter. If given the opportunity, he could probably cut bread with his nails.

On this particular day, he would keep the cash drawer open as he gnawed at the serrated knives he called his fingernails. He stopped swallowing the nail fragments after his mother had to take him to the emergency room at the ripe age of eighteen for a lesion on his esophagus. He needed a deposit for his jagged nail bits because his mother still rags on him about the cost of the hospital visit. Thus, the coin divots in the register were the perfect spot.

Lenny enjoyed handling the change because it felt like he was planting seeds. His discarded nails acted as a fertilizer towards his metallic crops.

He only served two patrons until Marc promptly swept him away from the register.

Apparently, some woman complained about wet pennies and some other foreign objects mixed in with her change.

Marc decided to put him on the register after the milk incident because he believed that Lenny lacked crucial socialization. He figured he couldn't do any more damage that day.

Lenny felt his life trajectory change in the check out lane that day. A cute blonde girl entered his line, holding a basket that contained a singular avocado and a case of sparkling water. He admired the simplicity of such a woman. She began to unload her groceries.

He had to act fast. This was just the inspiration he needed for his farm.

"Can I see your card?" he inquired.

The cute blonde girl cocked her head at Lenny. "The card reader is in front of me."

He took an oily hand and wiped his even oilier face. He was so close to looking the cute blonde girl in the eye. In fact, he focused on the star shaped freckle above her eyebrow.

"I need to override something on the register."

The star shaped freckle raised with her eyebrow. The cute blonde girl's hair bounced as she looked at the growing line cascading behind her. She surrendered her card to Lenny reluctantly.

Lenny grasped the card in his hand. His knuckles grew as white as the daisies on the card's plastic surface. The purple gleam of the credit card was almost as beautiful as the cute blonde girl. She was growing increasingly annoyed the longer he ogled Claudia Lynn Spacer embossed on the card.

The line was nearly doubled now. So much so that customers started fleeing to the newly opened lane next to Lenny's.

He raised her card to his nose, breathing in its essence. He wondered if it smelled as good as the cute blonde girl.

"Excuse me!" pleaded Claudia Lynn Spacer. She reached over the plexiglass barrier and throttled her daisy decorated card back into her daisy decorated grasp. Her body winced as the pads of her fingers brushed against Lenny's forest of hangnails.

The cute blonde girl, now identified as Claudia Lynn Spacer, rushed out of the store. Her avocado and case of sparkling water remained stagnant on the conveyor belt.

He held the nearly ripe avocado in his hands as a flustered Marc appeared in front of him.

"What is it this time?" he beckoned Lenny.

Lenny's eyes were blank as his mind ran rampant with new found hope.

"What am I supposed to do with you?" Marc breathed under his breath.

He firmly cemented that he would never be put on the register again. Probably not for an entire decade.

Marc was rattling off about a breach in contract or that he could be held liable for Lenny's foolish actions or something like that. But he wasn't listening to Marc. Instead, he imagined what the star shaped freckle would look like in a Victorian bonnet, or better yet, a modest wedding dress.

* * *

Lenny got sent home early. He bought the avocado with his employee discount. It cost him a whopping eighty-four cents, which was a small price for love.

When he got home, he went up to his frumpy bedroom he has inhabited for nearly

twenty-five years. His walls were decorated with a painted farm scene that had been there since he was eight. Rusty trowels and pitchforks also adorned his walls. In addition to the tetanus hazard, there were framed agrarian maps from one hundred and fifty years ago. Lenny of course couldn't tell you where the maps were from. It was whatever came up first when you searched "old farm map" on the internet.

Lenny flopped onto the frail twin bed with frayed sheets and took the avocado from his pocket. He caressed the avocado gently before laying a kiss on its sweaty exterior. If he focused hard enough, he could still catch a hint of Claudia Lynn Spacer's daisy essence.

* * *

Lenny often visited the Sunny Paw Dog Park. He of course did not have a dog. But what Lenny did have was a vegetable garden in his mother's front yard.

Lenny spent several hours a day tending to his measly plot of land. His favorite crop was wheat because it was the most versatile. It made him feel like he was doing something important even though he had no idea how to process wheat. The patch was a sickly yellow and stuck out like a group of American tourists.

He wanted only the best for his farm. Thus, any normal topsoil simply would not suffice. Cow manure would be the ideal fertilizer, but unfortunately, Lenny lived in a tragic suburb of an even more tragic city. Quality manure just simply was not accessible.

Luckily, Lenny would always grab a stack of Pleasant Mart plastic bags before heading to the Sunny Paw Dog Park. There he would harvest his yield.

When Lenny started going to the dog park, he was quite cowardly when it came to extracting the fertilizer. The Sunny Paw dogs were quite aggressive towards him, they could smell his aloofness from miles away.

While Lenny was squatted extracting his yield, something downy weaved between his bitten and scabby ankles. He sneezed, propelling him to flail on to his ass. Lenny was met face to face with a fluffy white cat. His eyes watered as he took in its aloof presence.

Through his blurred vision brought on by tears, he made out a cute blonde figure. She intervened briskly, hoping to retrieve her cat and leave.

Lenny closed his eyes. He was on one knee in front of Claudia amongst a growing prairie of wheat. A ring shone as he presented it to her. She flung her dainty arms around him as a resounding "yes."

"My life feels complete with you, Claudia."

She just looked longingly at him

"The farm will be immaculate with you in it."

He opened his eyes.

"Hey!" Lenny mustered. His mind was racing with farming and love. There was so much he felt obligated to teach Claudia. He wanted his measly farm and imaginary fiancée to thrive.

The cute blond girl muttered some sort of obscenity under her breath. The fluffy cat, clutched tightly to her chest.

"Claudia Lynn Spacer."

Her blonde curls seemed to drop with her expression. The star shaped freckle frowned.

"You know this is a dog park, right?"

Her face was like stone, only her mouth moved. "Well, which one is yours?" She gestured to the park. Lenny was still on the ground, dog shit still in hand. Claudia was towering

over him.

Lenny pocketed the manure in the Pleasant Mart bag. "I don't have one."

"Then I wouldn't be concerned why I'm here."

The cat pawed at her chest as she swiftly turned around. Lenny shot up to his feet, like a ripe stalk of corn. He scampered after her, the bag swung in his hands.

"Where are you going?"

"Doesn't matter." she said without turning around. Lenny looked like one of the dogs aimlessly following its owner.

"I like your cat." he tried .

She remained stone faced.

"I've never used a cat before."

"Used a cat?" she grasped the cat even tighter.

"For my yield."

Claudia stopped abruptly at a street corner. The signs loomed over them both. Lenny crashed into her. He didn't think they'd touch again.

"Where are you going now?" He sniffled before sneezing. She wiped her face as a response.

"I don't see why that matters." her eyes darted around desperately.

"We could do immaculate things together."

Claudia reached into her pocket.

"Things I've never tried before. New techniques that you'd-"

Lenny suddenly yelped as he fell to his knees. The plastic bag nearly hit him in the face as his hands shot up to his watering eyes.

Claudia was still pressing down the pump on her pepper spray. Red residue looked like blood on the cat's white fur.

Lenny moaned on the ground. Claudia ran for her life.

Through his bleary eyes, he was able to make out what house she escaped to. The one with daisies in the front yard.

He took a moment to compose himself and wipe his eyes. He trudged to the daisy garden which was guarded by an array of garden decorations. He dumped the contents of the plastic bag in the garden, the decorations were unable to defend the fragile daisies.

He picked the most prominent daisy before trudging away. He trudged all the way home, still unable to see clearly through his eyes. He quickly scurried to his bedroom and tore the comforter and pillows off in one swoop. The avocado was slightly brown now. Lenny gingerly embraced it, giving it one more sloppy kiss.

In front of Lenny's farming plot, he took his favorite rusty trowel and began hacking at the ground. The dirt was wet, heavy, and hard to dig, but that did not discourage Lenny. He had the power of Love on his side.

After an hour of fruitful labor, he carved out a small square hole in the dirt. It looked like a plot for the world's smallest casket. He laid the daisy and avocado to rest.

* * *

Marc reluctantly called Lenny into work the next day. Pleasant Mart was short staffed. He assigned him to stack the decorative display of pop can packs, the ones you would see just in time for the Superbowl. Marc figured a repetitive task would keep Lenny from interfering with

the customers.

Despite Lenny's relatively deplorable career history at Pleasant Mart, he finally found a task that he excelled in. Perhaps this was because he pretended he was bailing hay, a crucial element to sustain a successful farm. He had made incredible progress for the two hours he was there. The display was practically as tall as him.

Stomping brought him out of his productive trance.

A furious Claudia Lynn Spacer stood in front of him. Lenny didn't think that his day could get any better. He looked up at her, bewildered. He was met with a pearly daisy nail in his face.

"You know the funny part is, I don't even know your name." Her finger wagged in his face.

Lenny saw himself standing in a rustic church, gingerly holding the daisy hands of his wife to be.

"You're weird!" her hands flew up.

Lenny lifted the Victorian lace veil from her cute blonde head. Claudia awkwardly dodged his hands. The star shaped freckle looked so dainty nestled on her beautiful face.

"You ruined my garden! If you even *think* about stepping near me, I will call the police."

Lenny had just been granted permission to kiss his bride. His cracked hands went up to cup her face.

Claudia shrieked as she shoved him off of her. His body flailed as it crashed into the pop can display. He crumpled like the cans that surrounded him on the sticky floor.

Claudia looked at the carbonated wasteland around her as Marc arrived on the scene. Her eyes darted to meet his.

"I'm sorry," she blurted. "He won't leave me alone."

Marc diverted his attention to Lenny who was practically whimpering. He looked like somebody just objected to his wedding.

"He followed me home."

Marc's eyes widened. Lenny has done several questionable things under Marc's management, but they were all harmless. The crudeness of Lenny's behavior was shocking, even to Marc.

Lenny was curled in the fetal position babbling about true love and pleads for forgiveness. He sighed. "I finally have to let you go, Buddy. Go home and don't come back."

Marc walked on constant eggshells with Lenny. To his surprise, firing him left a bitter-sweet taste in his mouth.

Lenny cradled himself and couldn't fully comprehend the death sentence that was just handed to him. A new famine plagued his life.

Lenny had to be escorted out by Marc and a police officer who was just informed of Claudia's concerns. When he was dropped off by the squad car, he could barely carry himself to the front door. Instead, he army crawled to his plot of land. He grabbed the now black avocado with a firm grip. It started to ooze a rancid brown. His tears mixed with the toxic sludge.

Lenny found himself back at Claudia's garden, desperate to make amends. The cheery lawn ornaments looked uncanny surrounding the dry patch of wilted daisies. The clumps of dog shit were still prominent among the carnage.

Love does strange things to people. At least that's what Lenny thought. He picked up a shiny stone embossed with Welcome and dragonflies. He wiped his teary eyes with one hand before using both of them to chuck the stone at her house. It thwacked against the siding, leaving a hefty dent. The stone lay halved in her wilting garden.

Lenny returned to the arsenal of garden ornaments. He grabbed a garden gnome dressed as a bumble bee. He shrieked as he hurled it with all of his force straight into her window.

Glass shattered and Claudia wailed from inside of the house. She peeked her head out, avoiding the jagged glass.

"What the fuck is wrong with you!" she screamed.

Lenny looked up at her, his lips quivered, wanting to say something but nothing came out.

She ducked down briefly, returning holding a limp pile of white. It was peppered with red and ceramic pieces. "You hurt my fucking cat!"

"Claudia, Please!" was all he could manage.

She appeared at the front door and held the head of the now severed gnome at her side.

Lenny approached her, "Clau-"

She jabbed the jagged gnome head into his neck. Blood spurted as Lenny crumpled to his knees. Claudia's hands shot up to her mouth. The gnome's sunny smile made her scream.

Lenny still grasped on to his fleeting life. Claudia had him right where she wanted him, and he wouldn't dare to move.

In her fit of panic, she returned with a shovel. She frantically dug a Lenny sized hole into her dying garden.

Lenny did not resist as Claudia began to drag his body toward the shallow grave. It was easier than she thought it would be. Lenny went as limp as he could.

Lenny could've screamed, but he didn't. He could've brushed the piling dirt off of his face, but he didn't. Lenny was content. He would finally be a part of Claudia's life, even if it took years to do so. That was a sacrifice he was willing to make. He closed his eyes and breathed in the dirt on his face.

PATIENCE GRAHAM

This is my second semester working with Patience, and it keeps getting better and better. Every time I come into a session with Patience, I'm so excited to see what they've created. We have such a good dynamic, and our conversations flow so easily. I love being the one that helps Patience facilitate their creativity and energy because they are such an artistic force that it inspires me as an artist, too. I can't wait for another semester, my friend :)

—Katie

Countries of Strays

The Quadralis

Allied in Magic and Trade

The Quadralis consists of Amarrin, Bakarr, Creall, and Dormar. These nations have allied against the expansion of Esperia and its mission of eradicating magic-kind.

