

Wordplay



English '57 Series

Spring 2021 Collection

Acknowledgments

This collection is a vehicle for the incredible creativity of our writers, and I am so pleased to be a part of ensuring this opportunity is available for them. Thank you to all of the writers who have contributed their poetry and prose for this Spring 2021 Collection of *Wordplay*. Thank you for your dedication, and perseverance to keep writing.

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Poetry



Tess Kurschner

“It has been an amazing semester with Tess and I have had a lot of fun talking with her and getting to know her throughout our sessions. Tess is very passionate about writing with a unique style that I love to read. Many of her pieces are based on her own experiences or that of her friends, and Tess does a wonderful job in choosing her words to create beautiful imagery and invoke powerful emotions in the reader. I was excited to ask what she wanted to submit to Wordplay, and we looked at some of her pieces to decide which would fit well together. Throughout the semester, we have worked on finding the rhythm within her pieces and changing it up where she felt it didn’t flow well. Tess and I also came up with some writing exercises for when she wants to expand but finds herself stuck by looking at what she has, where she wants to go, and the different ways to get there. I am glad that I was able to get to know Tess, and I hope she never stops writing and continues to tell her stories.”

- Grace Dahl

Masterpiece Destroyed

Men take off women’s clothes as if it’s a flick of the brush. Art in the making, but they’re setting her aflame. Masterpiece destroyed and pages are burned. They aren’t creating anything. They are only ravaging what once was.

I never thought men could be artists, only conquerors of land and bodies alike. Claiming love only to rip them apart until they take what they need. Leaving behind broken bones and bruised souls. At least that was my experience.

I never thought that love was real after the life I had. Then I met him. He was an artist in his own right and he took the broken pieces of my soul and melded them back together. A mosaic of pain and heartbreak made with hope of being whole again. He was everything that I wasn’t but he made me want to become the best version of myself. He was almost too beautiful for words. Almost.

Radiant soul hidden behind his green eyes. I see glimpses of it in moments of ecstasy and that is my drug. Seeing that form of love and joy is more than I ever expected in a lifetime and I don’t want it to end.

Broken Vase

Blue and red lights flashed in the windows more than food touched our lips. Screams and shouts bounced off the walls and was my nightly lullaby. Instead of words of love and support, disgust and disappointment ricocheted in my ears. How I could be smarter and prettier and someone to be proud of. I was just a kid or I should have been. Instead, I was a keeper and support to the broken and my innocent spirit was dead longer than my memory can reach. The people supposed to be my guardians were wardens and the walls that were meant to protect me from the world were bars to my prison and I wasn't safe anywhere. Being told how no one loved me and never feeling protected broke me.

Now I look for that love in people like them. The ones who use my skin like an ashtray and my heart is thrown away-disposable. Men come and go using me and abusing me and my soul darkens every time. Again, my armor is still in place to protect my emotions from the world, but I'm shattered underneath. Still, I have hope. Hope that gold fills my cracks and makes me stronger inside as I try to be on the out.

I'm 21 years old now. I still continue to look for my mother in friends and my dad has been lost in the countless bodies of boys and men leaving me alone in my bed and thoughts. I know I should feel guilt, but I just feel numb.

The broken vases of my childhood dreams continue to be shattered over my head-the only thing I can do is pick up the pieces and walk out the door. Waiting and working for my next day to be better.

Stay Outside

After being broken...truly broken... it is nearly impossible to put yourself back together and if you do, that once strong person is fragile. The slightest breeze can knock you over and shattered on the floor seems like the place you belong. There is only so much superglue that can be used to put a person back together and pieces disappear every time.

She was a cataclysm and I tried to stay. I bolted myself to the floor and I was still ripped away. Night terrors and panic attacks filled the void you left and death loomed around every corner and tucked me into bed at night. Instead of listening to crickets and frogs, Death lay next to me whispering sweet nothings of taking me away from it all. Eventually, death took a backseat approach and let me live but I could still see her in my rearview mirror.

Learning to trust was harder than getting out of bed and that was nearly impossible. After two years I thought found someone worth trusting. She knew the stories and promised she wouldn't do the things that those in my past did. It was a lie. She was worse than a cataclysm...she was a black hole- destroying all who come inside.

Shattered Illusion

I was lost in the dark, stumbling over shards of glass. Leaving a bloody trail for you to find me.

Heart in hand you came to me but I thought you were an illusion and chose to stay, lost in the abyss. Dreaming of the day you would come like it hadn't already happened. Making you the savior who never came not the one who I pushed away.

Please come back, and don't leave me no matter how far I have fallen.

Pachia Moua

“I am very happy to have had the experience of working with Pachia both as a writer and person throughout the course of our sessions. I was always excited to see what she would bring in each week. Pachia mentioned early on how she prefers to write poetry, and her poetry is what we discussed for the majority of the semester. Her poetry address themes and ideas that many people can relate to and experience in their everyday lives. Pachia’s poems pull the reader in and make them think about the theme being presented, and whether or not they have experienced something similar to what is being shown. During our sessions, Pachia mainly wanted to focus on making the smaller details stand out, whether that be emphasizing certain words in order to get the reader to understand the emotions that the speaker is experiencing, or formatting the poem in a way that makes it unique. I am happy that I got to see how Pachia’s skills progressed throughout the semester, and know that she will continue to be a great writer in the future.”

- Rhiley Block

Ignorance is Bliss

I wonder
if people are thrown
off when they hear me
speak English
fluently.

Am I expected
to have the kind of
accent that is mockable?

The kind that is
deep, rich, and
different?

Why should my
identity as an Asian woman
allow anyone to decide
how I should speak?

We are divided
by a language that should
have brought us
together.

This clear divider
between you and me does
not exist unless you
allow it to exist.

Because it is
obvious to me now that no
matter what I say or do, you will continue
to allow your ignorance
to survive.

They say
'ignorance is bliss'
but is it really?

Made for the Stars

They say that our love
came from the stars.

It was *born* from the
supernovas that *envied*
our love for each other.

They even say that our
eyes *resemble* the
stars we once **belonged**.

Do you know the
story behind our stars?

Many believe they
are **souls** waiting
to be *reborn* again.
Watching us living
our lives from afar.

What do you believe
in the stars that
paint our **skylines**
with star dust?
So *colorful*, so **celestial**.

We were made
to be because
your *light*
brightens when you
are with me.

Sometimes I wonder
how *bright* I am
to you. Do I **shine** as
bright when we
are **together**?

Tell me in the
language only
you and I know.
Show me that the
stars made us **equal**.

We are simply **atoms**
that *rely* on one
another. This is how
we were made
for each other.

Our story has not
been told and it is
time they know
that our love was
made for the stars.

Now they will see
that **two** souls of
the same star can
be so *different*,
yet **compatible**.

How It Hurts

Oh, how it **hurts**
to meet someone who only
thought of taking *advantage* of the
kindness you've given them. That your
friendship has never been **requited** because
they found your *flaws* to be too *ugly* to
love and care for. Why does it
hurt when we are
no longer
close?

This kind of behavior
goes **unnoticed** and I *foolishly*
believed I was imagining things. *Imagining*
your **distance** from the one friendship who has
always stood by your side. *Wondering* why
I was *never* good enough for others
to see that I am **worth** fighting
for when it comes
to **friendship**
and **love**.

Flowers & Birds

Flowers grow
like the flow
of the ocean.

Birds fly
in the sky
without fear.

Yet, here
you are trying
to live life
without worry
because you've
learned to be free.

Flowers grow
and flow because
they have no worries.

Birds fly in
the sky because
they are free.

You take these
aspects of these
living things to survive.

Does this
 continue to
 make you happy?

I think this
should make you
happy because, why not?

You should continue
being yourself.

Staying true to
yourself is something
people still don't understand.
They are afraid
to seek their true
selves because of reality
and society
and judgements and
love and hate and sadness.

But not you.
You refuse to
let them change
your perception
because you have
seen what it does
to those you
know and care.

Don't let it
bring you down.
Your humanity
is continuously
challenged at every
turn. Believe in that
bird you saw
and that flower
you picked.

A worry-free
life can truly
make one see
that life is
full of many
things but it is
not worth the
pain to relive
moments that make
us sad or angry.

Take a whiff
of that flower
and appreciate its
beauty. Put on
a pair of wings
and aim for the sun.

Only you can
do what is best
for you and only
you know
what is good
for you.
Be the flower.
Be the bird.
Be only you.

Nassa

“I have loved getting to know Nassa and the natural ability she has for writing poetry this semester. Every week I have looked forward to the concepts she comes up with because they are filled with incredible imagery and descriptions that make it easy to picture the beautiful worlds she has created. Nassa’s major interests have been creating poetry that transports the reader to magical and picturesque places, writing about historical figures, and exploring the daily activities of the people in the worlds she has invented. The poems Nassa has chosen to include all contain her wonderful imagery and are great examples of Nassa’s ability to construct a poem that transports the reader to a new world.”

- Haley Steines

Princess Sensibilities

Nude vanilla scented candles with a golden beams of sun rays lighting the room.
And a dusty large golden floral rimmed vanity mirror sits slanted on the wall.

Unfinished handwritten letters lay besides wax pellets on top of an ivory oak table while,
hot steamy silky white coffee sits by the windowsill waiting to be picked up.

By the lovely etched table,
whitish pink satin sheets drape over a queen size bed,
three beautifully detailed dresses styled for a ballerina are laid on top delicately.
Glistening jeweled pink pointed ballet shoes with ribbons lay strung about on the
deep brown oak wooded flooring.

Across the ivory oak table is an open bustling walk-in closet with hues of pale,
nude, pink clothing that are organized all in rows,
with ballet shoes and other fine shoes placed delicately in rows of racks.

Covering the white blueish walls,
elegantly painted rococo paintings hang from them,
with solid floral golden or silver rims.

The beautiful room sits idle,
waiting for the owner to pick up the flowing dresses and drink the coffee starting to cool.

Forgotten

Near a field overgrown with grass,
with wheats and weeds sit a long-forgotten church.

The once neighboring parking lot in front of the church has since been covered in thick grass.

A small but once was readable church sign sits cracked in two,
with some of the letters,
blowing into the wind.

Vines proudly latch onto the structures of the building's walls and even onto the little cross that,
used to reflect the sunlight to passing church goers.

Sun rays beam into the cracks and missing walls of the building,
once pouring in golden beams,
now,
a slightly yellow tinge with floating dust particles from the rubble.

Big wooden boards,
some falling, are stamped onto some of the decaying doors and broken windows.

Writings on the boards from the church are barely visible,
a few stating to those wishing to vandalize the walls with a faded,
'Go Away',
the only memory someone once prayed here.

Her Name Was Marie

Rosy cheeks,
soft red lips,
and towering ash strawberry blonde hair,
Deep blue eyes that sway like a satin curtain on a breezy summer day,
Embroidered elegantly laced pink and blue dresses flowing in the grandiose hallway,
Hands dipped in white pearl laced gloves and silky pink roses that release a gentle touch,
Velvet and silk ribbons that tie around the waist and hat,
paired with a budding rose and curled locks of hair,
Elegant pose in stiffened royal corsets with secrets in longing eyes,
Doused in powerful sweet aroma perfume and a powdered face,
Flirtatious winks that lead to secret desires and sad eyes for a simpler time,
While scorned and hated by populace,
the misunderstood angel strikes a chord in certain hearts,
True friends and loving admirers are dazzled and awed by a kind woman,
Even Aphrodite would be jealous of a beauty so fair,
An icon of the ages,
influencer of her time and beyond,
May the sad,
kind,
misunderstood angel of France and daughter of Austria be loved throughout time.

Prose



T. A. De Guelle

“It has been wonderful getting to know T. A. throughout the semester in English 257. T. A. was already a *very* strong writer when they started this course, and they have kept improving as the semester progressed. T. A.’s passion for writing proses and poems is evident and I am continuously impressed by the level of care and thoughtfulness they put into each piece, making every one perfect. The language they use and the way they are able to captivate and enrich the reader is incredible, allowing one to make their own personal connections to the poems. I am very fortunate to have worked with T. A. this semester and am proud to see their submitted work on Wordplay. Never stop writing!”

- Hayley Bird

Dawn

Dawn rises. A goddess emerging from horizons, her swords of light slash through weak armors of the heavens, piercing the dull grey void and releasing bountiful blue blood upon exhausting minds in arid harvest fields. Her arrival marks not terror or anger as her worshipers never forget her daily march upon the battalion of night. They look to her as the destined herald of prosperous harvests, of memorable days, of reassuring warmth as her essence drapes all that she can look upon. To these mere mortals, Dawn is their creator, their inventor, their mother. And they are her created invented children, always appreciative when she allows them to glance upon her visage without shame, without fear, without suffering.

What if Dawn chose not to rise, instead decided to fall, to slumber?

What would become of these mortals, who know nothing but her embrace, who have shackled their lives around her light, who’s very existence is only permitted by her grace? Would they renounce their history? Following instead Dusk, whose decadence can be only matched by Dawn? These mortals would go blind in the dark, only knowing the cold embrace of Dusk’s presence as she condemns them to fear the light, fear the daylight, fear Dawn’s early light. They would renounce her, yes, and replace her with another, more opposite, deity.

They will forget the light. They will forget about Dawn.

But does Dawn weep? Does she seek vengeance, absolution, or submission? Nay. Dawn merely resigns to her glittering and iridescent world, awaiting simply for their return back to her. For Dawn knows these mortals cannot live long without her embrace, her most precious and warm embrace. She knows they are a race of heat, with passions as fiery as the heart within her

beats strongly with desire. She knows they will soon quest for her, as they are creatures made in the light, not in the dark. All they know is the light. All they believe is the light. All they can do, want to do, wish to do, must be in the light.

Dawn rises. She always rises.

Dreaming of Birds

Among the clouds, the skies, you hear and feel nothing but wind. The wind wraps you tightly, securely, like a babe in a swaddle. Soaring, hovering, you see all the many wonders of Earth, the beautiful perfections. You breathe and fly in awe, or even dumbstricken and overwhelmed. Somehow, all comprehensible.

You sail through breezes of happiness, gusts of adventure, winds of inspiration. You circle tornadoes of passion, cyclones of renewal, hurricanes of confidence. You navigate the skies of optimism with ease like a gentle songbird.

Even daily stormy foes become friends. Snowstorms do not freeze but comfort you. Thunderstorms do not terrify but dazzle you. You become one with danger, adding the feeling under your wings where you control fear and doubt. You become a master of flight capable of achieving more than Icarus' dreams, perhaps even tempt the wind gods themselves.

But to a flightless, wingless creature, your flight becomes more dream than reality. For this creature is condemned to merely hallucinate a glimpse of your impressive acrobatics, and thus must live and struggle with their grounded realities of their grounded lives.

Rush Hour

You'd think I'd be prepared to deal with traffic jams after becoming one with the frozen cars for most my life. Yet every stop-and-go trial that I come across seemingly tests my patience to its limits, or even further. I am tempted to blare my horn in the already chaotic orchestra of pandemonium, but I yield, either out of hopelessness or acceptance (whichever path the morning tricksters decided to take).

Trapped among these impatient workers, I witness the radio's desperate last stand. It tries to soothe the angry worker bees, but its lullaby only adds gradual annoyance to the stressful hive. Each tune produces the same outcome: "I hate this song, next station. God, why are there so many commercials?!" Perhaps it's better to just silence it, eliminate one stressor after all, but then I would have to hear the dysfunctional orchestra, so I choose slow agony.

Even if I pass through this trial with most of my spirit somehow left in-tact, work will soon destroy the rest of it in punishment of tardiness. I wonder if the boss is among the lost cars, if they too have been reduced to a major inconvenience, if maybe that will garner sympathy to my lost cause. I sigh and push aside the futile hope, the boss holds lower standards of minimum expectations whereas the grunts like me break our backs with no insurance or security for our position. I change the radio station to a different distraction.

The gradual shuffling of cars seemingly defies the concept of time as I lose track of the already fleeting minutes. Was the sun up that high when I left in such a hurry? Was the hour a double digit all this time? Did it matter that I was in a rush when so many around me would tell similar tales of woe? Would I even arrive at work before work ends?

Unable to answer, losing all hope, questioning reality itself, I slam my hand on the wheel and play my meaningless song to my trapped brethren. In response, they change their radio stations, tuning out my desperate solo, as rush hour slowly moves along.

The Forest and the Field

A tight Forest of trees huddle next to each other surrounded by a Field like a deserted island enclosed by water. Looking out from their pack, they see only the grains of the Field, a bad omen for the unwelcomed Forest. Their generations remain limited from the invasions of the Field as their numerous blades reach further for the light than the short branch-arms of the saplings. Yet the Forest of trees keeps seeding, hoping a new generation will break through the tall blades and bring them back to safety, or at least no longer surrounded by the grassy mass.

Until the arrival of their precious child, the Forest of trees leans and survives on each other for protection against the Field. They weave together a thick canopy of twigs and needles, protecting their vital roots from the ambushes of the Field. Not even the Field's spies can successfully pass through the viridian walls of the Forest. The Forest remains an eternal impenetrable fortress even in the passage of winter as the creeping cold cuts down the Field while leaving the towering thick Forest unscathed.

This stalemate between these two endless foes is not a positive but instead a negative for either side. The reach of the Field stretches beyond the horizon, leaving the Forest to wonder if escape is even a feasible option. The Field, though numerous and plenty in quantity, lacks the endurance of the Forest, leaving their efforts to only stall the Forest's growth instead of benefitting the Field's own progress. Thus, the Forest and the Field remained locked in battle without the possibility of a resolution.

This doctrine of the Forest and the Field neglects to consider a third foe in the conflict: The Frontier. The Frontier seeks to resolve this conflict brutally by eliminating the forces of the Forest and the Field. Their offspring of farmers and foresters reap the opposing two's bounty, dulling the Field's blades and destroying the Forest's walls. The wake of the Frontier's destruction leaves a barren land devoid of either the Forest or the Field as the Frontier continues to conquer more territory.

But even if the situation may be resolved, the Forest and the Field still regrow despite the Frontier's efforts. For their millenniums-old doctrine teaches them how to always defend against

invaders, no matter their form, until the very end of time itself. And in the eyes of the Forest or the Field, who are the true invasive species?

Alex Diaz

“Working with Alex has been a real joy. His vision and passion for his writing, as well as his sense of humor, has made every session enjoyable. Throughout the semester, we have worked on a book he is writing and a section of that piece is found below. Working on this section and the larger work it comes from has been a great time. Alex takes such care with the small details to ensure that every aspect is true to the story and the world he has developed. He artfully crafts dialogues that create realistic and relatable characters. He is the last one to sing praises about his writing but there is certainly much to be proud of. I feel confident that this will not be the last time that Alex finds his name published.”

- Emily Stanislawski

Willow Creek

Chapter Two

Rain began descending upon the unsettled townsfolk as they marched to the meeting hall. Constant chatter echoed throughout the room, engulfing it in unrelenting noise as the men and women found their seats.

“I know you have tons of questions,” began the Mayor, clearing his throat, “and we’ll address them shortly, but let’s—”

“What’s being done about this!” a man yelled from the third row of seats, shouts of agreeance coming from multiple people in attendance, “my child’s been missing for over a week!”

“I understand that you’re upset,” the Mayor responded, trying to calm the situation.

“You’re damn right I’m upset,” he retorted, staring daggers at the Mayor, “It’s been a week, officers look away whenever we cross paths. Is the Sheriff’s Department even looking for our children?”

“Calm down honey,” his wife tugged at his sleeve, gesturing to him to sit down, tears welling up in her eyes.