Symbols: Blue and silver, dragon, moon/stars

Amarrin

[ˈæməɹɪn]

Capital: Lumeris

Other notable cities: Sylvavere (where Stars Align and the witches are), Caldreth, Galehaven, Brineport

A bustling coastal nation renowned for its trade and naval power, Amarrin's wealth is tied to its extensive forests and mastery of shipbuilding. Timber, paper, medicinal and magical plants, honey, and wax are key exports. While it boasts medium to high wealth due to its role as a trade hub, Amarrin has relatively few magic users due to its proximity to Esperia, whose hostility toward magic has stifled magical communities. Ships are vital for both its economy and its defense, making the nation deeply dependent on its maritime resources.

People: Amarrese

Symbols: Green, wolf, intertwining branches

Bakarr

[bʌkˈɑ]

Capital: Ferrovia

Other notable cities: Vartis, Etralis, Aeldar, Dunhaven

A mountainous land of incredible wealth, Bakarr thrives on its abundant natural resources. Rich deposits of ores and metals fuel its renowned masonry and craftsmanship, while its fertile lowlands support luxury agriculture. The nation is famed for its fruits, wines, coffee, and vibrant dyes, all of which command high value in trade. Bakarr's prosperity and strategic resources

make it a major target of Esperian aggression, forcing the nation to balance its opulence with vigilance.

People: Bakarrians

Languages:

Symbols: Purple, anvil, bear

Creall

[kɹ'eaɪ]

Capital: Eshara

Other notable cities: Zarath, Tavim

A desert and savannah nation with a modest economy, Creall survives through resourcefulness and trade. It is best known for its high-quality textiles made from llama wool and silk, as well as its striking ceramics and pottery. Though its land is less fertile, it produces staple crops such as legumes, wheat, and grains, which sustain its population. Creall's relative poverty compared to its neighbors makes it vulnerable to political pressure, but its craftsmanship and textiles are prized commodities in regional trade.

People: Crealla

Symbols: Orange, sun, falcon

Dormar

[d'ɔɹmaɪ]

Capital: Salvarel

Other notable cities: Spiceridge, Lunarra, Coralin, Solterra

A nation of contrasts, Dormar boasts wealth derived from both coastal and inland industries. Its coastal areas thrive on fishing, sugar production, and salt extraction, while its hot, wet inland regions are famous for high-value exports like spices and chocolate. Despite its strong export economy, Dormar relies on imports for many staple crops and other essential goods. The nation's medium-high wealth comes from its ability to dominate luxury markets, making it a key player in regional trade.

People: Dormarri

Symbols: White, waves, crane

The Esperian Empire

For the Glory of Humanity

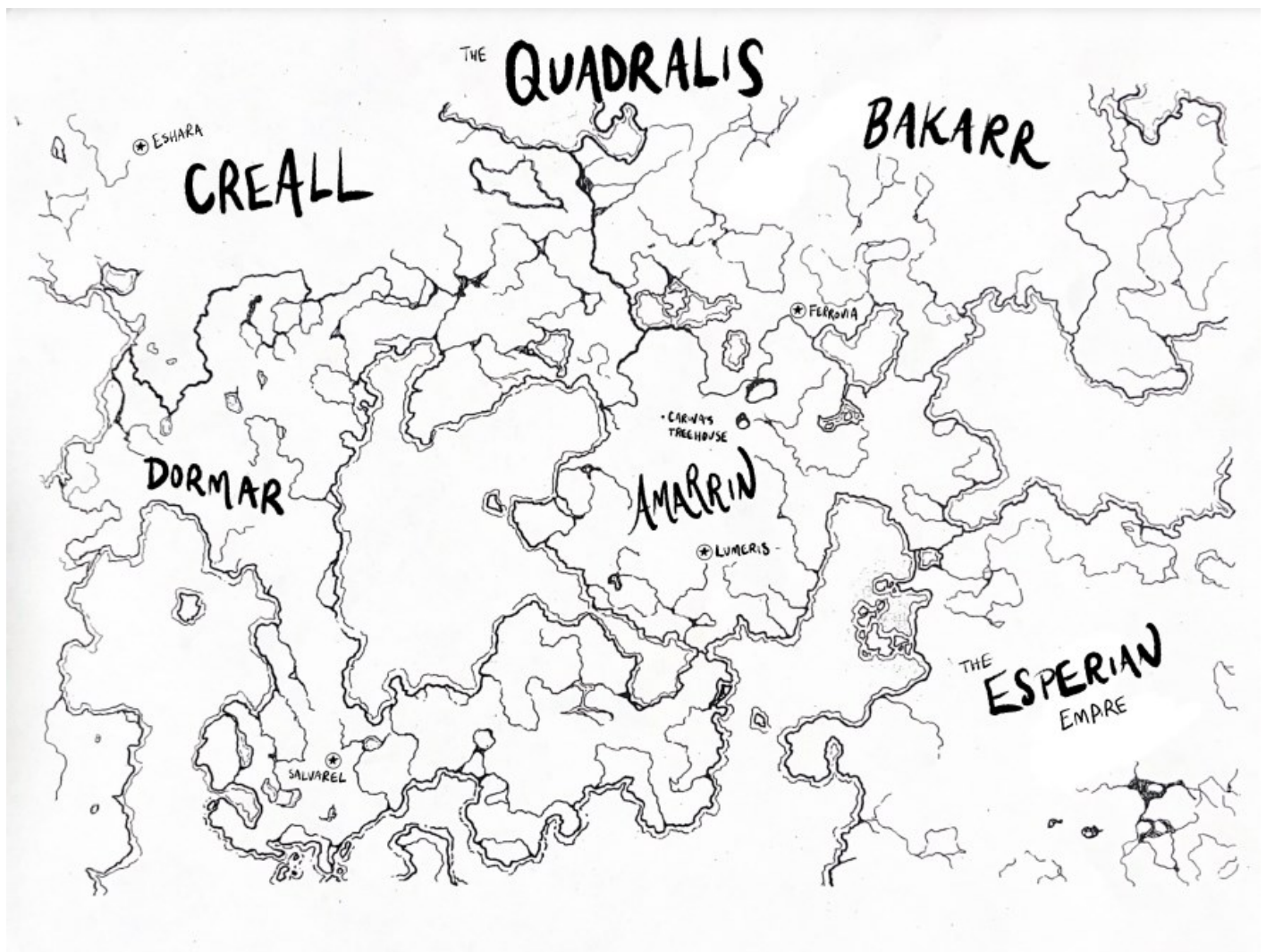
Symbols: Gold and red, lion, crown, sword

Esperia

[esp'ejə]

An expansionist empire and the sworn enemy of the Quadralis, Esperia is a rigid, militaristic nation that has banned magic as unnatural and dangerous. While it justifies its wars as a holy mission to eradicate witch-kind, its true goal is the conquest of fertile lands and valuable resources. Esperia uses werewolves in its military as trackers, treating them as “better” magical beings but likely positioning them as future targets once witches are dealt with.

People: Esperians



KYRA HAGEN

This was my first semester working with Kyra, and I feel like our sessions really left an impact on both of us. Every week, we bounced around emotional and technical ideas until we created a whole new life and inspiration for the poems. We have both learned so much from each other, and Kyra really is one of my favorite poets. I can't wait to see what she writes next :)

—Reilly

I Thought—Perhaps I Shouldn't—

I ate chocolate pudding on the couch
the other day and I thought
perhaps I shouldn't. I was
watching the news from Gaza
and body bags, bodies
in bags, they were piled
on a street corner
and children
cried for them

And I thought—
perhaps I shouldn't—
licked clean the spoon—
I would use it later—
eyes glued
to the lady in a pink dress
who tells us now about the weather

To Know as the Water

my solivagant soul
years to know
where to run

as the water
in the river
knows to run
with such fervor
such conviction

away

Over Lilac and Milkweed

clots of crimson recollections
flood my god-forsaken memory—
a reverie, derelict
and dying—
of the have-beens
and have-nots,
of all that is
and will be
never

and with water
i washed you away
but you stained my hands
and my heart and i have
no words and no
you and no
time to sit in sorrow and so

i will look for you
in magnolia trees
and in butterflies that hover
over lilac and milkweed
and in rays of moonbeam
and in the clouds above
and i will grow a garden from these
god-forsaken memories and hope
that one day you may
see the tulip bulbs and touch
the tender leaves

MAI KAO HANG

Working with Mai Kao this semester has been really enjoyable! It's been super satisfying looking at her poetry together and seeing the progression of her work through revision between sessions. Mai Kao consistently used the visual form of poems on the page to elevate the words within them in ways I never would have expected. I hope you enjoy reading her work as much as I have!

—Jazmyne

Dear Santa,
Please gift Christmas with Snow. Last year, Snow left
Christmas naked in the middle of nowhere.
Christmas sees red, green, blue, yellow, pink,
hear jingle bells traveling in the wind,
feel goosebumps from the stinging cold.
Confused, Christmas pleas,
“Snow, please come back.”
Snow did not show
to embrace dull
Christ-
mas.
Earth,
There is nothing
I can help you with.
One can only hope for Snow
to return to Christmas—I am not a God.
You have misunderstood my gift—and Snow
as well. My commands will not make Snow willingly
return to your beloved Christmas. Have you considered that?
Perhaps the reason why Snow left Christmas is because of you,
Earth.

Reach for the Moon

THE SILVER DISCO BALL GLISTENS
IN THE NIGHT SKY
BIGGER AND BRIGHTER
THAN USUAL.

MESMERIZED
BY THE MOON'S BEAUTY
I DON'T LOOK AWAY.

DARK BLEMISHES,
PORES ON ITS SURFACE,
A RING OF SILVER.

CONFUSED
BY THE MOON'S PROXIMITY
I GROW CURIOUS.

I REACH FOR THE MOON
WISHING TO TOUCH IT
AT LAST.

I EMBARRASS MYSELF
BY REACHING FOR SOMETHING
NOT YET ATTAINABLE.

A DREAM I CAN'T REACH
YET, BUT ONLY SEE
FROM A DISTANCE
EVERY NIGHT,
REMINDING ME
TO HOPE AND DREAM.

STEPH HEFTER

Seeing Steph's progression and range in writing this semester has been very satisfying! The subject matter of her essays and poems we looked at in our sessions together captured really interesting and personal moments of everyday life that always felt very honest and real. Steph's voice always came through loud and clear in every piece we discussed, and I'm excited to see what she'll come up with next!

—Jazmyne

FairyTale Nightmare

The heart lay amongst cobwebs and dust never seeing the color amongst the decaying roses. I put my heart behind bars and chains giving it the protection I thought it deserved, without thought. It was an ordinary day I still felt shattered from my previous tanglement. I heard whispers of someone having feelings for me and I was oblivious to the idea or thought. With time I am focused and stern to keeping my heart silent cause a beating heart is a diseased dream. I knew that it would only cost me my hopes, my dreams and the nightmare ahead of me. Yet I could not help it. Maybe I have become ill with all those fairytales. Even though I knew those tales were full of lies I still cling to the belief that there is someone who truly cares. It began as a normal day at lunch sitting amongst my acquaintances and wondering if I could truly understand the laughter when a phone was tossed at my arm. I gazed around the table confused wondering what was going on. When I gazed up on someone's phone realizing it asked something I've never experienced before. I debated over and over if it was a good idea wondering if I should make that choice to jump start my decaying heart. I glanced up to see his eyes with dread waiting for my rejection when I decided to give my heart one more light as his musk vaporized the air.

We became close. We shared our deepest secrets and tragedies with ease. You helped me seek my dreams even though I was way too afraid to take the leap, you guided me to take the risk. We shared ideals of the future and imagined destiny intertwining. We got older and decided the next steps toward the future and I thought I was ready for it. I've been through your battle fields. I've helped you contain your dreary clouds even though it costed my own. I began to feel the hint of what I jumped into and began to feel the first flame blow out. I ignored it without a care because I was wrapped up in the musky perfume you gave off. I faintly noticed how blinded I really was to your actions and began to let you use me like your own personal wallet, ready to be used whenever you needed something. I kept inhaling and taking that dreamland candy thinking it would eventually cure all the problems we faced. Then we decided to live together and for a while I was so happy even though I struggled with our dynamic. I knew you had medical health issues and yet I believed I could take care of you all by myself. We promised each other that we would help each other out. I worked day in and out to gain the green

chains that promised our future. You promised me you'd do the same but somehow that promise was glass. Even though I took that and moved on. You made another brightful promise that I fell for so easily. As time went on I realized the piles of dishes and the clothes you constantly abandon amongst the floor. With each sigh you'd explain how your health was getting worse and worse. I believed you and did not want you to feel worse than you already did. I took on the strain. I began to manage all the heavy duties without issue.