“I understand your grievances,” he sighed, running his left hand through his hair, “I have a daughter, as most of you know. I can’t imagine how I’d feel if she was taken. Thankfully, she’s safe along with most of our children in the other room, guarded by deputies. It’s not safe to leave them at home and it’s not a good idea to have them here in attendance.” the Mayor then stopped for a second, looking at the audience. He took a deep breath and looked down at his notes, “before we continue on this subject matter, I hope you’ll join me and Father Isaurica in prayer.”

The room fell silent as men and women clasped their hands together, bowing their heads as Father Isaurica spoke.

“Dear Lord, please bring these children safely home to us. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.”

“Amen,” the audience and Mayor responded in unison.

“Thank you, Father,” the Mayor stated, patting the priest’s shoulder, “Now onto the subject at hand. Sheriff Jones, would you please bring solace to these fine folk.” The Mayor smiled at the Sheriff which was not met with similar emotion. The Mayor's expression faded as the emotionless Sheriff stood behind the podium.

“I wish I could give you the answers to who this creep is, where those children have been, and how they’re doing,” the Sheriff struggled to speak loudly through the microphone, “but I can’t. Sadly, we haven’t had much luck finding evidence. Rest assured, we will do everything that we can possibly do to get these children home safe and sound.”

“And what if you can’t find that evidence!” a concerned parent shouted from the second row.

“I’m not sure you or I want to discuss that outcome,” the Sheriff responded quietly, the silence that followed was deafening. “Um,” the Sheriff continued, bringing the citizens back to reality, “we ask that you ensure the safety of your children. Keep track of where they are and where they’re going.”

“You say this like we haven’t been doing that already!” a man shouted from the fourth row.

“I’m merely stating that you keep your child as close to you as possible.” the Sheriff stated bluntly.

“Thank you, Sheriff Jones,” the Mayor jumped in, placing a hand on his shoulder. He then leaned in to whisper. “You’ve done enough,” the Mayor then turned his attention to the citizens with a welcoming smile. “Although we would all like to continue on this topic, we also have other matters to attend to. I’m sure the children are getting quite restless. I will be enacting a mandatory 8 PM curfew for everyone under the age of eighteen.”

With murmurs of discontent beginning to erupt into arguments, the Mayor ended the meeting, sneaking a scowl at the Sheriff. Sheriff Jones got up from his seat and left the stage behind the Mayor.

“Office, now.” The Mayor stated sternly. Sheriff Jones sighed as he followed the Mayor. The Mayor’s secretary opened the door, the Sheriff stared at the Mayor as he walked in and grabbed two glasses and a bottle of whiskey.

“Listen, Travis—” Sheriff Jones began before being interrupted.

“Mayor Wolff,” he retorted, staring daggers at Sheriff Jones. “How about you take a seat, Martin.” he then placed a glass of whiskey near the seat opposite him, never breaking eye-contact. Sheriff Jones sat down, grabbing the glass.

“Mayor Wolff,” he sighed, taking a swig of his drink. “I really should get back to—”

“What was that back there,” the Mayor interrupted, “you couldn’t just comfort the people?”

“Should I have lied?” Sheriff Jones sneered, “All the kidnapped children are safe and sound in the precinct, waiting to be picked up by their parents? I can’t comfort the people without lying to their faces.”

“Then do your damn job!” the Mayor shouted, slamming his fist down onto his desk. He stood up, running his hand through his hair, drink in hand. He walked to the window on his right, gripping his glass tightly. He peered out, sipping his drink as he pondered something.

“Mayor Wolff, I—” Sheriff Jones began to stand up.

“How’s the family, Sheriff?” Mayor Wolff asked, turning his body to face him.

“Excuse me?” the Sheriff responded, agitated.

“How would you feel if your kid was kidnapped?” the Mayor asked, drinking the rest of his whiskey. The Sheriff paused for a moment.

“Travis—” Sheriff Jones stated tensely.

“It’s Mayor Wolff!” he shouted, “Get that through your thick skull!”

“You think I give a damn about how you want to be addressed!” Shouted the Sheriff.

“You watch your goddamn mouth when talking to me,” the Mayor stated, withholding his anger.

“This is a waste of time,” the Sheriff stated, trying to calm himself. He stared at Wolff, about to say something but stopped, turned around, and walked out.

“Have a good day Sheriff,” the secretary stated, working away.

“Thanks, Millie,” the Sheriff sighed, nodding at her, “you too.”

The Sheriff grabbed his coat and umbrella from the rack before stepping out into the pouring rain. As he made his way to his Plymouth, a woman began approaching him from the parking lot with haste.

“Sheriff Jones,” the woman said ardently, “any news on my boy, Georgy?”

“Mrs. Wilson,” the Sheriff’s breathe began shaking a bit, “like I said in the meeting, we just—”

“Sheriff?” she asked.

“We’re doing everything we can,” the Sheriff tried to reassure her.

“But,” she paused, “it’s been two weeks, Sheriff.”

“The minute we find anything surrounding Georgy,” the Sheriff stated sternly, “you will be the first to know, you have my word, Angela.” They stared at one another as the rain crashed against the pavement in the background with lightning lighting the skies. Tears began to pour from Mrs. Wilson’s eyes. The Sheriff could only divert his gaze, no longer being able to face his failure. He trudged toward his car. Soaking from the rain, he entered, staring through the windshield. He took a deep sigh as he turned on the engine.

He began driving; the constant pounding of rain impacting the car provided solace to him as he made his way home. He drove past empty streets where it was once vibrant. He arrived at his home; his eyes fixated forward on a bicycle leaning against his garage. He stayed in that car for a while. Tears began running down his face as his grip on the steering wheel tightened. He took a deep breath as he stepped out of the car and picked up the bike, placing it in the garage. He walked inside, greeted by the sound of silence. His home was dusty, unkept. He entered the kitchen and was met with a large stack of dishes yet to be washed. He sighed as he began to clean a few. Grabbing a pot and pan from his cabinet, he started cooking. He served two plates and took one upstairs. He entered his bedroom, his wife laying down motionless.

“Hey,” he whispered, nudging her slightly, “I made you some rice with ground beef.” She didn’t move a muscle. Sheriff Jones grabbed the plate he had left on the bedside table the day before and placed the new plate down. Her body looked frail as she laid in bed.

“You should really eat,” Martin persisted, “you need to keep your strength for when Maddie comes home.” She stared at him, bags under her dried red eyes.

“Get out,” She faintly whispered, “leave me alone.”

Martin left the room, went downstairs, and ate his food in the company of past memories. His eyes swelled with tears as he questioned if he'd see his daughter again. He laid down on the couch, struggling to fall asleep.

Will Gustafson

“It has been a wonderful semester with Will and I had a lot of fun reading his stories each week. After finding out that 157 writers only had to write 1,500 words by the end of semester when he thought it was 1,500 words each week, Will made it his personal goal to keep up writing the same amount and developing his story. Most of his pieces were chapters from one of his stories, and I hope you like reading this selection as much as I did! We had to trim down some of the story to keep it within the word limit, but I enjoyed many of the details he incorporated to solidify his characters. Will already had a plan for his story coming into the Writing Lab, so my job was mostly providing a fresh perspective and talking through the events and foreshadowing he wanted to plant. Will is very good at giving his characters life and distinct personalities, but I am glad to see his newer chapters containing more physical description to ground the setting and help the reader feel as though they are in the story. He is a strong writer who seems to be excited to share his work, and I hope to one day be able to know how the story ends.”

- Grace Dahl

Indifference

Keeran leaned against the stone wall, his hood covering most of his face. Rain poured down from the heavens. Some astral god was probably having another hissy fit. Making the puny mortals down below suffer was the only way it could deal with its feelings. Keeran snorted a humorless laugh. His experiences with immortals never exactly made him feel like the world was in safe hands. The rain was pouring down in sheets, soaking through the young mage’s dark robes. His staff was tucked under his left arm, sheltered from the aquatic onslaught. The bright green emerald embedded in the headpiece still glittered through the thick storm.

The soldier who was guarding the door with Keeran shivered. The water was starting to get to him. Keeran was unaffected. He supposed it was a side effect from the line of magic he studied.

The heavily armed soldier sneezed. He was dressed for combat against other warriors, not against the elements. He was probably going to get a cold at this rate. The storm didn’t appear to be letting up, Keeran suspected it wasn’t going to get better anytime soon.

“Head back inside.” He told the other guard. “I can keep watch.”

The nameless soldier looked over at Keeran and hesitated. This heartless mage hadn't said a word since they had taken post over three hours ago, and hadn't reacted to his joke earlier about the rain. "You sure? I'm pretty protected with my armor, but you..."

"I'll be fine." Keeran reached into his cloak and pulled out a random amulet. The red ruby glowed with a powerful, fiery energy.

The guard shrugged. Magic. Of course. He opened the door and headed back inside the castle. Keeran wasn't exactly what he would call trustworthy, but right now he didn't give a shit. It was just so cold out.

There was a flash of lightning, then a clap of thunder. Keeran tucked the amulet back inside his robes, unfazed. The ruby he had shown to the guard was designed to heal physical wounds, not protect him against a storm. He hadn't technically lied to the man, just convinced him to go back inside without him thinking that Keeran was some kind of freak.

The brewing hurricane wasn't the only reason Keeran wanted the man back inside. Twenty feet away from them, a hooded figure stood, invisible to anyone who hadn't invested time in studying the proper lines of magic. Unfortunately for this man, Keeran had been well educated.

The mage chuckled to himself again. Even if he couldn't see through the man's potion, he probably still would've noticed the not so cleverly disguised assassin anyway. If Keeran looked up, he would've seen a watery outline of the man. Even children knew not to drink an invisibility potion when it was raining. This man likely wasn't aware of the rules of magic. Just a random guy who bought the potion and chugged it before going off to sneak inside and kill someone.

And he *had* already killed someone. Five other guards in fact. Keeran could practically smell their blood on his knife.

The assassin was now only a few feet away from Keeran. Knife poised to stab him in the jugular. At least he knew how to hold a knife properly. Little did his would be killer know, the only thing keeping him alive was Keeran's indifference to the situation.

"Nice knife."

The assassin practically dropped the weapon, startled. His opponent probably could've taken that opportunity to smack the blade out of his hands and kill him, but Keeran remained unmoved, his hood still covering his face.

If anything, this made the assassin even more unnerved. He should probably try and stab the magician while he still had the chance, but anyone who could see through an invisibility potion wasn't someone to be messed with. His self preservation instinct was screaming at him to get the fuck out of there, but his legs were frozen in place. Not to mention, the load of cash, payment for his target, was the biggest he had ever taken on.

“What is that? Dwarven?” The shady mage asked, trying to continue the conversation. Surprising even himself, the assassin responded. “Y-yeah.”

“Very nice.”

Nothing happened. Neither man attempted to strike the other, but the air was thick with tension. The conflicting nature of the assassin's instincts was the only thing holding him in place, not committing to either. Keeran stood still out of boredom. His master was inside, debating with the king, trying to get them access to a powerful magical item locked away inside the castle's archive. She had ordered her apprentices to guard the entrances. Well, except one. Keeran's master, like most mages, had a favorite. Heather. She was allowed into the meetings to help debate. Keeran was fine with this, mainly because he rarely talked. He wasn't exactly useful when it came to diplomatic missions. It took quite a lot to bother Keeran, which his master and fellow apprentices quickly found out. But he was more than happy to talk to this man who had come out of the pouring rain, soaked in water and blood. It was the most interesting thing that had happened today.

“Who's your target?” He asked the assassin. He finally moved, raising his head just enough to look the man in the eye.

The view he got was much more intimidating than Keeran probably intended. The assassin saw a singular green eye glowing from underneath the darkness of the mage's robe. He wasn't a cowardly man, but his knees were practically knocking against each other as this powerful magician stared him down. He could feel waves of energy radiating off of Keeran.

“The d-duck-I mean the duke of G-grindolare.” He managed to stutter.

The Duke of Grindolare? Keeran racked his brain, was he related to the king or was he just a random guy who was from the previous leader's inner circle? Would his master get in trouble for an assassination taking place inside the castle her students were protecting?

He shrugged. “Go ahead.”

“What?” The assassin was confused.

“I don’t know any duke. Head on in.”

Whilst bewildered that this mage would allow him to go in and kill someone inside the very place he was guarding, the assassin wasn’t going to look a gift horse in the mouth. He shuffled past the dark man, and opened the door. Before he could head inside however, he felt the magician's staff pressed against his chest. He looked fearfully over at the scary mage and prepared for his life to end.

“*Only* this duke. No more guards.”

The assassin nodded rapidly. The only reason he had killed the other guards was because of this goddamn rain. They had seen his outline and attacked. That was quite a ways from here, so he had no idea how Keeran knew about it. He wasn’t about to question him though, so he nodded far longer and far harder than he would have normally.

Keeran pulled his staff away from him and leaned it back against his chest. He wanted to mess with him a little more, so he told the already terrified man, “Watch out for my master,” and enjoyed his reaction.

The incompetent killer slammed into the door as he rushed past him. Keeran chuckled to himself again. This little bit of enjoyment would be worth the kickback he was going to stir for letting an assassin into the castle. His master would either be furious with him, or pleased depending on who this duke actually was.

Keeran wasn’t likely to get in trouble with the law, there was no way they would know that he had willingly let someone in, even conversing with him before doing so. After all, how was he supposed to see an invisible man?

But his master would know. She always knew. Incompetency was not allowed from one of her apprentices, and she was well aware that Keeran was not incompetent. His punishment would vary from a slap on the wrist to a harsh blast of electricity.

There was also little chance that any of them would be blamed for what was about to happen inside. The knife the assassin had been carrying was well made, but not enchanted. The only magic coming from his body was the invisibility potion that was slowly wearing off.

The way Keeran saw it, one of two things was going to happen. Either A, his new friend would succeed with his mission and kill the duke, causing chaos to erupt inside the castle. That would open an opportunity to steal the magical item hidden inside the castle. Or B, his master

would catch the man, preferably in front of the king, and they would gain allegiance and trust from the kingdom.

He knew his master would prefer plan B, it had less death involved, and she preferred to have more friends than enemies. Keeran himself liked the sound of plan A better. He was rooting for his new friend to succeed in his mission. One more dead politician was music to Keeran's ears.

Both options were better than killing the man outright. He knew, from previous experience, that he would be blamed for the deaths of the other guards, and they would all be either expelled from the kingdom or imprisoned. His fellow apprentices were likely to have ruined his master's plans. He thanked his lucky stars that the assassin had chosen his door and not theirs. He chuckled softly to himself.

Things were about to get a whole lot more interesting.

...

Keeran contorted on the ground, electricity crackling around him. Sparks of lightning shot out of Heather's master's fingertips. She and the other two apprentices were standing behind Greenfeld, looking over her shoulder.

Disobedience was not allowed in Master Greenfeld's students. She had given Keeran an order and he had disobeyed. Heather's face remained emotionless as she watched her companion writhe on the floor. The budding necromancer might not be able to feel the cold of the rain, but he could definitely feel the 50,000 volts coursing through his body.

Greenfeld stopped for a moment, and adjusted her hair. Keeran slowly started to rise, but collapsed when his master responded with another short blast of lightning.

"Stay down." Greenfeld looked at her nails, which had been recently manicured. She always managed to upkeep her appearance, even when they had to take long trips into the wilderness. "Do you realise what you've just cost us with your foolish actions tonight?"

Keeran rolled over onto his back. "No."

Heather had to admire the fact that throughout his torture, Keeran hadn't cried out once. It was rare, but whenever she was submitted to their master's harsh punishments, she always let at least one scream slip out. Even Minotaurs bellowed out in pain when subjected to Greenfeld's powerful magic.

“You have managed to let the most powerful magical item in all of the Forgotten Realms slip past my fingers.” She strode over to their table and started pouring herself a glass of wine. That was how Heather knew Greenfeld was legitimately upset, and not just teaching her apprentices a lesson.

Keeran grunted noncommittally. Apparently he was content with letting Master Greenfeld yell herself out before making an actual case. That was probably for the best. He would know, Keeran had been her student for as long as anyone had known him.

Meanwhile, Greenfeld fumed, “Do you have any idea what I-what the Academy could have done with such an item?? We could have waged wars without lifting a finger, gained information from the Library of Ages, summoned gods! And you thought it would be a good laugh to let a bloody assassin inside the castle? I have half a mind to turn you over to the local authorities. At least then I would be back in good standing with the king.”

Everyone in the room knew that was an empty threat. Keeran was Master Greenfeld’s proudest achievement. She wouldn’t kick him off to the wayside over a minor disagreement. No matter how powerful the item happened to be.

Greenfeld took a big gulp of wine. “Now, what do you have to say for yourself?”

Keeran slowly rose to his feet, cautious in case she didn’t want him to get up again. But she allowed him to rise and dust off his robes.

“My apologies, Master Greenfeld. I believed my actions would have resulted in your best interests.” He bowed.

“You believed incorrectly, my *very* young apprentice. But please, try and explain yourself out of this one.”

“I thought that if the assassin were incompetent enough, he would’ve fallen into your hands, putting you in higher standing with the king.”

“But he wasn’t. He fucking fell off the side of the fucking earth the second you let him inside. The only thing he left behind was the duke’s slit throat and a note that told the king he could go fuck himself or something. In what way would that put me in higher standing with his majesty?”

“It wouldn’t.” He admitted. “But I knew that the castle would erupt into chaos. The king would send his soldiers out of the castle to find the assassin, creating an opportunity to take the item without needing explicit permission from the king.”

Greenfeld took a deep breath and paused before taking another gulp of wine, then slammed the empty cup onto the table. “Wrong again, my foolish apprentice. The protection around the item hasn’t loosened in the slightest. And that’s the only protection that really even matters. Who cares if there aren’t a few more soldiers around us anymore? The wizards and spells surrounding the item are still there.”

She rose from the table and stormed past her apprentices, who all quickly moved to give her a wide berth. She opened the door leading outside the room and stepped into the hallway. “I’m going out for a drink. Keeran, meditate on your recent choices. Everyone else, work on your Transmogrification. I want that wine glass to be a rosebush by the time I get back.”

Heather and her two other companions groaned. “A *non-amphibious* rosebush Norrison. I’ll return within the hour.”

Greenfeld pulled her head out of the room and closed the door. Heather took that opportunity to fling a fireball at Keeran. He deflected it with relative ease, but still looked offended.

“What was that for?”

“Disobeying orders at the most inconvenient time! You have no idea how close Master Greenfeld was at obtaining the artifact!”

“Well, I’m sorry for trying to make things go faster.” He gingerly moved across the room and sat down on one of the sofas, criss crossing his legs.

“Do you feel any remorse for what you’ve done?” It was infuriating to see him relaxing on the couch after everything that had happened.

“Of course I do.” He said, eyes closed. “But mark my words, Master Greenfeld will get her hands on that artifact if it’s the last thing she does.”

“After your actions tonight? I’m beginning to doubt it.”

He opened one eye to look at her. “Are you questioning Master Greenfeld’s abilities?”

She quickly backtracked. “No. Of course not. I just think-”

“Then I suggest you be silent and try to work on your Transmogrification.” He closed his eyes and relaxed again. “It would be a shame if she came back in here and her students had disobeyed her twice in one day.”

Heather practically stamped her foot in frustration. Humans could be so infuriating. Especially *this* human. She walked over to the table and started to help Quinn and Jacklin.

“It’s ok Heather. Nothing really bad happened. We just had a little setback is all.” Leave it to Jacklin to try and look on the bright side of things. Her pet snake, King, was curled around her neck like a scarf. Heather could remember when King had been the size of a garden snake. Now he was over eight feet long, as big as a python.