WITHOUT REALIZING IT MY SECOND FLAME BLEW OUT AS THE PAIN GREW DEEPER THAN ANY KNIFE WOUND. I USED ALL MY MONEY ON YOU AND BOUGHT YOU EVERYTHING YOU WOULD'VE WANTED. EVEN THOUGH WE WERE BEYOND POOR. I BEGAN TO REALIZE THE WEDGE THAT FORMED. YOU WOULD PLAY VIDEO GAMES ALL DAY WITH YOUR FRIENDS AND NEVER GAVE ME AN OUNCE OF YOUR FLAME. I'D BEGUN TO NOTICE THAT I WAS THE ONLY ONE TO FIRST SAY THOSE THREE WORDS. WE THEN BEGAN TO FIGHT AND EVERY TIME I CAME OUT THE VIL-LAIN OF YOUR FAIRYTALE. EVEN AS I ALLOWED YOUR FRIEND TO MOVE IN AFTER I KICKED OUT MY BROTHER. THEY DID THE SAME TEARING THAT MY BROTHER DID. DURING THIS BATTLEFIELD YOU DECIDED THAT YOU WERE ALONE AT HOME AND NEEDED A FRIEND.

I thought if we got a cat it would help some of our issues. Instead another chain was added to my shoulder but I was too blinded to feel the weight. A little fur ball has brought so much happiness but I saw the cracks amongst the walls and the never flowing dishes hit the floor.

WE BEGAN TO FIGHT ONCE MORE. WITH EACH FIGHT I SHED ANOTHER OCEAN THAT I THOUGHT WOULD DRY. EVERYTIME WE WOULD APOLOGIZE AND YOU WOULD MAKE THESE FLOWERY PROMISES THAT STRUCK HOPE IN MY EYES. THEN YOU WOULD BEGIN TO BUILD YOUR LIST OF DESIRES HIGHER AND HIGHER. I KNEW I COULD NEVER AFFORD ALL OF THEM.

I thought if I bought a whole montier and a PC it would motivate you to do better. Boy was I wrong instead you clinged onto it like a drug and I accidentally added more chains to my shoulders. You promised if I got a dishwasher you would help but we eventually got that washer and I noticed you broke another promise. while you tell your friends how evil I was for speaking up about your lack of effort. We began to draw further and further apart and I could not stitch back together the damage that kept happening. Then My work life became chaotic and throughout my week so has everything else. While my world fell apart you would laugh with your friends and not even come to my aid.

I began To look amongst the mirror and realized the hollow fairytale has gotten to me. I tried to fake a smile and continued like, I still had all the candles lit. I began to question my decisions and if I decided to end this fairytale. I then realized the handcuffs you left. They make it impossible to leave you without some agony to myself. As I shake geely relight the candle as the clicking of the lighter produced no spark. I tried again.

This time I tried to tell you and work it through but I'm beginning to lose hope and it has only taken a further toll on my heart. I've noticed the decaying roses again. Even my heart began to dust and turn gray

again. I noticed I started to withdraw as well. We barely talk or glance at each other. Have we become villains in this decaying fairytale?

THE LAST FLAME BEGAN TO WAIVER AS MY BODY FINALLY BURNED FROM THE INSIDE AND OUT. I BEGAN TO CONSTANTLY FEEL LIKE IM SCREAMING EVEN THOUGH I HELD A GLASSY SMILE. I BEGAN TO BITE MY TONGUE. I THOUGHT ABOUT RIPPING IT OUT BUT I KNEW MY EYES WOULD NOT KEEP QUIET EITHER. WE EVENTUALLY BECAME STRANGERS AND NOW WE PLAY THE FAKE FAIRYTALE. I WONDER IF WE ARE TOO AFRAID TO BE ALONE WITHOUT EACH OTHER. WE HAVE BECOME POISON APPLES TO EACH OTHER AND YET WE STILL TRY TO HOLD ON LIKE STICKY CARAMEL APPLES. I'VE BEGUN TO REALIZE DREAMS ARE NO LONGER ALIGNED AND I BEGAN TO QUESTION IF FAIRYTALES WERE JUST ALL ONE BIG LIE.

AS I BLEW OUT THE LAST CANDLE I BEGAN TO SMELL THE SMOKE AS IT INTERTWINED IN YOUR MUSKY ALLURE. I REALIZED THE TOXINS YOU'VE ADMITTED AND BEGAN TO PICK UP THE LID AND SMOTHER THE SMELL AND BURIED IT UNDERNEATH MY DEAD DEUSTED HEART.. WITH ONE LAST INHALE I FACKED A SPARK AND BEGAN THE PART OF YOUR FAIRYTALE DREAM ONCE MORE. MAYBE ON A RAINY DAY I'LL PULL IT OUT TO REMIND ME OF WHAT WE COULD'VE BEEN BUT A WARNING TO ALL THE TOXIC WAX I'VE INHALED.

ELLIOT HEILING

Despite being nearly too busy to function, Elliot still made an effort to stay on our staff this semester, and I'm so glad he did. On top of being a great writer, Elliot brings an infectious energy to the TLC without even trying. Even just by choosing his word of the day, he makes his mark. I couldn't be more proud of him this semester, and I know he'll be an incredible student teacher <3

—Reilly

In The Moments Where Time Is Stopped

For as long as I can remember, sleep has fascinated me
It's human nature—

A need for survival intertwined with the warming reality of commonality,
A break from the reality that the lack of discrimination is against our nature

Every single morning, the world wakes up,
We rub our eyes, we survey our surroundings, and the day starts anew
And after the horrors
(time passes)
Our heads hit the ground, however soft, and we drift away.

I look into the eyes of a stranger and can picture them closing for the day,
How strange, isn't it?
To know you have a faction of life experiences that, at their core, are not unique to you?
How comforting, isn't it?

No matter how many tears of laughter you weep or blood you spill
Your body will give out for the day
Consciousness will take a deep breath in and not out until subjective daybreak
And we will meet again, for the moment, and relish in the moments when time is stopped

I look into a stranger's eyes and squint, tilting my head
If I look hard enough, through my own warped reflection,
I think I almost remember where we met,
But time continues and I must go

The Red String of Fate

A red string is slip-knotted around my pinky
It cascades like a spiderweb in a wind-swept arch to the floor
Snaking through the gaps in linoleum and twisting like a silverfish

I've never tried to follow it, until today
They say the red string leads you to your soulmate: your fate
The Universe gifts you with a promise of true love for those brave enough to seek it

I tie my shoelaces, careful to not catch my ruby thread, and begin my trek
My neck bends in its familiar arch, staring at the ground in second nature
Tears steal from my eyes as I struggle to focus

The string takes me across the rolling hills of my parking lot
Down Fifth—I can almost see the bones of the library—before twisting back in the direction I
came
I walk for what seems like hours

As I walk, the hair-wire thread has begun to shift and warp,
It appears to double-helix slowly, becoming thicker with each footstep
By the eighth hour, I walk upon it like a felled tree

The further I traverse, the heavier the backward pull becomes
Red fishing line—the birth of the string—threatens to cut off circulation completely
My fingertips are blue and I touch them to my lips

Nightfall rapidly approaches, and the starless sky offers no light
I glance down for the first time in hours, light peaks through the gaps in scarlet cords
Motion stops as the new moon rises

Warmth radiates from inside the hollow trunk, I force my cold hand toward it
The Red Sea beneath me parts, giving way at once
Sleep takes as the glow swallows me

When I wake, it is in my bed
T'was but a dream, I am sure of it, because nothing is different
When I greet my roommate, her hair is red, as always

Greetings to the Sun That Always Rises

I find that when time is fleeting
And the air in your lungs threatens to thin to nothing
That forcing your body to be vertical is a beautiful thing.

Lately, I have found it much harder to live
Not in the sense that I want to die—
not anymore, at least
But living and surviving are two different things
And I've become more comfortable acquainted with the latter.

Despite this—
Each morning, I rely on the Sun to greet me,
She casts her prismatic light across the soft fur of my companion
Marking my morning with the promise of love and color
They say beauty is constant if you know where to look.

The routine of the constant running is soothing
In a way,
 When I can't help but leave consciousness on my couch
 I at least know I've been welcomed into a thousand spaces
 And someone is always expecting my arrival

So I will show up and make a face
And toss my head back and laugh
And accidentally forget my worries,
For each promise of daybreak,
I get more acquainted with living—
choosing to exist.

JAZMYNE JOHNSON

Jazmyne is one of the funniest, personable, and overall amazing people I know. They bring overwhelming fun energy into the space and start some of our silliest conversations. On top of that, they are a great tutor who always put their all into helping those around them any way they can. They have an ability to brighten any room, and I'm so glad they share their talents with us in the TLC :D

—Reilly

Check-In, Check-Out

I set off on the trail, following groups of other students as we all keep our eyes and minds open for inspiration to strike us. It's too warm, I dressed to coordinate myself according to the laws of fashion, not the laws of nature and the daily weather forecast. I try to get in tune with nature as I try to tune out the almost incessant, scattered sounds of emergency sirens that I wish would get quieter as I walk deeper into the woods, but it takes longer than I'd expect. Soon, the casual chatter and vehicles rushing past fade into ambient cricket and distant bird noises, but not entirely. I absentmindedly swat at a bug that flies into my face.

Gentle talk and wail,
A local bumps into me,
I am now checked in.

I continue walking, following a path with the promise of a lake in the future. The journey offers worn, rocky paths, wooden walkways winding through lush, shady trees, and a scenic, rushing river of pavement cleanly dividing my trip into two distinct, equal pieces. After expertly fording my obstacle, I arrive to find the crisp water I desperately wish I could dive into as well as busy benches filled with other writers. I am working against time, and I continue my walk, eventually settling on a gentle incline in front of the water. I sit down and unpack my belongings, being careful to balance everything and not lose them to the tangle of assorted dry foliage and dark, damp sand below. I always hated walking in the muddy silt, complaining to my parents how it felt on my bare feet. Floating above it in the water just to avoid it. A solitary game of floor is lava.

Wading the pavement
I arrive in true nature
If it should exist.

Looking out across the water, I see multiple canoes full of people gliding across the water much like the nine geese in front of me. They're too far away for me to make out what they're saying, and eventually the chatter dies down. I quickly scrawl and scribble into my notes, the sun illuminating as my hand casts a shadow on the paper. I watch a bee gently crawl on a small purple flower before it darts away without a care, a small red dragonfly dipping down to make ripples in the water. A fine cloud of gnats keep me company as I furiously collect everything I can see with my pencil. I can still hear the cars and reserve staff vehicles humming along behind me. I check the time and decide to turn back, a breeze carrying a delicate mist of fluffy seeds away as I make my return. Playground wishes for a new scooter or video game. Kicking dandelions with

my colorful Velcroed shoes just to watch them scatter.

Observed from afar,

Man, animal, and insect

Though I do not join.

It's lonelier on the way back, my classmates dispersed amongst the trees. I'm at the clock's mercy, yet I keep stopping to jot things down. A man jogs past me and tells me he's coming up on my left, and I don't parse his words until he's already gone. I cross the asphalt divide again, getting closer to my destination. I walk on the wooden path, passing by trees that are more familiar than I realize. I get so absorbed in the moment I trip on a jagged root before catching myself, finally recognizing some familiar faces. Yet before I know it, I'm alone again on a long, straight path wondering when I'll get back to where I started. I check the time again and am interrupted suddenly by a quick motion in the grass, a small black and yellow snake. By the time I collect my thoughts, it vanishes. I reach the end of the path and see posted trail map lovingly displayed in a frame of painted wood, and realize I took a wrong turn somewhere, truly being lost in nature. Turning around to make the longer journey back to where I'm supposed to be, I'm hit in the neck by another tiny fly. My time here is coming to an end.

Absorbed in the trees

Turned and twisted, checking time

Find that "You are here".

TESSA KRAUSE

Having Tessa this semester in 157 has been amazing. We've created a connection that goes beyond just writing, but with that being said, her writing has been awesome! It's been really cool to see Tessa start as an already crazy good writer and grow into her writing even more. She takes feedback really well and took all of my challenges I gave her in stride, even if they were something she wasn't quite as used to. I loved working with Tessa and can't wait to continue to see her grow in her college career!!

—Katie

Who I Will Always Be

I always knew that protecting the king could cost me my life, but I was prepared for the ultimate sacrifice. I trained hard, every day, knowing that it could be my last. Not that I ever let that stop me. I lived my life to the fullest, never letting my impending fate settle a crushing weight on my shoulders.

I never once considered that I would leave an impact on the king. Such an impact that he's currently cradling my head as I gasp for air. He's on the dirty, now blood-soaked floor in his full ceremonial garbs.

Even as I realize that these are my last moments, I can't get past the fact that this king is on the ground. For silly old me.

"Your Highness, get off the floor. You're a *king*, for crying out loud!" I try to make him chuckle, but it hurts. I wheeze, wincing when I feel the blood run down the side of my face.

He, too, winces. He never stops stroking my head as he takes out his handkerchief and wipes the blood away. I take this opportunity to gaze into his eyes, seeing a whirlwind of emotions in his warm, chocolatey brown eyes. I put my own hand over his, shocking him. "You deserve the world. Yet here you are. On the ground. D-dying. How is this fair? How am I supposed to continue *living* when the brightest part of my life is *gone*?"

I manage what I think is a weak smile. I remove my hand from his to wipe the stray tears from his cheeks. "I'm flattered, Your Highness. I never knew you thought so highly of me."

His voice suddenly goes whisper quiet. "I don't think t-this is very funny. Why are you trying to make jokes when..."

Blood now runs from my nose. My own blood halos my fragile figure. I clasp his hand again. My eyes widen. Dread now settling firmly in my stomach "Your Highness-"

"Shhhh. I've got you. I'm not leaving you." His tears are now falling freely. The entire room is respectfully silent. He looks me right in the eyes. "You *saved* me. You protected *me*. I won't ever forget what you've sacrificed...for me."

"No. *Please*. My life meant so much more to me than just this moment. When I'm gone, remember who I was—not what I became."

The Lesser of Two Evils

“Yes, well, love,” I preen, “the devil you know is better than the devil you don’t.” I relish in the flames dancing in her eyes.

“Why would I ever make a deal with you? I’d rather die than be seen in your company.” She juts her chin out at me. I smirk. What an adorable little heroine. She’s so attractive when she’s this fired up.

“That could be arranged. All I’d have to do is send you on your way, and then watch the nightly news. Oh wait. There wouldn’t be one.” She crosses her arms, her eyes are looking everywhere but at me. Weighing her options. “Well, do you want the world to burn? Do you want that to be on your head? All of the ‘innocent’ people dead?”

She grabs at her hair, tugging so hard I’m afraid she’s going to rip it right from her head. “Of course I don’t want that. I also never want to work with you. Ever! Not after what you did to us. All of us!”

“Don’t you dare!” I growl, “ever mention that again!” I walk away from her, running a hand through my buzzed hair.

That night, I sit by the TV. I turn on the station for the news. Nothing. I switch channels. Nothing. I don’t even have to look outside to know that the world is burning.

Except for my house.

Ashes are falling on my lawn.

I see the smoke billowing.

Then it starts to rain. A light, soft rain.

Maybe, just maybe, there is hope. For something better. For a new start. For a better future.

“Maybe humanity will learn from their mistakes this time around.” I sigh, “but probably not. Nobody ever wants to accept my deals. Well, so be it! Let the world burn!”

OLIVER MCKNIGHT

It has been a real privilege to work with Oliver; I can't describe how proud I am of how the way they have pushed themselves to write and create this semester even when it felt difficult at times. Over the semester we spent most of our attention on a short story that only got better and better as they continued to put their time and effort into it, and that growth and effort has definitely not gone unnoticed. They such a kind and fun person to be around, and their talent, hard work, and amazing creativity is always evident to me in their writing. Our sessions were one of the highlights of my weeks, and I can't wait to see what they do next semester! :) —Zoe

Acceptance.

It takes far too long to get out of bed.
I know what today will bring,
And my chest feels oh-so heavy.
She leaves me today.

I hold her on the drive over,
Tears soak her fur as her slobbery tongue
licks my face.
I hold her for as long as I can,
And for the first time in a long time,
I pray.

We drive home without her,
tears in our eyes.

"It will feel bad for a while,"
My therapist tells me.
And I know it will,
of *course*, I do.
...*Of course, I do.*

The house feels emptier now,
I realize,
Because grief can't be as simple as
Deep sadness.

I'll cry when I clean out the pantry,
months later,
hesitating to throw her medication list away
that has hung on the door for *years*.
It will live in my phone case,
folded up & safe.

I'll put ashes into necklaces,
And sit with my little sister,
And cry much more than I'd like.
...It *does* feel bad for a while.

When I lay down at night,
Grief will wrap me in a blanket,
Rest her head on my chest,
And simply *be*
In all of her heaviness.

And I will let her *be*,
Of course,
As heavy as she is—
Because what is grief if not *love*?
A reminder of the love that was,
And love that still *is*.

(What an honor it is to love.)

ANKICA MONTGOMERY

Ankica is a wonderful writer, wanting to immerse readers in her stories. During every English 157 session, she finds ways to expand her skills on creating imagery and meaningful dialogue throughout her short novel. It was a pleasure to work with Ankica throughout the semester and I wish her a successful future.

—Andrea

We Have Teeth

The hologram played. It played and played and Huř was *afraid*.

Four hundred millennia. *Four hundred thousand years* the Concilium stood, ruling over all Sentient species the Universe deemed good enough to explore more than their own planet. 150 races were represented in the Concilium, split into four select tiers: the nobility, the artisans, the guardsmen, and the Caliph- the elected leaders. Every member who had ever served, regardless of rank or background, was held accountable to the Law. Huř stood apart from them, ruling over with a clear conscious set apart from the inevitable politics that the lower levels of the Concilium was rife with. As Ludex Ignis he reigned over all who came before the Concilium seeking judgement or mercy. He was held accountable to no one soul of any Sentient, but instead to all of them. When he died, it would be at the hands of the People, all judging him unworthy, just as his predecessor and all Ludex Ignis before had died. He was the Law, and he bowed to no one.

Huř had never felt fear. The closest he had ever known was the adrenaline of battle, the power of gifting life and death in equal spades filling his chest. His race, the Diyu Zhizi, were masters of war who could fight even the cruelest race of Sentients, Behskerrs. Standing eight feet tall with four arms, he had the advantage over most opponents. No other race- not the elegant Chima Mire with their long hair of fire and poisonous skin nor the silver-tongued Altavoz recognizable by their razorsharp feathers and acidic orange spit- could ever dare dream to fight a Diyu Zhizi and live to tell the tale. Never before in his life had fear been needed or justified.

He was afraid now.

He could only watch in creeping horror as the hologram played on and on in an uncaring, unending, loop. It began with screams as the hull of a carrier ship was breached by pirates. The camera, stationary as it was, picked up on no visible violence at first. Then, as the explosions, gunfire, and wailing died down, the video showed it's first sign of life. A crewmember of the ship ran through the camera's line of sight, hands clutching her bleeding side. Before she could pass out of sight, however, a crack sounded through the air and she fell, motionless. A pirate walked onto the screen, saber teeth dripping blood and gun still smoking. As he leaned over her dead body he inhaled deeply and grinned. The video, though of poor quality, could still convey the fear when he started screaming.

When he had first heard the rumors he had scoffed- humans were well established as the lowest and weakest of all Sentients, lacking any natural protection system other than, arguably, their tenacity (although, privately, he agreed with the argument of that particular trait being more

of a curse than a blessing). The mere idea of a human so powerful it took on a squadron of behskerrs was so outlandish he dared not repeat it to a child for fear of laughter and mockery.

No one was laughing now.

The abrupt silence drew Huǒ's attention back to the hologram. It was frozen in the video's final image, blood splattered onto the cam-recorder's screen, and the human- if it could even be called that- lay twisted on the ground, dead once again. The human who had finally managed to kill his former race-mate was leaning against the wall next to what remained of the pirate, bite marks sluggishly bleeding. The video had stopped. All was still. The sounds of heavy breathing of the Concilium and a small, bitten-off whimpering echoed through the deathly still chamber.

The hologram disappeared, and he looked at the now visible source of the sobs. It came from the human standing in the middle of the room, surrounded by the Concilium's imposing semi-circle. His chest heaved, a side effect from silencing his sorrows, if Huǒ had to guess. His pale cheeks stood in stark contrast to the mouthguard he wore- the ones that all humans, regardless of age or job, wore. His uniform was standard to Commander-in-Chief Baesin of the carrier ship Korae, and the stripes running down the side of it signified him as a navigator-in-training.

He was undeniably weak. How could this human possibly stand against even the prey species of the Concilium? Huǒ's own species were predators- a rarity in Sentients- but he couldn't see any similarity between himself and the shaking human in front of him. Huǒ's skin was harder than any crystal or metal, able to withstand the sharpest of blades. Humans cut their skin with paper. In times of need, Huǒ could push past the pain of losing limbs or organs- humans were notorious for crying from the simplest of pains.

And yet. And yet the human in the video had easily killed her attacker with no signs of pain.

Huǒ took a breath, refocusing his energy to prevent any sign of his unease from escaping. He was Ludex Ignis for a reason, and a human barely into adulthood would not scare him, no matter how unnatural.

"State your name and race." From the corner of his eye he saw Lord Oshio nod slightly. Although Huǒ had no real need for a singular member's approval, Lord Oshio had been the one to introduce Huǒ to the Court of the Concilium so many years ago. He had been Huǒ's original mentor and had been the first to nominate him for Ludex Ignis when the previous had died.

The human's eyes shot to Huǒ's face. He opened his mouth, then closed it again. Swallowing, he responded.

"Raphael. Raphael Avellino." He was quiet, *afraid*, but Huǒ couldn't blame him. It was not every day a human was called to Court in front of the entire Caliph, and certainly not to explain why they killed a friend. "I'm human."

Before Huǒ could respond, a chair's screeching rang through the room as a member of the Concilium slammed her fists on the table, orange spit flying. "What was *that*?" The Duchess Anaran hissed, feathers shaking with the force of her anger. Her chair abruptly fell behind her, sounding off like a bullet.

Raphael Avellino stumbled backwards, breath coming out in short gasps. The Duchess Anaran started to hiss a low, winding noise that grated on the ear.

Raphael didn't answer her question, and as the silence continued- the Duchess's hissing

growing more pronounced- murmurs started in the Hall. *What did this man-this boy!- do?* They whispered. *What does he have to hide that he doesn't answer?*

The Duchess spoke again. "What did you do, *Piszok*?"

Raphael recoiled as though he'd been struck, and Huř felt his hands jerk. How dare she? *Piszok* wasn't used to describe anyone other than those whose eternal soul could never be wiped cleanchild-slayers and the like. To call someone that, before a judgement had been drawn, before even evidence had been laid...

To be called *Piszok* was to be shunned for the rest of one's life, unable to go anywhere in the universe without mocking jeers preceding them and fevered whispers following.

The whispers of the Concilium grew to a frenzied pitch, each wondering what the Duchess knew to give her reign to declare this. Huř could already see how their eyes shifted moments before connecting with the human's own, but moved back afterwards to look at him again.

From deep inside, where his ancestors dwelt, Huř felt a fury unlike any he had felt before- not the injustice done to him in his youth nor the savagery of Behskerr foe had ever created this feeling of absolute and utter *rage* that swelled from deep inside him. No matter this human's crimes, no matter what he had or hadn't done- he did not deserve this.

"How dare you?" His voice was quiet, but everyone heard. "Anaran, you ask the boy this question. But my question is how dare *you*?"

The Concilium was quiet, perhaps now realizing their mistake. It was too late.

The Duchess gulped but stood her ground. If Huř might have been impressed if he hadn't been so close to ripping out her throat and letting her blood stain the ground. "Ludex Ignis, surely you must know- only a monster could do something like what he did."

"A monster, you say?" he asked, voice soft and body still. The Duchess nodded, perhaps taking his stillness for consideration.

She nodded, eager to rescue herself from the pit she had made. "Of course- creatures like him are irreversibly terrible and monstrous- with *Piszok* like that, the best solution is to drown or burn them. What true Sentient could do such a deed?"

The longer she spoke the higher her voice rose, a swelling crescendo that built and echoed in the Court as people began to agree with her, voices rising and morphing into a mob of hatred.

"Indeed, Aranan. What kind of *monster* could do such a thing?" Huř's voice was still soft, but now something caused the Duchess to pause.

Huř stood, and he could feel the tremors that swept through the room as his true power began to flood the room.

"What kind of person could commit such atrocities?" He paused and looked her in the eye. She made no noise- not because she could hold them back but because his power forced her into silence.

"You forget, Anaran. I am *Piszok* as well."

There was a stillness that filled the room, like a mouse who knows it has been trapped by a snake is still- not with the hope of survival but a stillness that is born by knowledge of the death that awaits it.

Huř smiled. He knew that it was not just Anaran who had forgotten, that they all had. It was not a kind smile.

He had been young when it happened, and his youth was inscribed in the history books of the modern class, so he wasn't surprised they did not know. But that would not save them from his wrath. He had gotten to where he was because he repaid every injustice done to him, regardless of how much time passed. For this, for the Duchess, he would not wait.

He spoke again. "One hundred and twenty-four years I have served as Ludex Ignis. I've spent an additional seventy-six years living and breathing." He paused for a moment, taking in the widened eyes and letting the implications of set in. He was not the oldest in the room by any means, but the time he had spent in his position was longer than any Ludex Ignis before. He, who served until the People declared him unfit, had been chosen year by year for over a century.

He, who was *Piszok*.