“I know.” She told Jacklin. “It’s just infuriating.”

As Jacklin was trying to comfort Heather, Quinn was desperately trying to read through the Transmogrification book. The cleric was absolutely awful at transformation spells. Almost everything he cast turned into a frog. Which would be impressive if he was actually trying to turn anything into a frog. If Transmogrification had a god, it was mocking him. “Could we please work on the task at hand? I don’t want to get tased tonight.”

“Right.” Heather said. She waved her hands and spoke an incantation. The wine glass filled with soil and turned opaque. Jacklin took out her wand and helped her shape the glass into a pot. Now for the hard part.

Jacklin shuffled over to Quinn and looked over his shoulder. “Did you find it yet?”

“There’s hydrangeas, so I must be close, right?”

“I dunno.” Jacklin shrugged. “It could be in alphabetical order.”

While the pair scoured over the Transmogrification book, Heather glared at Keeran and fumed. Literally. Smoke was starting to come out of her pointed ears.

“Heather...” Jacklin warned. “Try not to set anything on fire.”

The fire mage scoffed and turned back toward the table. It just wasn’t fair. Keeran was the one who disobeyed, and now he gets to skip Transmogrification? She hated how he always got off scott-free whenever he disobeyed orders, or stole things, or cheated on tests. (Although she never could figure out how he was cheating. He never studied! He *must* be cheating.) She just couldn’t understand why Master Greenfeld liked him so much, why he always got the special treatment. Heather had worked so hard to get where she was, and Keeran almost never tried. But whenever he did, people would sing his praises for weeks. Heather snorted, and flames spurted out of her nose.

“Ah ha!” Quinn grinned. “Rosebush! Kara vun untum pre vasa!”

With a puff of smoke and a magical, sparkly swirl of magic... a fat frog popped out from the soil, shaking dirt off its nose.

“...God dammit.” Quinn plopped down back into his seat and put his head in his hands. “I’ll never be able to do Transmogrification. I’ll be the first wizard in five hundred years to never pull a rabbit from a hat.”

“It’s ok Quinn.” Jacklin reassured him, rubbing his back. “You’ll get it one day. Look, this one has little red spots on his back!”

“At least nothing exploded this time.” Heather tried to take a leaf out of Jacklin’s book and look on the bright side, but it might’ve come across spiteful and sarcastic.

Quinn looked miserably across the table. “Thanks Heather.”

Suddenly, the door burst open and Greenfeld strode back in. She seemed nervous, rubbing her rings and circling around the room.

Without opening his eyes, Keeran asked, “What’s wrong?”

“I was just speaking to Undaleffer, you know, the *king’s* adviser, and-” Greenfeld looked over at the pot. “Is that another bloody frog?”

“Concentrate Master.” Keeran said.

She sighed. “Right. We’ll talk about that later, Norrison.” Quinn hung his head.

“Where was I?”

“Undaleffer.”

“Right! Undaleffer asked me what I was going to wear to the feast tonight and-”

“There’s a feast tonight?” Heather asked to no one in particular. Jacklin shrugged.

“-I said, ‘Feast? What feast are you talking about?’ and he said, ‘Oh did I forget to tell you? There’s a feast tonight and the king said if you don’t come he’ll cut off all your bloody heads!’”

“I highly doubt he said that.” Keeran told her.

“I was paraphrasing. Anyway, nevermind about your Transmogrification, grab anything remotely fancy, and let’s get to this bloody feast.”

...

Jacklin struggled to keep up with her master’s long strides. Whoever said that elves were short obviously never met one. Greenfeld was almost six foot three, Jacklin supposed that’s why they called them “high elves.”

After her furious outburst in their quarters, Jacklin expected Greenfeld to have been storming all the way to the dining hall. (Figuratively, not literally. But with Greenfeld you never

knew.) But instead the hallways were completely silent, except for the cute little clip clops of Quinns hooves tapping on the stone tiles. The king liked his castle to be pretty empty, so without any interference, any little sound would reverberate throughout the castle. The grey stones that made up the walls gave terrible acoustics.

Jacklin turned around to quickly glance at the young faun. He looked so dashing in his little white and red jacket with the cute coattails. The Beast Whisperer had to suppress fawning over him whenever they had to work together. Due to her class, Jacklin always had an affinity to animals, that was expected. But no one ever told her that animals would have such an affect on *her*. Greenfeld always had to stop her from catching little forest creatures on their travels, insisting that a proper Beast Whisperer had a maximum of two animals. Quinn was no different from the little raccoons and squirrels she tried to adopt. Every time she saw him she wanted to give him a carrot and a pat on the head.

King shifted his body and wrapped himself more tightly around her waist. She had to move him so he didn't start strangling her unconsciously again. It was the reason the eight foot long python was no longer allowed to sleep with her. Too many close calls where she woke up half asphyxiated.

She then felt a small tug on her robe. "Why do we have to go to this dinner again?" Quinn asked her.

"I don't know. Formality I suppose?" She whispered back. Greenfeld turned her head and gave them both the stink eye. Man those ears were sharp.

The high elf flung the doors of the Great Hall open and strode inside. Her apprentices meekly followed behind her. Well, except for Keeran. He meandered uncaringly into the hall, and while his fellow students obediently followed their master to the head of the table, he walked in the exact opposite direction and seated himself as far as possible from the king.

The massive feast hall had the largest golden chandelier Jacklin had ever seen. The king was so wealthy, she had no idea if the crystals were made of diamonds or shards of glass. A massive oak table stretched from one end of the room to the other, with the king's golden throne at the head. There must have been sixty to seventy seats available, but only about half were filled. Jacklin supposed that there were quite a few generals and soldiers who were very busy trying to find the assassin that had killed the duke.

Jacklin sighed. She disliked meetings with his royal majesty. The fat old man cared very little about things that weren't gold or jewels.

The hedgehog inside her jacket chirped quietly. Jacklin tucked his head back down into her pocket and shushed him. She wasn't allowed to have the tiny little rodent, her master had been very adamant throughout her training that Beast Whisperers were only allowed two animals. No more, no less. Jacklin disagreed with her wholeheartedly, extending that disagreement to try and catch forest creatures throughout many of their travels, only to have Greenfeld blast them to pieces everytime.

Her master strode towards the king, expressing her many apologies that they were late, while also shifting most of the blame onto Undaleffer. Jacklin and Quinn sighed, this was going to be a long night.

...

Quinn stared at Jacklin in disbelief. There was no way she just said that.

Master Greenfeld and the king were also staring at her. The king with harsh judgement, Greenfeld with a thin mask of shock.

Poor Heather was looking in between all four of them in confusion. She had been playing with King and wasn't paying attention to the conversation. She did however sense the awkward silence that followed and was now trying to make sense of their current situation.

"What did you just say?" The king asked her. It wasn't for clarification, the king knew exactly what Jacklin said, his question wasn't out of confusion. It was to ensure Keeran's fate on death row.

He knew he shouldn't, but Quinn couldn't help but glance over at the necromancer from across the table. He was standing behind Master Greenfeld. She had called him over for... well it hardly mattered now. Quinn couldn't even remember. The rest of the hall was too loud, drowning out the rest of his thoughts. Somehow, the whole table was oblivious to their king's sudden change in mood. They all partied on, laughing and telling jokes. An extreme contrast to the very serious situation that faced the misdirection. (I looked up what a group of magicians was and the answer was too hilarious not to use.)

Like his Master, Keeran's face was unreadable. But unlike Greenfeld, Quinn had never been able to see past his mask. He had no idea what the dark mage was thinking.

Jacklin also glanced at Keeran and swallowed. She had accidentally let it slip that the assassin had entered through the north side of the castle. Specifically, the door Keeran had been guarding.

When she didn't answer, the king continued to try and interrogate her. "How do you know where the assassin entered the castle?"

The young Beast Whisperer took a deep breath, and paused for a moment. Not all was lost. She might yet be able to pull them out of this situation. She tried to rack her brain for a solution, but was coming up with nothing.

The golden eagle heads on the top of the king's throne caught her eye. Eagles. "I- uh-" Her voice caught in her throat. Why were her palms so sweaty all of a sudden? She cleared her throat and tried again. "My griffin, Harriet, discovered some remnants of an invisibility potion nearby the northern entrance."

The mask on Greenfeld's face suddenly turned to one of anger. She caught on to Jacklin's lie. "And when were you planning on sharing this information with me?"

"Sometime after dinner."

"I am extremely disappointed in you Ms. Hayes." She turned to the king. "My deepest apologies, your majesty. I've had a few problems with her before. Nothing to this extent however."

The king seemed to relax a little. Greenfeld, however, was not finished. She turned back to Jacklin and asked, "What do you have to say for yourself?"

She bowed her head and said shamefully, "I'm sorry Master."

"And to the king."

"I'm sorry for not sharing this information sooner, your majesty."

The king cleared his throat. "It's quite alright. It was fairly obscure information after all." He beckoned to Undaleffer and told him, "Start interrogating the nearby potion markets. I want to know every person that purchased an invisibility potion in the last month."

While the king started making plans to catch the assassin, the five mages all sighed in relief. Well, four. Keeran turned and walked back over to his seat impassively.

Greenfeld pointed at Jacklin and told her, "Think before you speak next time. Before you get us all killed."

Jacklin hung her head again and nodded.

“Good.” Greenfeld said. “Now Keeran, why don’t you pull up a seat and- Keeran? Where did that bloody- Did he go back to- Keeran! Get your arse back over here!”

But Keeran was finished with his meal. He stood up, made direct eye contact with Greenfeld, and walked right out of the hall.

“Curse that boy.” Greenfeld complained. “I’ll never be able to get a reign on him.”

Unfortunately for Quinn, she did have a reign on the rest of her students. She refused to let any of them leave until the king excused them over an hour later.

...

Quinn was the first one back in the room. He had happily skipped ahead, enjoying his newfound freedom from that terribly uninteresting dinner. He was glad to be back in their room. It was one of his favorites, it’s red curtains and large assortment of books gave it a comforting library feeling. When he burst in through the door, he found Keeran relaxing on the couch, reading through the Transmogrification book.

“How was the dinner?” He asked.

“Boring!” Quinn sighed. “I wish I could’ve just left like you.”

“You’re going to have to learn to tolerate them Norrison.” Greenfeld said, entering the room and plopping down into an armchair. “They are an essential part of being a successful magician.”

“But Keeran gets to skip them!” He whined.

“Keeran is a disobedient tel’athim.” Greenfeld glared at Keeran, while he ignored her and continued to read. “He’ll be punished later for it. In the meantime-” Greenfeld pulled off her boots and strode towards the bathroom. “I’m going to take a bath and go to bed. Goodnight children.”

“Goodnight Master.” Three students responded in unison.

“Goodnight Keeran.”

“Night.”

Greenfeld sighed and left the room.

Heather immediately took that opportunity to throw another fireball at Keeran. It bounced off of the green protection circle that he had set up while the rest of them were at dinner and fizzled out. “What was that one for?” He asked, still not looking up from his book.

“For being an idiot.” Heather stormed across the room and grabbed the book out of his hands. “You almost got Jacklin arrested for keeping secrets from the crown.”

“And how exactly was that my fault?” He leaned up in the chair.

“By letting the stupid assassin inside in the first place!”

Quinn and Jacklin stood awkwardly in the corner of the room while the other two apprentices argued loudly. Eventually Quinn turned to Jacklin and asked her, “Are you alright?”

Jacklin sighed and said, “Yes.”

“That was pretty clever. You know, saying Harriet found out about the potion.”

“Thank you.” She smiled at Quinn as she set King down into his basket for the night. He was snoring peacefully, his belly full. She then took off her robe and fluffed it into a makeshift bed for her new hedgehog and placed him next to the sleeping python.

Quinn’s brow furrowed in concern. “You know Greenfeld is going to find him right?”

She sighed again and said, “Yes. I know.”

The young faun crouched next to Jacklin and scratched the ‘hog’s furry white belly. The spikey little rodent cooed. “Isn’t he cute though?” She asked him happily.

“Yes. He’s very cute.” The faun said. “I don’t understand why you don’t just listen to Greenfeld and stop catching these things though.”

Jacklin opened her mouth to respond, but the bathroom door suddenly burst open and Greenfeld stode back into the room, wearing her bathrobe. The duo stood up suddenly and tried to conceal the hedgehog.

“Alright, who moved my Kerithian oil, I swear to Cyric-” She paused, looking at Quinn and Jacklin suspiciously. “What are you two hiding?”

“Nothing!” They said in unison.

She rolled her eyes and marched over to them, while Jacklin desperately tried to kick her robe and wake up the hedgehog. Maybe he could scurry away before Greenfeld spotted him. But the poor little rodent thought she was playing a game, and squealed in delight, sounding almost like a small child laughing.

Greenfeld groaned. “Oh Jackie, not another one.”

“No!” She said quickly, “It’s just King.”

“Oh please.” Greenfeld said as she pushed the both of them aside. Keeran and Heather suddenly stopped arguing, both of them looking at each other nervously as their master snatched up the squealing hedgehog. “Do I really have to get rid of another one of your blasted pets?”

“Please, no.” Jacklin begged.

“Jacklin, you just don’t seem to learn.” Greenfeld shook the small rodent in her face. “How many times do I have to tell you, ‘A Beast Whisperer can only have *two* companions.’”

“Please, just leave him alone. Punish me instead.”

“Oh I will. By killing him.”

“No!”

“Jacklin, you leave me no other choice! If you didn’t keep collecting these little pests I wouldn’t have to keep exterminating them! Believe me, I get no more pleasure out of it than you do.”

“Then let him go!”

“No, you need to learn that your actions have consequences. Consider this your punishment for that outburst at dinner too.” Greenfeld tossed the hedgehog onto the table, raised a lightning bolt and prepared to send the little critter down to the Underworld. The spikey rodent trembled on the table. Sensing that his life was going to come to an end, the only thing keeping him in place was his unwavering trust that Jacklin would protect him.

“I bonded with him!” Jacklin cried, clawing desperately at her master’s back.

Greenfeld froze. She turned around and lowered her bolt. “What did you say?”

“We-we’re soul bonded.” She gasped, tears streaming down her face. “Please, don’t hurt him.”

“Again? When did you bond?” Greenfeld dispelled her lightning bolt and grabbed Jacklin by her shirt. “When???”

“W-weeks ago.” Jacklin managed to sputter. “Right after Jer- my raccoon.”

“Damn you.” Greenfeld tossed Jacklin and she fell onto the floor in a heap. “I give you one order Jacklin, *one* order...”

“I had to!” Jacklin sobbed. “He was hurt, h-he was going to die!”

“Then you let it die! Little forest creatures die all the time Jacklin, it’s the way of nature.”

“Why do you hate them???” Jacklin screamed at her. “Why do you kill everything that I love???”

Greenfeld took a step back. Quinn was frozen in fear. Jacklin and Greenfeld had argued before, and Jacklin always cried when she killed her pets, but this was different. Jacklin never yelled. Never.

Then, the impossible happened. Greenfeld kneeled down and put her hand on Jacklin's shoulder. "I don't hate them." She told her. "I get rid of them to protect you."

Jacklin sobbed a humorless laugh. "H-how does y-y-you kill-killing them p-protect me?"

"When a Beast Whisperer bonds with an animal, the two exchange a piece of their soul." Greenfeld explained. "You have already given parts of your soul to King and Harriet. The effects they will have on you are permanent. You cannot take the piece of your soul back. That raccoon had only bonded with you for a few days, so the exchange was still fresh. When I killed it, the piece of your soul returned back to you, and the raccoon's went down into the Underworld. Look at me." Greenfeld lifted Jacklin's chin up and made eye contact. "If you give away every piece of your soul, there will be none of you left. Both you and your Beasts will shatter, and there won't be enough soul for the Reaper to recognise. Not only will you die, you will be gone forever. Do you understand?"

Jacklin nodded.

"Promise me that this is the last one."

"Y-you'll let me keep him?"

"Yes, but you have to promise me."

"I promise."

"No more squirrels with broken legs, no more baby birds that fell out of their nests, no more raccoons. Do you understand?"

"Yes master."

"Good girl." She stood up. "Now which one of you little brats moved my oil?"

T. Narrator

“As a writer, T. Narrator has just begun showing his true writing abilities. Through our ‘57 sessions, we worked to uncover his true passion for writing sci-fi and crafting unique plots. He can immerse readers into his writing by developing memorable characters and attention-catching cliffhangers. As only the first few installments of a larger piece, T. Narrator prepared this short story based on a dream. He had a vision to create this piece with animalistic characters and fulfilled it with his talented writing abilities. I have confidence that T. Narrator will become an established writer and pursue his dreams!”

- Rachel Hansen

Survival of the Beast

Under Duress

Under duress, two animals run through the wilds of wood, green, and steel. A ravenous Boar, red at the eyes. Its hide and fur black as mud can be. The second animal runs in the trees using speed and agility to stay only just out of reach. The Boar barrels down after its prey. The Boar charges and crashes into everything like a frate train. The more agile animal bounds off of a wooden beam flying into the air and grabbing a rope. The animal holds on to the it firmly but it still falling; It’s falling right on top of the incoming Boar. The animal lands in the path of soon-to-be destruction. The animal chuckles a little, smiling to show its teeth. The animal pulls down on the rope and a cage lands on top of the boar trapping it inside. The animal, a man wearing nothing but a rag around his waist and his skin covered in splotches of mud cackles at the stupid boar. The man grabs a stone knife from his belt made of old braided vines, and looms over the boar. This animal was not running away in fear, it was leading this great beast into a trap. The hunter has become the hunted. Survival of the fittest has no place in this world; only the smart and cunning survive here.

Unfocused Eyes

He lays on his back in silence. His gaze fixated on the void of air in front of him, his eyes unfocused. “lo-ahst,” he struggles to make his way through the world ‘lost’. The word echoes out on the concrete walls, dilapidated by time. The cracked walls and collapsed space make a room no bigger than a semi-truck. The rusted carcass of one lay just outside the door. The door was nothing more than a crack in the wall letting in the light of a dying sun. The entombed resting

space is cool, dark, and grim. Like the mind wrapped in an open chasm, lack of use or function. The man recalls the beast, who's innards lay in his stomach and its newly rotting hide lay over top of him. The man allows himself to fall to rest. The imagery of a woman dances on the inside of his eye lids. The warmth of an embrace imprints on his skin as his body shuts down.

The birth of a new sun pierces his sleeping form, attempting to sear his eyes when they open. The animal snarls and growls as he kicks off the beast's hide; and recoils into the corner like a serpent ready to bite. Regaining sensory awareness, he stands upright and scoops up his dagger on the floor as he walks out. The smell of dew flickers off the moist flora while the broken roadway swelters from heat from the sun. The asphalt desert stretches headlong into the horizon. The growth of green above, below, and on either side overtakes the view of the sky; and is casting shifting shadows in the quiet breeze. The low hanging fruits of stop lights mimic that of real fruit, right down to the twisted bark and root of the tree. The dense green expanse takes hold of the right side. The left side is mostly encompassed by the old stone and metal faced mountains that forever shrink as time goes on. The man walks down the middle unsawed by either side.

Crossroads of two Pits

The sun lay over top the sky, beating down at the land below. His stomach has receded back to an indent between his ribs and hips. He finds himself at the crossroads of two pits. The one in his belly and the one that stretches out in front of him. The land folds in on itself and a lush green abyss spans out so far, that the edges are shrouded in mist and fog. The animal kicks a nearby vine over the edge and tests its strength before repelling down. The ground slips and squishes beneath his feet as he lands, his legs are slathered in a coat of thick mud down to in-between his toes. He trudges through the knee-high mud of this swamp. The ground seems to suck in whatever is unfortunate enough to land in it and holds on with no intent of letting go. Having to rip his legs free from this ink with every step, takes much effort.