The Duchess, fool that she was, thought she could escape the wrath of his. She believed his wrath had cooled. It did, but only to hard into something unmovable and inevitable.

"When you were young, perhaps. But surely that was in your youth."

He did not let her finish. "I was labelled *Piszok* a year before I became Ludex Ignis, and I have been it ever since. Tell me, *Anaran*, do you not know the rules of a *Piszok*? We are labelled for eternity. That is why I stopped that process- a process you seem to want to start again. Perhaps, then, you think yourself above my law."

She was shaking now, fear unhidden on her face. He let a smile curl onto his face. Good. She knew what would happen to her, that he would have no mercy. He was not afraid of a single Noble who thought her age and position made her impervious to harm- Huǒ had burned the Concilium down once before and would do it again if it was necessary.

Lord Oshio stood up. "Please, everyone. We are here to discuss the human Raphael Avellino, not our Ludex Ignis." People started to nod, grateful for a break in the tension.

Lord Oshio turned to Huǒ and bowed deeply. "Please, Ludex Ignis, have mercy on those not educated on your history and laws."

Huǒ said nothing, but internally he smiled. Lord Oshio bowed to Huǒ when the Duchess did not, a message to the Concilium that was not missed. It asked a question that could only serve to embarrass the Duchess, as she had not bowed before speaking to Huǒ. Lord Oshio was smart, far smarter than anyone else at the Court. He knew how to play games that the rest would never dream of watching.

Huǒ spoke. "Very well. Thank you, Lord Oshio, for reminding me of our purpose here. *Anaran*, we will speak on this at a later time- perhaps the next Concilium meeting."

Huǒ heard the sharp intake of breath at his words, and knew that the onlookers had finally realized that he was not referring to the Duchess by her title. She did not deserve the respect he gave to Lord Oshio.

He did not wait for anything else to be said but turned to the human who was watching the proceedings with wide eyes. The Duchess did not deserve any more attention.

"Raphael Avellino. Do you know why you are here?"

The human slowly nodded. In a voice so quiet that Huǒ's heartbeat seemed to overpower it, he said, "T-trial. It's a trial." His voice shook, and the guards seemed to tilt their heads towards him in an attempt to hear him.

Huǒ nodded. "Two weeks ago, Commander-in-Chief Baesin's ship Korae was attacked

by pirates. searching for the cargo Korae was carrying. The battle, according to reports afterwards, lasted two days, and ended with massive casualties on both sides. Three days ago, this footage was pulled from the wreckage. This video depicts you, Raphael Avellino, killing a fellow human crewmate.”

He stopped. This case had been simple when he had learned of it earlier in the week. Either it was murder, an accident, or self defense- and Huř was prepared for all possibilities. But now, after watching that damning video, he realized something.

This case, this human, would change everything.

Huř looked to the room: the Caliph and guardsmen representatives sat on Huř ’s left, and the nobles and artisans on his right. In front of him stood Raphael in the center, surrounded by guards. The scribes sat behind the accused, writing down all that was said- each assigned to listen to one member of the Concilium. This was his Court, the kingdom that he ruled. None could challenge his claim and all knew it.

Huř waited. At any point the Concilium could interrupt to say their piece, but most knew better than to halt his words. Instead, he gave them time- a pause in his conducting to allow them to speak their mind on the matters happening. This was one of those times, and he would be surprised if no one took advantage of it.

The silence stretched and folded in on itself like a taffy maker doing his trade. Huř could see the hesitation of the Concilium members, several tensing in preparation to rise or opening their mouths to speak, all halting before a single action was taken.

Then, at the end of the Huř gave, a willowy figure stood. At full height she stood at nine feet, but her taunt skin and hollow eye sockets made her loom taller. Huř knew Pemakan Daging well, but still he was surprised she was there. Her kind, the eldritch-like Kematian, were well known for their lack of interest in most subjects.

Pemakan Daging spoke, her voice like a crackling radio wave, something not meant to be heard but still forced into the world. “The Artisans call for Trial.”

A murmur went up around the room. No one expected the Artisans to be the first in calling for Huř ’s singular word.

He saw Raphael pale, and he knew why. In regular Court when someone was brought before the Concilium the decision was made by all- every member present voted, and every tier was given an additional vote for the majorities opinion. Thus the Concilium gave it’s verdict- and the accused needed only to persuade the majority, though Huř was still the final say. When a Trial was called, though, it meant something very different. When Huř was brought in it meant the Concilium knew that it could not be without bias.

This would not be an easy Trial.

Lord Corbeaux stood, leather-like wings flaring out. “The Caliph calls for Trial.” The representatives behind him nodded their agreement.

Prince Zahreh of the Al-Kuabis stood. “The Guardsmen call for Trial.”

Finally, all looked to the Nobility. There, sitting deathly still, was the Duchess. She had been hoping to avoid attention for the rest of the day, Huř knew, but now she had no choice. Trial only occurred with full agreement, but no one in this room could claim impartiality here. To not follow through would be the height of arrogance, and the Duchess surely knew that all of Huř’s patience with her had disappeared the moment she said *Piszok*.

Duchess Anaran stood, orange plumage shifting behind her. “The Nobility,” she said, voice quiet, “calls for Trial.”

Huř nodded, and the four sat in unison

He stood and addressed the room, power overflowing. None could doubt his control. “Thus says the Ludex Ignis: the Trial begins.” He said, voice echoing in the Court.

He turned from the Concilium and faced the human. “Raphael Avellino. You have been brought to the Court of the Concilium for your crimes against a Sentient. The Ludex Ignis will choose your fate.”

All were silent. Huř paused for a moment, looking at Raphael Avellino. The boy’s eyes were wide, and he could see how harshly the human’s nails were digging into his own hands. Huř knew then, in that moment, that Raphael was not afraid of him, and Huř did not want to know what truly would scare the human.

“Nullius veritatis obliviscere. Forget no truth.” With his final words, the stage was given to Raphael Avellino.

Raphael closed his eyes, and tilted his head up. Huř could see his lips murmuring, but knew not if it was a prayer or curse that fell silent from the human’s mouth.

His eyes opened, and Huř couldn’t help but notice Raphael’s eyes; they focused on him, iridescent pupils shining.

He began to speak.

“There has always been rumors about humans- why we wear guard in our mouths and monitor our heartbeats.”

Huř nodded- humans, as weak as they were, were notorious for refusing medical aid when seriously injured- they would either live or, if they were certain they would die, they would disappear to never be seen again.

“It’s to keep everyone safe.” Raphael smiled, and Huř noticed, perhaps for the first time, how sharp his teeth were. “That is, it’s to keep you all safe from us.”

Huř saw a few people scoff quietly.

“It happened six hundred years ago, on my home planet Earth. The world as it had been known ended. Civilizations fell in days, societies crumbled until not even their ruins remained. Billions died before they even realized what had happened. Everything they had ever known went up in flames and drowned in blood.”

He paused. “That’s what the history books tell us, at least. It was my ancestors, seven generations ago, who fought that battle. Who killed and were killed by their friends and family.”

A sense of unease filled the air.

“Ophiocordyceps unilateralis. That’s what it was originally called, when scientists were just finding it in spiders and ants. It was creepy, sure, but just a part of life. That is, until it wasn’t.”

No one spoke, the air itself seeming to halt as to not interrupt his tale.

“One day, they woke up and realized that it had changed. That it wasn’t a fungus anymore, it was a virus. A virus that could affect them. My grandparents tell me that at the beginning they labelled it as OU-01, but when society collapsed nobody was following those rules. Eventually, though, it got it’s moniker. Ophelia. A combination of the original name and a homage to their history.”

Huř was horrified. He knew that humans were a bit notorious for gifting inanimate things names usually bestowed upon themselves, but this... this was too far. How could they give their killer, their world-ender, their own names?

“But they didn’t just die when they were infected. They died and rose again. After it killed them the first time, the parasite would reuse their bodies and turned them into mindless monsters, focused only on killing any warmth to further spread itself.”

The entire Concilium was silent.

“After fifteen years of hell, we found the cure. Ophelias was killed by even being near the stuff, and the humans who took it were immune to getting it.” He laughed, devoid of any humor.

“Or so we thought.”

“A couple years later we found out that our savior wasn’t actually a cure. It just prevented any new Ophelia virus from infecting us. But by that point Ophelia had infected everything, even the damn water we drank. Once we die, we still become monsters.”

“Become?” He asked, almost afraid of the answer.

Raphael grinned, sharp teeth visible past the mouth guard that made a terrible amount of sense. “Why do you think they don’t send out search parties anymore?”

ANASTASIA MUCHA

Every week I always looked forward to working with Ana and seeing what new, amazing poems she would bring in. It has filled me with so much pride to see her grow and step out of her comfort zone in writing about new subjects, and it's hard not to admire the creativity and love with which she approaches her writing and life in general. She was one of my very first learners, and I credit her patience and ability to quickly bounce ideas around in making my job so much easier while I found my footing as a new tutor. I'll always cherish the fun and silly sessions we had, and I already know there are great things in store for her future!

—Zoe

Is the Poet Actually the Heartbroken Prince?

I lie here in bed,
Half an hour till midnight,
Pondering what she might be doing.
The one that got away.
I ponder if she ever has sleepless nights like I,
If she ever walks out in the middle of the night to feel the cool air hit her beautiful face,
If the air ever welcomes her with a cold, yet familiar, embrace that leaves a trace.
If she ever whispers my name out loud, and if the air takes it and sends it my way.
Then I step out into the cool air,
The wind whips my face, and whistles,
And I start to journey down memory lane.
Just a woman,
Who I longed for,
Whom I shall never have, nor embrace.
Whose eyes I will never have the pleasure of meeting,
Whose lips I will never kiss,
Whose hair I will never be able to run my fingers through,
Whose face my hand will never hold,
Whose body I will never be able to make love to,
And whose voice I will never succumb to.
For I am the heart broken prince,
I lie here, in my bed, and the only thing that is keeping me warm is the glass of wine down this
throat of mine.
For I am the heart broken Prince,
Whose love, ran away, without leaving a slipper, or any trace,
Behind.
For I am the heart broken prince,
I keep glancing at the door, hoping to see her face.
But it stays shut.
The mirror mocks and mimics me.
It reminds me that I am alone.
Why don't I shatter it already?
For I am the heart broken Prince,

I light candles every night, in hopes that in the midst of the darkness,
She'd be able to see the beaming glow, illuminating a path from her to me through the trees.
For I am the heart broken prince,
And I am the fairest in all this land.
My kingdom's population of:
One.
For I am the heart broken prince.
Maybe one day she'll come,
Maybe one day the candle's light will be a beacon in the night.
However, that day is not today.
The time has come to dim the light of the candle,
Once again.
For I am the heart broken prince.

KYLIE NEWTON

Kylie is both an incredible tutor and one of the brightest lights in the TLC. Whenever she's in the space, I know I'm in for a good chat, no matter the topic. Losing her writing and Spanish skills next semester is such a big hit, but the even bigger loss is the positive energy she brings every day. I know Kylie will do great things in the future!

—Reilly

Moon Song's Song

Waking to the moon's song,
just as she
lulled me to sleep
Before.

I Would
Want to
give you everything
the moon gives me.

Of shadow and light
Of all that comes in between.

When the sun swells and
the moon shuts down, falling into broken sky.

Tempting, but

I'm a bad liar and

You are good at hiding behind that crescent
when it shows.

Maybe I am the dog at your door

Maybe I am the bird.

kaleidoscope

and suddenly
I see rainbows of light everywhere
mosaics letting people inside
their art
collages
clutter that's comfy,
not too much.
and I see soft love everywhere
—not broken hearts—
broken people healing,
kaleidoscopes of light
—spinning—
yearning
loving
not aching.

GWEN PARICH

Gwen is by far one of the most talented writers I have ever seen. They are a master of vivid imagery, emotional storytelling, and creative word play (no pun intended). I have had so much fun working with Gwen and discussing their absolutely stellar work. Gwen will surely be a rising star in the English department and I am eternally grateful to be part of that journey.

—Angel

“Mom, I’m sorry.”

The car tears down the road, kicking up gravel; the sole of my shoe forces the gas down. A lump forms in my throat, and aching tears well. My stomach curdles; sweat leaks from the creases of my palms. Familiarity is lost; I am living my once wildish dream, now a hellish reality. This isn't the first time I have left, nor will it be the last. Guilt thrusts open a fleshy, oozing wound. I am betrayed by the only choice I am offered. The silver-plated spoon tarnishes and rusts as it is thrust down my throat. I have never been angrier at a person. I have never felt pity like this. Her soft eyes formed under years of a forced fawn response. Unable to escape the clubbed thumb of a man who wanted a silent housewife. Slowly suffering. Only to cope by slowly poisoning herself, while her crippled spawn watch in silent acceptance; unable to break through the sunk cost fallacy. I look at this shell of a person, my eyes tarnished by her words, spilling over with sympathy. Watching your creator drown in their own agony. I can't help but plead, beg for it to stop. For her suffering to parish. To cut the leech that sucks at her thigh, draining her of love, softness, and heart. *Oh*, I watch him take all her worth. Leaving her dried-up crackling corpse fallen over a computer.