A sudden feeling of dread and panic roars up the man's spine. The growling of a wolf erupts from nearby. Through a gap in the trees the wolf stands on solid yet tilted ground facing something out of view. The wolf is struck with a large rock nearly half the wolf's size. The defenseless prey yelps and cries as it struggles to move its broken body fast enough to escape. A hand as thick as tree stump grabs the wolf by its hind leg lifting it up. The wolf howls in pain as

it is shaken around violently. Until the leg that was being grasped comes off, and the wolf is flung into the mud. The monster holds the wolf down with one meaty hand, so that it is not able to surface. The monster towers over the wolf. The slender build of the wolf is dwarfed by the gorilla like stature of the dark monster before it. The monster hunches over putting its entire weight on the drowning wolf. The monster chuckles. Each sound from it is in a low booming voice. Once again, the wolf is suspended above the mud, this time by its other leg. The wolf, in a last ditch effort tries to snap and bite its captor. The wolf's teeth latch on to the arm holding it, but another hand grabs the wolf at its muzzle. Now holding its prey by its proud teeth, the monster uses little effort to rip the wolf's jaw from its hinge. Petrified by what he had just seen the man is in a cold sweat, his own heartbeat louder than a drum in his ear. The monster sniffs the air grunting as the wolf in hand lay limp. The prey has lost any and all hope of escape, its broken breath stains the air with blood. The monster locks eyes with the animal. The monster takes a step forwards and the animal takes a step back. Quickly and quietly the man ducks under the mud. The monster pushes its large gorilla like face through the gap in the trees slowly panning its head from side to side. The monster cannot pass through and leaves, with victim in hand.

Colossal Footsteps & Angelic Melodies

The heavy sound of colossal footsteps and sloshing waves linger out as they lessen with distance. The man resurfaces taking deep quiet breaths as he carefully and quickly tears the mud away from his face. Trying desperately not to make a sound he glides through the mud barely keeping his head above the blood-stained depths. He slips onto the broken rock and stays low on his hands and feet, keeping a sharp eye in the direction of the monster's path. Shifting through the mangled gas pumps and the entangled hoses; the man enters a building laced with green orange and red. In his over-cautiousness of the monster, he is cut by a shard of glass still stuck in the door frame. He covers his bleeding leg with his hands applying pressure and continues on, keeping stress of his cut. He looks over the empty knocked over aisles hoping to find a wrapped tasty relic; no such hope prevails.

The back corner of this building is submerged in a liquid completely unlike the mud outside. It's dingy and see-through. This 'water' smelled both terrible and slightly euphoric. There is a long rag scrap floating on the surface. The man takes the scrap and presses it to his leg intending to make a bandage. The sudden sting of the rag doused in the dirty water makes the

man shout out with pain. Immediately after, a boom is heard from outside. The man looks on in the direction of his certain doom his face full of despair. His life and struggle were at an end, the collective memories of this beast will be no more. He closes his eyes accepting death as an old friend.

From the soiled void a hand reaches up and grabs the dead man plunging him under. He opens his eyes when he feels air on his back again but there is nothing but darkness. The only thing he can feel is warm squishy and distantly familiar. The sounds of crashing and bashing are muted from his ears. A hand is firmly pressing the back of his head into this warm firm wall. The pain from the water on his leg, the calm and steady pressure on his skull, and the rhythmic beating from inside this soft cocoon reminds him of how tired he really is; his senses go dim. His dreams are filled with old forgotten angelic melodies.

The gentle humming gives him a peaceful wake. The light from the sky skins through a woven net of leaves above his head. He slowly sits up and looks at his leg; it has been tended to and wrapped with clean cloth. A woman with frizzy dark oak brown hair nearly half her size- sits at one end of the small makeshift shelter braiding together weeds as she hums.

“m-mah?” the man questions, recognizing this woman.

The woman gets up and embraces him like only a mother can.

Honeydew Sunrays

The lush embraced of mother and son carries them both out and away from the reality they have to face day in and day out, even for just a brief moment. The woman hesitantly breaks away and offers her wounded son some water. The man eagerly accepts taking the crude wooden bowl and spilling some water as he drinks greedily. The woman giggles to herself, the memories of years past of a younger animal fill her mind. She gets up and starts preparing, grabbing some braided ropes, fixing a tooth-shaped stone dagger to her belt. She looks over her shoulder gesturing for him to join her. The man smiles, bounding up and brushing against her without a care or pain in the world.

Outside of the mud-covered log walls of the shelter, the moss flooring and green of the leaves seems brighter. The honeydew sunrays cascading through the wind-blown leaves causes the very air itself to dance in joy. Over moss covered bolder, root covered ditch or stream, and grass covered knoll; mother leads her eldest cub through the woods. They reach a field of tall

golden dry grass; they pass through and the hurried rustling of rabbit mice and other small furry animals scatter outwards. The animal wildly throws his head around and pounces trying to catch prey. The woman clears her throat to get the hunters attention. The animal looks her way with a mouse wriggling in his mouth. She sighs and plucks the mouse out by its tail setting it free.

She guides the both of them to a strong shallow river. The roar of the stream is tranquil yet powerful. Suddenly he spots it, a large grey and red fish leaps from the water trying to get over a small water wall in the stream. The man dives in trying to literally wrestle up a fish or two. The woman just sighs, shaking her head in her hand. The woman ties one end of her rope to her knife and carefully walks to the center of the river at the top of the mini waterfall. She kneels down and waits patiently, with a small smile and air of peace around her. The man follows his mother's lead, and goes limp letting the water rush over him.

The salmon hit the man in the face with their tails as they swim upstream. And when they jump up from the water's surface, that breath of fresh air is to be their last. The woman roars into action and with a thunderclap like swing of her claws, catches a fish mid-air with her knife, like teeth. Excited about the catch they both leave the stream. The woman waists to time ripping into the catch and eating the good stuff. The man reaches out for some and gets met with bear-like growl; if he wanted food, she made it clear he had to catch it himself. The animal- now put in his place, meekly recoils and heads back to the river in attempts to catch his own tasty looking fish.

The Maw in the Stone Wall

The glimmering of sky light dims from the water's surface and the two fish catchers lay on their backs, their bellies bulging on the verge of bursting. The animal has not been this full since he was half the size of this mother. Like a dog he leaves his tongue hanging out of his mouth as one of his leg twitches occasionally. The woman gets up and stretches elegantly, wiping her face and hands on hide that covers her chest.

The man sniffs the air and flips to stand on all fours. His predator like eyes look around slowly to pick up the slightest hint of movement. Suddenly through the brush on the other side of the river a man with discolored legs leaps into view. This new being swivels his head around catching his bearings and stops the two animals. The beast locks onto this new form of prey; with blood-soaked lips he lays low. The odd legged being bounds through the water and continues with momentum towards the woman. The beast lunges at this would be attacker pinning them to

the floor. He growls, his wolf's muzzle and whiskers hair away from ripping through his prey's neck. With her bear hands she lifts the hunting cat by the skin on his neck with one arm and sets him aside.

The strange legged man frantically hoots, chirps, and waves his arms around repeatedly gestures to his leg. He points over the woods he came out of and looks at the woman with hopeful eyes. She turns on her heel and shoves the man with miscolored legs in front to be the guide as she pulls her young along behind her. Hurrying as to still keep the daylight with them, the group races through the woods. The strange colored gazelle jumps at the head of the pack while mamma bear and hunter keep close behind. The ground gradually starts to slope upwards and the shadow of towering land on the horizon looms ever closer. The earth comes to a sudden cliff face, and with the guide having to reorient their direction they soon come to the maw in the stone wall.

The three of them step into the cavern. The animal has a hard time adjusting to the low light but when his vision becomes clear again, what he finds put him in shock. The crack in the stone cliff holds roughly a dozen people in it; way more people than he has ever seen before. The man with colored legs leads the woman to a younger girl laid out on the ground with the rest of the cave dwellers surrounding her. The girl has a bend in her leg that should not be there. The woman looks at her son dead in the eyes and he snaps to attention. The woman acts out putting her arms next to the girl's leg, and mimics wrapping it up. The man nods and darts out as the light of day begins to dim with grey clouds. The woman gathers the people around the girl having them brace her for what the woman is about to do.

Awaken, the Primal Child of Man

The shrill scream blares out over the sound of new rain. Any skittish creatures to dart for safety. The animal doesn't let the scream distract him. He has gathered two thick relatively straight branches and races against the ever-dimming light to find something to use for a splint. Old forgotten memories come fading back into his vision. He was no taller than a sapling tree and not that much thicker than one. He had fallen down into a dark cave with smooth straight walls and his leg felt hot to the point of bursting into flames. He cried out for his mother, but she ran away which made him cry even more. The sky saw this poor abandoned child and wept for it, and life-giving rain slowly brought along death. The box like cave was slowly filling with water.

The man slipped and fell into some mud as his thoughts took over his surroundings. The feeling of being half sunk in water brought him right back to that day. The water had cooled of his leg, but the burning heat was replaced with painful cold. Something awoke in the child of man that day; something, primal. His mind had no words in it, no sounds, only emotions and instincts. He growled as he flipped over. He roared in pain and the thunder of the storm roared with him. He clawed his way up the slanted smooth floor, the cracked stone crumbled with his grasp making easy climbing holds. A slick black rope hangs down into the hole he fell through and he grabbed it and pulling up.

The vine in his hands heled firm as the mud drips off from him. He cuts off as much vine as he could spare and starts returning to the cliff face. The water drips off from his face and lands back on the stone desert. A child born of man embraces the animal within him and limps off as a newly born lone wolf. Something stops him dead in his tracks, his first life's trial has started. Above the rain and above the thunder a call comes out hitting him in his still human heart.