Before she was a surrogate for others' desires, she was once sleeping in a womb of her own embryonic fluid. Unknown to the world, existing. A pile of pale clay she was, molded by the mistakes of an overbearing mother, and a father who only loved the idea of her. Some place in time, the place of a woman was crafted below everything else. The generational curse of womanhood now infused into every uterus. Her mother's mother's mother, her mother's mother, now she. Her mind is set in stone, a choice she didn't mean to make, from childhood bedroom to marriage. *Oh*, A false dream to be embedded, of a small girl who wants to be a mother, to be different than hers and hers before.

A ruthless toddler biting at her ankles. An infant spooned in her arm, softly crying. Dishes in the sink, laundry piled on the edge of a bed. *Oh*, how she had made a choice, how she let the monster from under her bed climb and feed. How she struggled, how he weaponized his incompetence. How the fighting would start, and her ability to hold a thought of her own died. My eyes crafted at the edge of a table of empty seats, nights shivering in my room, and paralyzing fear that the monster was not under my bed, but in the very fabric of my DNA. You know she would flee if not for her children. She tried once, but her life was tangled in his wild bush of buckthorn. He was not about to lose his second maid, his second toy to manipulate and abuse. *Oh*, how she fell for the age-old trick. *Oh*, how she dropped the next generation into a pit of fiery tar. *Oh*, how she let her eggs rot.

I now speed away to a place just far enough where he won't bother me. The love I feel is a trauma response. I fawn like my mother. I yell like him. I have seen unthinkable things, heard words that branded my skin. The silver-plated spoon now held to my throat, a weapon to keep me in place. To keep my hair long, and dresses short. To keep my words "lady-like," and my pants a size 0. I envy that small deer hidden in a pile of grass waiting for the love of its mother. My heart cries out after her, because the only thing that holds us together is my ability to please her. A sadness, an anger, and a burden. She was not meant for motherhood; she was playing a part she had been groomed for. *Oh*, I cherish her for all she did and am indignant for all that she let slip through the cracks.

Her eyes opened, an opportunity for her to leave. Her job brought her across oceans, to a place where she could escape from the hell she had created. A land of indulgence and forgetfulness. She ignored the ringing phone; she ignored the cries. Still a child myself, I was toe to toe with the beast. I could see its rough skin and thick hair. My teary eyes pondered up at him as I took the beatings for her; his anger never subsided when she was gone. His property had abandoned him. I begged her to come back, sobbing over the phone, unable to escape his rath. When she did return, she wasn't the same, she was no longer present. Her mind filled with the joys of a world outside of us and our burden on her became clear. It was a horror story waiting for a happy ending. A nightmare that you didn't get to wake from. *Oh*, a painful knife in your chest, pounding with your body, as gushes of blood splatter the walls of her white picket fence dream.

In another world, I do not exist, but she gets to live. She picks up her bag and waves goodbye to her small purebred dog. She smells of vanilla and tobacco. Her clothes reflect her confidence with clean-pressed pants and high-fashion tops. She has no doubt in her mind that she's anything but perfect. She does not talk to parents. As she is concerned, Wisconsin is just a place of cold and suffering. Her heart belongs to the world and all of its beauties. She has found a life around the globe, and no matter what country or work trip she is on, she is never alone. She enjoys the simple things. An overpriced cocktail, a good sale online, a clean car; maybe she even dabbles in a spin class or two on the weekends. Her money is all her own. The hours she spends over the computer reward her with fulfillment. Her eyes glisten with hope. She would never meet him, or if she did, she took off her rose-colored glasses and saw the mess. She never married him or bore children that he immediately resented. She never felt sorry for leaving, nor did she look back. *Oh*, the world kept spinning, her heart full, life together, the burden of a family lifted.

ABBY PAULSEN

Abby is so creative, and she brings amazing poetry in every week! Her work is such an enjoyment to read and work on; her vibe and energy always makes our appointments feel productive and fun! It has been a pleasure to work with her this semester and watch her and her poetry grow!

—Mydasia

my sweet indigo hues

nothing could deprive me of my sweet indigo hues.

I can lie awake and admire the midnight sun,

or pretend I'm drunk deep in the sea

beneath the air we breathe—

I can hold you close behind shut eyes,

you're never far away.

still, some night ache

each second that you don't lay with me,

thunder cries for us

its tears spill onto my windowsill,

the breeze begs me to remember your scent

and the clouds in the heaven's night blend

to make the sky a little more indigo.

with peace closer in mind,

I shut my eyes ever so softly

so I can feel your butterfly kisses

on my cheeks once more—

that can be enough.

tea with weeds

i love skipping stones,
and seeing the ripples when you smile,
the lake dances gently with us, all is settled.

i love picking the stems off of dandelions,
and making tea with your weeds and drinking chamomile,
i love repairing bruises you've dared and laying for a while.

in my arms, you can share the life you've lived,
and together, we'll heal old wounds and learn to forgive.

a letter to a bud

TW: sexual assault

oh, dear iris,

i'm sorry you had blossomed early,
they dug their fingers into your dirty pot,
left their oils seeping into your soils,
your spinal stem left twisted and arched.

i'm sorry you can't escape your roots,
had they not penetrated them
so far into the ground,
the trauma left running through your earthy veins.

i'm sorry you will blossom again next spring,
they will come tug at your purple petals,
they will drag your roots into their home
into that bedroom
and display you.

i'm sorry you cannot help being desired.

with aching love,
the crocus

SAMANTHA PETERSON

Sam has blown me away this semester with her poetry. Week after week she brings in incredible poetry that digs right into the core. She began our time together unsure of her abilities and as we met, her confidence in her “Notes app poetry” grew. It was incredible to see her growth in the past semester and I look forward to seeing where she goes next.

—Kacey

Another World

I wish for a life that I cannot grasp
To do things that are impossible
Living a life equal to that of a book

That’s the life I wish to live
One with dragons
And magic
A world of mystery
And wonder

Filled with mystical beings
And quests that lead me
To dark forests
And floating islands
Containing creatures that only exist in our Dreams

I feel like I am meant for a greater life
A life that’s worthy of an author’s imagination
An artist’s touch

It makes me ill
Knowing I will never
Ride a dragon
Feeling the wind and their strong back
Fight a knight
With a longsword and courage
Practice magic
To heal my comrades and fell my foes

I will never experience
The wonders
Of a fantasy world

But that's all it is—
Fantasy
Because it can never happen

Only in my dreams
Only in my imagination
I can only wish

So I will stick to my books
And my films
And my games
Because that's all I have

The only way
To live an unattainable life
Is by dreaming of one
And wishing
I was somewhere else

Stripped

How can you claim we are equal
When you treat us as opposites
You strip us of rights we fought for
A right to our bodies
A right man has had for centuries.

What makes us different?
We have your children
We slave away in your homes...
We slave...
We are the slaves...
To our husbands
To our families
To our countries

They see us as nothing but baby makers
Something to breed.
They can't see us as humans
If they only see breeding stock.

I will give them something to see.
A sight no man will expect,
Their cities aflame with the anger
Of the women
Who have had their rights stripped
Along with their bodies
Over and over again

They will say we are weak
They will say our purpose is to carry life
And just that
But let these very wombs that brought you into this world
Take you right out
Stripped
Of *your* rights
And *your* lives

Because we are far more than something
For you to breed
We are aching for that moment
When you try to enslave us once again
And we will fight back

With the anger of a thousand generations
Because you stole our lives
And we will get them back
At any cost
And you,
man.
Will weep for your lives
Just as we have.

Not My god

I am angry.
People are dying
And they don't help.
We will pray for you

Prayers haven't fixed shit.
War is still raging
People are still starving
The earth is still dying

God is not forgiving.
And most importantly
God is *not* good
And never has been

Eve ate the apple,
And in turn
God damned every woman to be born
To pain
To suffering
To a bloody life.
Because he does not forgive
He hates and
He avenges

He killed almost everyone on the planet
Simply because he could
Leaving them to drown
Wondering what all-powerful being
Had abandoned them.

He has left millions to die
From natural disasters
Illnesses
War

People claim he was taking them
for a greater purpose but
What purpose is greater than life?

I'm told
"Accept god before it's too late"
If not worshipping a killer
Means I will be damned
Let me be damned
Like my sisters before me

My sisters who were too intelligent
And sank to the bottom of a river
My sisters who protected themselves
And their *own* bodies
Let me be damned
Because I will gladly rot
With the others he has wronged.

If god exists,
I want nothing to do with him.
With his hate
With his evil.
Because any god that promotes
Harm
Killing and
Suffering
Is not a god worthy of worship.

LEO POSKOZIM

Working with Leo has been such a blast. His imagination is incredible and has led to some very interesting sessions. Not only has he been open and receptive to new input, but also *very* tolerant of my *even verier* sloppy handwriting when writing things down. I wish him nothing but the best with any project he pursues!

—Sam

Untitled

I wonder what my dog thinks when I leave.
Does he think his favorite person died
When I get into the car? He always mourns
For a few days. He paces through the night,
A member of his flock, a piece of him
Is gone. He howls like a cantor
At a funeral in his own mind.

Perhaps that's why he's so happy
When he sees me. Each return
A rising from the dead.
Does he forget about me?
Or does the pain just fade away?
How long does it take?

Does he hear Italian on the breeze?
Does he sit when my mother gently muses
Over a recipe? Or has he already forgotten the
Commands I worked so hard to teach him?
Mi ragazzo, mi fagiolo, mi bambino.



KATIE SCHEDER

One of Katie's biggest strengths as a tutor, writer, and leader is their ability to come up with ideas and solutions for almost any problem. This semester, I've seen Katie become more confident in themself, and it's been so incredible to watch. I'm so proud of everything they've done this semester, both inside and outside of the TLC, and I'm so grateful to work with such an amazing person <3

—Reilly

The Prince and His Castle

TW: child neglect, suicide

Presley's face reflected the colors of the setting sun: the pinks, oranges, purples. He gazed at the window from inside the top floor, appearing to look out at the lawn. Beyond, the old, red swing set swayed in the heavy wind, making his wooden house creak with each wave. It started to blend into the background as the day faded away—everything becoming black. With only one overhead light for the upstairs, the room became more and more dim as daylight left. Presley stood as the divide between the light and the shadows that crept behind him.

Presley's son chattered on to himself in the background. The son, Wes, continued to build with his blocks even without his dad's attention. Some were chipped and worn, and they looked like they've been repainted haphazardly—not that Wes paid that any mind. He was building a castle. The color from the cubes drained as the shadows grew and the castle became more and more unsteady with each block added. Wes' castle clattered to the ground, and he cried; tears rolled down his cheeks and snot dripped.

Presley continued to stare at the window while his son cried in the background—cries the same as a box fan to the father. He sighed the sigh of someone so exhausted they could barely stand, turning to face his boy. He looked beyond Wes, towards the mess that his failed creation left. Presley sighed again as he dropped to his knees and rumbled, “Stop crying.”

Wes' lips quivered with effort, trying to obey his father's command. He hiccupped, “My pretty castle died. It's dark and broken.”

“So what? Get over it,” Presley paused for a moment. “Everything dies, Wesley.”

Wes' cries began anew. This time with slightly less fervor, but they echoed in the small space and made Presley's head pound. They stopped as quickly as they started as Wes realized himself under his father's shadow.

“Let's go downstairs,” Presley walked out, leaving Wes in the darkened room.

Wes stared at his back as he walked down the stairs. He frowned and tears welled in his eyes once again, whispering, “Okay, Daddy,” then began after him.

When Wes finally made it down the staircase, his father was already sitting in the worn, brown recliner watching his nightly show. He didn't turn his head to look when he heard the creaky stairs, his focus solely on the TV. The lights flickered on his face. Presley lifted a bottle of beer to his lips and put it down on top of a picture frame that laid on the end table next to the chair. A slight stain and indent on the back could be seen. Wes went to go sit on the floor.

Presley turned the TV off, his eyes started back at himself in the dark reflection. “Go play

outside.”

Wes stood still, blinking. He stuttered, “But it’s dark out.”

“Get over it.”

Wes took hesitant steps towards the front door. He passed by his father’s recliner slowly, as if waiting. Before he reached the door, Wes grabbed the flashlight that they kept in the entryway in case of a blown fuse. “Bye, Daddy,” he stopped for a response: silence. “See you later,” and he walked out. On the other side of the door, Wes turned on his flashlight which broke through the darkness—highlighting the red swing set in the semi-dark. He trekked towards the swings to play. Wes’ head was on a swivel, snapping like lightning towards any noise he couldn’t see; every step laced with trepidation.

Finally, Wes made it to the swings. He grabbed onto the chain that was holding the seat, switched off his flashlight, and climbed onto the swing—turning himself towards the house. Wes sat still in the dark, goosebumps forming on his arms in the warm wind. The seat next to him swayed. He felt no need to swing himself. Watching the house, Wes noticed the light swinging in the attic where his fallen castle lay.

Wes sat there for a long time: waiting. There was no call from his father to come inside—not that Wes expected it. Eventually, he got up and started towards the house with his light.

When Wes came in, he placed the flashlight down where he got it. There was no sign of his father. His recliner sat there empty; Wes walked over and jumped onto it. Wes looked at the TV just like his father would—seeing his reflection in the screen. He turned towards the frame and noticed the bottle was moved. Wes’ curiosity overtook him. Reaching his hand out, he felt a little guilty, like he was committing some crime. He had never seen the picture before. He turned it over anyway.

Wesley could see himself, his father, and a woman he didn’t recognize. Wes was smiling bigger than any other time he could remember. Presley’s little grin finally reached his eyes. Wes put the frame down quickly like it burned him and glanced around the room: waiting.

There was nothing.

“Daddy?” Wes called out. It echoed in the empty house. “Daddy, where are you?” He began to panic. He begged, “Please, I’m scared.” Frantically looking around, he began searching the first floor in a desperate haze. He finally reached the stairs leading up; the only place he hadn’t scoured. Wes stared at the hill in front of him, remembering the light that was swinging while he sat outside. He grabbed onto the rail that he ignored on his way down and started up the stairs.

“Daddy?” he called again. The stairs groaned. He continued step by step until he reached the landing, his hand dragging and squeaking on the wooden railing along the way. The door to the castle room was partially open as Wes reached out to push it open.

When the door opened fully, Wes saw his father hanging from the rafters of the attic. A stool that usually sat in the corner was kicked over underneath Presley’s feet. There was a slight smile Wes couldn’t see stuck on Presley’s purple face. The light stood between father and son, and Wesley stood in his shadow.

I'm Pomegranate.

I'm pomegranate.
A rich, heavy red that borders on purple.
I'm the seeds that consume half the fruit
and burst on fingers.
Staining skin and clothes with no remorse.

I made a new friend today, his name is Horace.
I wonder if I'll infect him
with my pomegranate juice,
and he'll be dyed bloody forever.
A disguise of sustenance unveiled to be poison.

Until he—like they all do—washes his hands
and crimson clothes
free of me.

They expect vibrant orange juice, the one with pulp;
or an earthy clay-brown that creates;
or the cloudy sky's deep blue-grey.

Yet I'll fester in his stomach
as my seeds grip with their developing roots
and intertwine with his intestines.

Work in Progress

Maybe there's something to be said for
the murmuring of my heart as it eaves-
drops on my mind, a cacophony of
cranes that did not fly south for the
Wisconsin winter and grew to love the
cold—the bleak blank canvas that bleeds
to be heard, that beats to the rhythm of
the roots that intertwine like lovers who
feel this is their last hello.

A child's frown echoes in my eyelids and
escapes out of my tears, stuck in my
lashes until I emerge numb to the noisy
whining of my soul—the lone loon loops
around the lake and breathes still air
into somber sighs.

To *Be*

To be or not to be, that is the question;

Except, what does that even mean?

Does it mean you know that suffocating feeling?

The feeling where your arms are heavy static?

But they start to move

your feet start to walk forward of their own accord

you ever feel like that's your life?

Like someone decided how you'd function

before you took your first breath?

somehow

like sleepwalking

How do I describe the overwhelming feeling that I am not

in control of my own life because there was something predetermined

inside of me that decides everything for me?

It forces me into a mold that I cannot

escape from, that I

follow at every turn.

But it's you

unintentionally

it always has been.

How can I possibly believe in being

one of the only things

I'm living for

if this is how I feel?

I merely want 'to be',

but my brain thinks these things

Instead, I have to think and think and think

it doesn't even feel like my own ideas

they're from somewhere else

doesn't let me be.

all the time

someone else.

I just want to *be*.

KACEY SCHMIDT

Though I wasn't Kacey's tutor this semester, I had the privilege of being a student manager with her, and I have seen all of the time and effort she's put into the TLC. Kacey has so many new, innovative ideas when it comes to writing critique, and I'm always impressed with her tutoring. Working with Kacey in any capacity is guaranteed to be successful and fun, and I'm so happy to work with someone so great <3

—Reilly

The Suit

Guillermo came down the dusty road that led to one of Virginia's older graveyards, a wooden handled spade slung against his scrawny shoulder. Sun glinted against the dulled metal, spraying light against his knapsack and tattered shoes. A High-Vis vest crossed over his chest, holding some stolen authority from his father's old work truck. He had walked for miles, his shoulder already beginning to ache under the weight of his tool. His father had told him once that he would fill out in time, but his father was a drunk bear of a man, and Guillermo had little hope in anything the man promised. His boot kicked against the road, scattering debris against the sunlight in speckles of dirt and dust. The stones in the yard became clearer as he approached, the forgotten names began to take shape. He reminded himself of why he stood before the crumbling church and flock of dead parishioners.

His father was going to die.

Guillermo was also in the market for a new suit.

These facts were inherently connected, his father's liver had finally had enough and turned against him. Decades at the bottom of the bottle turned his father from an angry fighter to a rotund shell of a man. His mother wanted him to have something nice for the funeral to show that the Sanchez men still had some respect and upstanding. She'd given him a handful of bills to get one second-hand. Guillermo knew the little money he now possessed was better spent on some new tapes or toy cars for his little brothers.

The rusted gate squawked into the silence as he pushed through. The flashlight clipped against his belt loop clanged against the iron fixture, piercing the silence that fell around the abandoned space. Silence in daylight is unnerving, no birds came within a mile radius of the church, bugs that normally swarmed slowly in the day disappeared, no cars flew past down the dirt road. Silence.

The old church stood tall at his side, casting a towering gaze over Guillermo as if it knew what he planned to do. The Cross perched at the top, crouched like a crow with its wings outstretched and beak pointed towards the sky. He expected it to shriek before taking off into the sun but it stood there unmoving.

In the harsh daylight, Guillermo walked through the rows of graves making out names of long dead men. It gave him a sense of pride, to walk over the graves of men who would have disregarded Guillermo and his tattered sweatshirts. He decided if he was going to take a suit from a dead man, he'd take one from the richest man in the yard, leaving him naked and cold in his abandoned grave. Your money couldn't do shit now, old man.

He paced the back row of the cemetery, he wouldn't have to refill the grave if it was all the way back here. He read the names off under his breath, looking for one that seemed especially evil and especially wealthy.

Ellison Brown 1879, John Wilson 1894, Samuel Jones 1902,
Credence Montgomery 1957

Bingo.

That was a man who had dignity, power, and so much money he could swim in it. His headstone stood tall against the sky formed from sun-baked white marble.

Guillermo wanted *his* suit.

He unclipped the flashlight and placed it upon Credence's headstone for safekeeping once the day got dark and set upon his mission. His rusty spade cut through the dry grass and he began to dig. The dirt came up with a stubbornness that was matched by his own determination to unearth the ratted suit he would wear to his father's funeral. He hoped it would be a light gray, perhaps a powder blue, anything to show the dirt and decay that still clung to it. He wanted his father to see him from above his casket caked in death as if Guillermo was the one who had died. His father enjoyed having the attention on himself and Guillermo wanted so badly to take that final moment from him. He would enjoy that greatly.

Guillermo continued to dig, cutting worms and roots in half as he hoisted the earth into the air, tossing it down behind him. The mountain of earth climbed as his back began to ache and his neck began to sweat, higher and higher and higher. The dirt clung to his shoes and to his arms, caking to his brow and exposed hands. His sweat mixed with the soil and bled down his body, returning to the ground, saturated with salt. With every upheaval, decapitated roots and silt floated back to the earth. Tiny sacrifices against the greater mission.

The sun began to fall out of the sky, the light draining from the wide expanse above him. Shadows reached across the grass to tug at his shoestrings and ruffle his hair. This was the first time Guillermo's right forearm gave out, the dirt tumbling back down into the grave to recover Credence's dignity. Rolling up his dirty sleeves, he got back to work fighting the earth. It felt good to burn, each lift of his shovel above his head tore at his muscles. His pubescent shoulders turned against themselves, shredding themselves in the effort. The decaying church pushed heavy against the earth, weighing down the soil around it. Sweat dripped down his back before turning to ice when the nightly wind blew through his threadbare jacket.

The hill beside him grew the further he dug down, climbing with uprooted earth and forced perspective. It wasn't until Guillermo broke out of his grave-digging trace that he found the church no longer loomed over him, strategically hidden by the heap of damp dirt, dead worms and yellowed grass. The beak of the cross poked through the mound, a suffocating bird attempting to breathe once more before succumbing to the death that awaited it.

Guillermo tossed on another shovel of dirt.

It wasn't until the edges of dusk began to creep in that the spade finally clunked against something hollow, rotted wood gave way to the inner pressed metal of the once ornate casket. The wet soil corroded the shiny black coating to a dull silver, small holes bored into the steel from tiny claws and strong tree roots. Nature had begun to reclaim her kin, riches be damned.

Dying afternoon light turned orange, shining down on Guillermo's sweat-soaked hair. This was the moment he'd been waiting for. With a reclaimed fervor, his arms worked to clear

as much of the dirt from the waiting box. The shovel scraped against the rust and the sweet sound of metal on metal became the horns of Heaven, welcoming Guillermo into his future.

“What are you doing young man?” a brokenly stern voice called out. “Are you digging where you aren’t supposed to?”

Shit

Guillermo dropped the spade with a resounding clatter and spun to face the elderly voice. An old woman stood over a headstone four gravesites down, her spine curved over the cane she used to keep herself upright. Her spindly fingers clamped down on the headstone as she began to question him further.

“What are you doing in that poor man’s grave,”

Dammit, was he poor? Guillermo didn’t want a poor man’s suit

“You’re just digging him up for no good reason? What, did he commit a crime or something? That’s usually why they dig people up, according to the television set.”

“Ah,” Guillermo managed to get out. Smooth

“Oh, do you speak English? Is that insensitive? I don’t mean to be insensitive but that would make this conversation very difficult.” she sighed, hobbling over to Guillermo’s pile of dirt.

This would have been much easier if Guillermo had spent more time around his Spanish speaking uncles, scratch that, tíos. “Ah, solo hablo a little bit of Español,” he worked out. Damn his mom for not teaching him Spanish. “Yeah, es un criminal, getting los fingerprints” he waved his fingers for emphasis. God his grandmother would kill him.

“I see, well I hope something good comes from it. I would hate to see someone not get justice.” she bent down so far over the hole to place a hand on his shoulder he was worried she might fall in with him. “Thank you for your service” with that, she hobbled back over to her original gravemarker, placed a kiss on the top of the stone with her shriveled fingertips, and made her way back to the iron gate.

Well that settles that.

Guillermo bent down and dug his fingers into the seam of the casket, steeling himself for the incoming stench of death. Using the little strength left in his arms, he pulled the top half from the rest of the box. A single finger pressed into the seal to break the vacuum that held for the greater part of the last century, a slightly sweet rotting smell broke from the case before he got a glimpse of the contents. Overwhelming Guillermo’s senses, he let the lid drop back down and heaved over the side of the hole, barely tall enough to reach over the edge. Coughing and sputtering, he spit into the grass to rid his mouth of the remaining scent. Guillermo pulled the edge of his shirt over his nose in a futile attempt to block out the odor. Preparing himself for another whiff of Credence, he lifted the lid of the casket to finally meet the man who wore his new suit.

He was disfigured, that was the first thing Guillermo noticed, his lips mashed together strung up with string and his eyes melted into his skull. Skin hung off the peaks of his cheeks in long filets and long brown grey hair fell around the head like a halo of dead thistles. The meat of his cheeks clung to the bone, desperate to keep the body in a lifelike state. An ear had slid down the side of his face and lie against the satin pillow. If Guillermo squinted and tilted his head, he could imagine what he once looked like, a strong, confident man.

His suit was a dusky brown with brass buttons leading down into his covered legs.

Guillermo could do worse.

He tried to come up with a game plan, how would he lift this man without ruining his suit? He began with the buttons, undoing each one with one hand working his way down. The aged fabric fell away from the middle, exposing the white shirt that contained the bloated body. It was soaked then dried in a pink liquid, leaving it stained and stiff. The inside lining of the coat was stained in spots, but would probably come out with enough borax. Guillermo attempted to pull the shoulder of the jacket down over the right arm, having to drop his hand from his shirt inviting the smells back into his nose. The bones creaked as he pulled the sleeve down the dead limb, the joints tight and unwilling to be undressed. He forced the jacket off the man, seams tearing at the shoulder and elbow. Oh well, it wasn't as if he would wear it much after his father's funeral.

With renewed excitement, Guillermo yanked the opposite arm free. Fabric began to fray and rip in the wrong places. The weight of the body pinned the back of the jacket, but not hard enough to dissuade Guillermo from claiming his prize. With another sharp pull, it broke free from its decades-long position. It was Guillermo's now!

Checking that he was alone, he poked his head above the hole, head swiveling around the still abandoned yard. The sun began to dip, casting red rays against the trees and stone church. In the sunlight, the suit morphed into a deep chocolate brown and the buttons gleamed under its gaze. Guillermo threw the jacket over the side of the grave for safekeeping and it fell stiffly against the ground.

Now for the pants.

Guillermo balanced himself on the sides of the casket, one foot on the edge, the other placed above the rotting skull of Credence with the top lid propped open with Guillermo's knee. He carefully leaned over to lift the bottom half of the lid, exposing the matching pants and dulled shoes that looked too large for Guillermo's own teenaged feet. No matter, he could just wear his current pair of shoes with holes near the left toe. He shuffled along the side of the casket, feet along the rim, holding himself up with the lid as leverage. The horror of decay was hidden away by the pants but nothing could hide the stench. Guillermo pushed through and reached with one hand to remove the shoes. He pulled from the back of the foot, revealing skeletal feet covered with now-loose black socks. He placed the shoes next to the legs where they would fit and pulled the button of the pants out of its hole and fuddled with one hand to unlatch the clasp. He quickly found that removing the pants of another person was infinitely harder than unbuttoning his own. He wiggled and pinched the fabric until it finally gave way and left only the zipper. With a quick snag, the pants were undone. Guillermo averted his gaze from the ends of the shirt that barely covered the small amount of flesh left beneath the long white shorts. He alternately tugged at the sides of the pants until they worked themselves down the wiry thighs and half exposed kneecaps. The pant legs bunched at the calves where Guillermo pulled the bottom hem over his dead feet.

He had the suit.

Guillermo had a suit.

Guillermo had a suit that he had stolen from a very rich man that he planned to wear to his father's funeral.

Hell yeah.

He threw the pants with the jacket and climbed out of the hole, kicking dirt back into the

hole as he scrambled to lift himself out. He stood on the edge, looking down to Credence. The top half of the lid had thumped back down while the bottom half stood up in place with rusted hinges, exposing the man's underwear, socks, garters, and bony, fleshy legs. Guillermo was satisfied with his work. The sun sunk against the treeline, casting the sky in purples and deep pinks. A mosaic of colors sunk into the stones of the disheveled church. He'd done it.

With a moment of hesitation, Guillermo pulled the jacket over his own, letting it sit against his shoulders for a moment. The sleeves hung over his hands, drowning his small frame in corduroy. He felt strong, he felt tall. He felt cool as shit. He let the satisfaction settle into his bones before he gently pulled on the pants over his jeans, he whispered encouragement to the pants when they got snagged and thanked them when they finally settled on his thin hips. He would need a belt, but they fit well enough. This was his moment, nothing could bring him down now.

He grabbed his flashlight, rucksack and his spade slung over his shoulder with a new-found confidence. In the waning light, he walked out of the churchyard, slamming the gate shut with a loud shutter. He pulled his headset out of his pack and plugged it into his player and pressed play on his Paranoid tape and cranked it. If he had to walk home, he'd go home in style. Guillermo strutted down the center of the darkened street, the sun gone over the horizon with just enough light left to navigate home just in time to see his father die of liver failure.

The screen door rattled against the frame behind him alerting the rest of the family of his presence. He stood in the doorway, facing his family members who stood around his frail dying father wrapped in an old tiger blanket that was beginning to fray. The suit hung down around his shoulders, obscuring his blistered hands, and stuck to his back with sweat and dead man fluids. The High-Vis vest peaked out from under the brown fabric and his big toe stuck out from a hole in his sneaker. A gasp from his mother filled the living room as the smell of death wafted in a cloud around the suit. Guillermo hoped the smell would help his father remember what he had yet to do. The room began to mumble and shake in slow realization of Guillermo's attire.

Guillermo had himself a new suit.

MAKENNA SPRINKLE

Makenna creates worlds unlike any I've read before. Her short fiction is so captivating and fun to read, I can't wait to see what it becomes! Makenna is always open to discussing her work and asking questions, traits that make working with her so enjoyable. I look forward to our sessions every week and I'm so proud of her growth throughout the semester!

—Mydasia

Untitled

Lizzy's head is pounding. She closes her copy of Plato's Entire Works and pushes the book away. The headaches are becoming more frequent and her Philosophy homework is doing her no favors. She clicks off the desk lamp that illuminated her reading, sighing contentedly when the pressure behind her eyes lifts slightly at the ensuing darkness. It's late, and a look over her shoulder to the small clock on her nightstand shows it's 11:42 p.m. Not yet feeling tired enough to go to bed, Lizzy heads downstairs.

When she feels stressed from college or lost in her mind, she finds comfort by either writing in her journal or playing the piano. Her memory hasn't been the best since the accident so she started keeping a journal to write down things she doesn't want to forget. It normally ends up as only a summary of what happened that day, but it's important to her nonetheless.

Apart from the journal, gliding her fingers along the ivory keys of the grand piano never fails to calm her mind. As Lizzy carefully makes her way down the wide staircase to the living room of the DeMeun mansion, she smells a strange sort of metallic, rusty odor. Weird, Lizzy thinks. She ignores it as she continues to walk towards the old grand piano sitting atop the raised platform in the living room.

The metallic smell becomes more prominent as she sits down on the hard wooden bench in front of the piano. Still, she ignores it and begins to press down on the keys, attempting to produce the familiar tune of *Clair de Lune*. But, as she plays the first few notes, they sound strangely muted. Confused, Lizzy tries again and this time a thick, dark liquid begins to ooze from the top of the keys and onto her hands. She pushes back from the piano in bewilderment, rubbing the liquid between her fingers. She briefly wonders if maybe it's some grease or wood polish that somehow got into the keys. But that doesn't make sense. Pianos don't need to be greased, and the wood doesn't need polishing for a while yet. That, and the liquid is red.

Oh god, she thought.

Blood...it's blood.

Slowly standing up from the bench, she peers over the music shelf that previously obscured her view inside the piano. She has to squint to see through the darkness in the living room. And there, she sees something she knows will haunt her dreams for years to come. It's the gruesome sight of the mangled and dismembered body of her step father, Daryl, shoved inside the body of the piano and underneath the strings. Horrified, she backs away and turns just in time to throw up into a potted plant beside her.

She would scream if she could. Instead, she runs back upstairs, hurriedly trying to get to her mother, whom she vaguely recalls is working in the study. Lizzy bursts into the room, the

door slamming hard against the wall. Maria DeMeun looks up from her computer to see her daughter staring at her with wide eyes and tears streaming down her face.

“Lizzy? Honey, what’s wrong?” Maria asks. Lizzy tries her hardest to explain to her mother what she’d seen, but is ultimately unable to. She often forgot about her own inability to speak, which frustrated her to no end. Maria understood, knowing of this. After the car accident, Lizzy had returned home from the hospital mute as a result of the brain trauma, and in a wheelchair, needing six months of rehabilitation for her leg. Now though, a year and a half later, her physical injuries have healed, but her voice never returned.

Forgoing words, Lizzy rushes over to her mother and begins pulling her arm up and towards her, trying to get her mother to follow her down to the piano. Once at the bottom of the stairs, Lizzy frantically points in the direction of the living room and moves forward, mother in tow. Once in view of the body of her fiancé, Maria cries out and covers her mouth in shock.

“Liz come here, don’t look at that.” Maria grabs her daughter, turning Lizzy towards her own body to face away from the horrid sight in front of them. With shaking hands, Maria pulls the phone out from her back pocket and dials 911.

SARAH WINCHELL

Sarah is an immensely gifted writer who always comes prepared to discuss some element of literature; when we do, you can plainly see the love and dedication she reserves for writing. Though her obsession with Fitzgerald goes beyond admiration at times, Sarah is always looking to learn from others as a way to grow. Getting out of her comfort zone and trying something new is not a chore, but a representation of how much she cares about her craft. It was a privilege to read her work this semester and I have no doubt that one day I will be purchasing her novel.

—Anna

I.

I have dressed the bars of my prison,
Adorned them with letters, writings,
paintings, sketches, and peonies—
Please, hide the metal glimmer!
Perfume the iron smell!
Soften the concrete floors with pillows!
For now,
Let me believe in this façade,
Let its beauty distract and deceive me,
Until I can be free
And build my own home.

II.

My heart is a deep lake,
Swelling with life and death.
Who will traverse my murky waters?
Who will dive into my depths and
make myself known?
But, oh, to be known!
One will find the skeletons I bury in the mud,
Skull by bone rotting beneath buried earth.
One will find poisonous waters, unfit for life—

Is this what I want?
No, it must be what another desires.
A swimmer, who will delight in my shadowy depths,
One who will challenge my vastness,
One who will enlighten my waters
with vitality and vivacity.
One who will become fluid with my movement,
One who will unite itself with my sufferings
and who will challenge my verities.
Swim long and deep, swim high and shallow,
dear swimmer and my Lord!
One of flesh and fish, without you I am no longer a birthplace
of life,
But only a denizen to the bedside of death
and destruction.

MYDASIA ZIPPERER

This was Mydasias first semester working in the TLC, and I'm so proud of how much she's grown as a writer and as a tutor. She puts so much care into every piece she works on in order to make it the best it can be. She is such a strong addition to our staff and to the space, and I can't wait to see what she does next!!

—Reilly

ode to my dance teacher

I think about all of the people
with music in their ears
and paint on their fingertips
and musical notes in their throats

and the rest of the people
who create movement
and leave it all out there
to be free

freedom to push boundaries
and fly across a stage
to spin and throw themselves
even when they can't see where they're landing

as you would scream at me
tell me I'm not good enough
when you would tell me
"Nobody wants to see a fat dancer"

the lines where ballet bars end and
vocal ammunition would start firing
I can't see but I would hear you yell
"Stop the music"

like a bullet charging towards a deer
you would approach and shoot me down
broken and bruised worse than
any injury could leave me

and as my clothes dampened from sweat
you would make sure I knew about
how everyone around me wore a size smaller

and how I was too big

too big for that costume
too big for that space
too big of a target
too big for you to understand

and as Tuesdays became my least favorite day
because I had to see you
I lived in fear of next week
because Tuesdays never stop coming

and after a while I knew where I was landing
and I could feel the floor beneath me
and I was grounded and even when you tried
to uproot me

I always finished the dance

I Feel As Though I Love Being A Woman

I feel as though I love being a woman—

Being able to buy a dress

Being able to run my hands through my hair after a fresh cut

Being able to contour my body to be perfect

I feel as though I am meant to be thankful I am a woman—

Thankful I can be a mother if I want

Thankful I can have a job

Thankful I can vote

I feel as though I am loved as a woman—

Loved to be told I am too ugly or too fat

Loved to be told I am not good enough

Loved to be told that honesty is the best policy

I feel as though I am to love other women—

To love them and be their support

To love them unconditionally because they understand

To love them even when they don't love me back

I feel as though I am safe as a woman—

Safe to walk with my friends

Safe to carry pepper spray when I walk

Safe to be afraid of my shadow and noises in the dark

I feel as though I have privilege as a woman—

Privilege to be loved by you

Privilege to let you touch me

Privilege to say the word "no" even though nobody listens

I feel as though I am proud as a woman—

To be proud of my mistakes

To be proud of myself

To be proud of being a woman

I feel that if I were a man I could do these things—

and not have to love or be thankful.

And if being a woman loved me

I feel as though I would love being a woman.

DAYTON ZUEHLKE

This semester with Dayton has been one of growth and exploration. Dayton began her semester with works of prose poetry about a variety of heartbreaking topics that amazed me with each new work. She's grown so much as a writer, both academically and creatively, this semester and I could not be prouder of all that she's accomplished this semester.

—Kacey

Beating Just for Him

Beating.

Her heart is racing like a car on a bustling highway, each beat reminding her of love's warm glow. Standing by the window, she watched the sunset turn the sky orange and pink, feeling a cozy happiness inside.

Love had a way of surprising her, like a sudden breeze that made her feel alive. She thought of the little moments: shy glances across the room, laughter over coffee, and sweet whispers shared at night. Each memory tied her heart closer to that special someone.

With every heartbeat, she felt excited about what tomorrow might bring; new adventures and quiet nights snuggled together. She remembered their first meeting, how everything else faded away, leaving just the spark between them. That spark grew into a bright flame, warming her heart every day.

As the sun set, she reflected on their journey together. There were ups and downs, times when love felt hard, but those moments only made their connection grow stronger. Trust held them together, like a sturdy anchor.

In the quiet evening, she closed her eyes and listened to her heart. It beat steadily, boom boom, boom boom; a reminder that love was always there, guiding her through life. She knew, deep down, that with each beat, she was exactly where she was meant to be. Her heart steadily beating just for...

Him.