"C-ave, C-ave!" his mother calls out for him. The child turns around falling on his chest and the tears of a newborn come spilling out of him. His mother comes chasing after him and holds him in her arms. In turn, he holds her back; neither one of them wants to let go of one another. She kisses him repeatedly on the cheeks making him giggle through his pain. She lays him out flat on the ground putting her hand on his chest. The child closes his eyes and does his best to relax.

Two branches are places on either side of the broken leg and tied together tightly as the one in pain winces and tries to endure it. And then, it's done. The man is back in the cavern and the girl has had her leg tended to and everyone can breathe easy. Even the storm outside calms down and seems to smile as the last rays of sundown make both Cave and the stone glow.

Late Night Instincts

A fuzzy pale half-moon illuminates through the haze of the nightly clouds. The faded amber light looks bigger than it normally does when the moon is in the sky; there is more color in it too. Cave had been on night-watch since he got back and treated the girl's leg. Everyone offered him a spot to rest considering all he had done for them; he stood as sentry none the less. The call of an owl sounds over the buzz of the night, and immediately the woods were silenced. He pans his head around not moving his body at all. There is a hint of green reflected in his

otherwise oak brown eyes. Perched outside the stone entrance, he is silent and still like the woods. Alert and awake like the moon combing the horizon.

The gazelle emerges from the crack in the wall; the dark of the night makes his legs almost look the right color. He taps the sentry on the shoulder. Alerted, Cave whips his head around startling the skinny gazelle, and making him topple backwards. The gazelle frantically throws his thumb behind him signaling that he would take the next shift. Cave glares at the miscolored prey. The gazelle backs up a few more paces using body language to say he is not threat or prey. Cave growls at the idea as he walks away on all fours. The gazelle breaths a sigh of relief and looks back at Cave wondering ‘what’s wrong with this man?’

Cave skillfully crawls through the body’s sprawled about the stone ground; placing his hand or foot in the space between people sniffing them as he goes. He sniffs the girl with the broken leg, she smells alright. He finds his mother by sent and lays next to her. She shifts in her sleep hugging him, pressing the back of his head into her chest and wrapping one leg over his belly. Cave grabs her forearm gently with one hand, his eyes still wide open. Staring into the black space in front of him, not knowing if it’s the wall the floor or someone’s butt; he looks back on the memories of the past few days. The boar he trapped when he was following its pack’s migration. The Monster he found in the swamp pit; he touches the cloth bandage around his right leg. The reunion with his mother and the new memories he has of her.

He never found it tiring to think, it was just looking through your eyes again only using your mind. What he found taxing was physical labor. His body hadn’t felt the strain of his muscles or the heat of his blood when he ran in a while. He missed the rush of the air as he leaped through the treetops. He suddenly thinks about the breeze of the wind when his mother took him fishing for the first time in that golden meadow; the warmth of the sun. His instincts told him; those are good things to do. He senses the presence of the gazelle, the girl, and all the others. He asked his instincts, if being around all these people will stop him from doing those good things. Thinking made him sleepy. The darkness all around him comes closer and laid over top of him closing his eyes.

Lucy Noor

“It has been wonderful getting to know Lucy and her writing style. She has made incredible progress with her writing throughout this semester, and I have been so amazed by how well she has been able to grasp writing concepts. Most of her writing we have looked at has focused on aspects of her life and the significant moments she wants people to know about. Our main goal has been organizing her writing and improving sentence structure so readers can get immersed in Lucy’s writing and life story. Lucy’s final product reflects how hard she has worked to improve both her writing and English since it is not her first language. I have been so impressed with Lucy’s beautiful descriptions and metaphors, and I think this piece is a perfect example of Lucy’s brilliance and skill.”

- Haley Steines

Light Upon Light

I have been called audacious, strong, smart and happy. I’m a person who worked hard to be successful. I always feel that I was born without luck. I have to work harder for what I want, but I’m really thankful for what I have and where I’m now. I’m studying at a university in the state of Wisconsin in the US. I never imagined myself studying in the United States. My biggest dream, when I was a kid was to go to Europe. That’s life, it changes your directions to places you never imagined it. When I entered the United States of America and I looked at the flag, that was the moment I decided to change myself. That was the moment I started from zero. Let’s start from the beginning.

One of the cities in Kurdistan is called Duhok and is one of the most beautiful places. It is surrounded by mountains and it has fantastic nature. In the city of Duhok, there was a married couple waiting for their second child. Their first child was a boy. They did not know the second baby's gender. They got everything white for the new baby. They were so excited for their second child and this beautiful couple were my parents. My mother is Olyaa, she was born in Fallujah, Iraq. I don’t know how to write about her, I can’t describe her. There is no word or sentence in any language that will describe my mother. There is not enough paper or ink in the world to write about her. She is full of love, patience, mercy and beauty. When people tell me that I look like her, I feel like they are giving me the world. I have never seen anyone like her.

My father has two names. His given name is Faez, but one of his uncles named him Antar. Antar is his nickname. My father is a real man. Many ladies were jealous of my mom. Even though he was married many women were running after him. My poor mom never got mad, she was so confident. Nobody in this world treats me as well as my father does. He trusts

me and makes me feel strong. I like when he says “ Nora I trust you and I know you won’t do anything that would make me sad or ashamed.” My name is Noor but he called me Noora. That’s just a little bit about my parents. Just like a drip from the ocean.

On October 3rd 2000, the beautiful couple had a little girl and the baby girl was me. They were so happy, especially my mom. She felt like god gave her the world. They didn’t know what to name me. My mom wanted to name me Nezha or Suzan ,but my father didn’t like it. My youngest aunt said “ let’s open the Quran (Muslim Holy book) and look for a name”. She opened three times, Surah al Noor came out. Then everyone agreed to name me Noor. It is a very beautiful name, and it means light. My mom always calls me “the light of my life.”

After a couple days my mother had a fever. She had to stay in hospital for a month without her baby girl. My aunts took care of me. My mother didn’t see me for a month. Can you imagine how hard it was for her after all the excitement she felt? My dad had a taxi at that time and that was the only job he had. During the same time my mother was in the hospital, my dad had an accident. He was fine, but his car was damaged. He lost his job. That was a really tough time. My mother got out of the hospital. My father didn’t have a job. We didn’t have any income.

Due to the lack of income, my parents were buying for me the cheapest milk. My mother couldn't breastfeed me because of her fever. That was really hard for her and for me. The baby needs a mother’s milk, because it is more natural than store milk or factory milk. According to what my mother told me, I was a really naughty baby. I was crying all the time. That’s kind of funny for me because knowing about how naughty I was, it just sounded funny. I also was a strong and smart baby. I started walking and talking at the age of 9 months. Everyone was so surprised, the nine month old baby was walking and talking. Just imagine how small I was. When my mother was telling me about my babyhood, I was so surprised and laughed a lot. Then I started thinking about my nutrition. Unfortunately, I didn’t have the best milk nor did my mother breastfeed me, but I was smart and strong. That means that sometimes the nutrient is not the problem but the environment. My parents, my aunties and uncles (from my father's side) loved me a lot. I was the first daughter and the first granddaughter in the family. I had female cousins from my mother's side, but my cousins from my father's side were male. I grew up with love, that was the best nutrition for my mind and my body.

There is one thing that everybody told me “ you were a super naughty baby.” The only person I listen to, is my mother. I was a troubled kid, but when my mother said something, I did so. My mother used to watch a TV show, the main character was named Lucy. She used to play with me and call me Lucy. Then, everyone started to call me Lucy. Now, I go by both names Lucy Noor. The funniest thing is that I have discovered that many of my relatives don't know my real or given name is Noor. They think Lucy is my given name. However, I love my childhood. I wish I never grew up. I didn't have toys, the best food or the best clothes, but I lived the best life. That was full of love and humbleness.

I was a troublemaker, but that was the best part. I grew up with my cousins, in one house. We were financially unstable even though my dad found a job. He wasn't getting a good salary. So, we had to rent a house with my oldest uncle. My oldest uncle had 4 boys and I had an older brother. His name is Murad. That's a total of five boys, and I was the only girl. Murad is two and half years older than me. He was the opposite of me. He was quiet, calm and timid. I was a spunk, trouble and not calm at all. I grew up with five boys, but I was so brave and tried everything even if it was dangerous versus my cousin and Murad were so scared to do anything scary. They would like to do dangerous or scary things, but they would be afraid of consequences. I personally think kids are the most beautiful thing in the world.

We used to play soccer together. I was the captain and gave orders. I can't remember how old I was, but I think around three or four years old. I still remember how I was telling them to stand where and what to do. We were so innocent, happy, loved and unified. We laughed, ate, drank and played together. We didn't know what was out there. We were living in our world, full of color. We never were mean to each other. We sat and stood together. We shared our candy and sweets. We all know that all kids around the world, candy is everything for them. When one of us got hurt it was like we all got hurt. If one of us got sick it was like we all got sick. It was like the equation where both sides have to be equals. All we wanted was candy, to play and be with each other and hold each other's hand forever. Can you imagine how fun that was? It was really hard for us, when we got to leave the house to a place of our own. Unfortunately, when you grow up, you will have an enemy called life. Life is like a test, it's full of challenges, it is like pass or fail. I never wanted to grow up and be an adult, but we don't always get what we want. We don't always pass. That is the challenge, it's pass or fail, from either one you will earn. If you fail you will earn experience and if you pass you will earn what you wanted.

Annika Rice

“Working with Annika this semester has been a pleasure. She has a passion not only for writing, but helping others. As a future educator, I believe Annika will serve as an excellent role model. During our ‘57 sessions she continually impressed me with her attention to detail and story telling abilities. We worked each week to find common ground in her writing and develop her personalized story as a camp counselor. I have all the confidence that Annika will make a difference in anything she pursues.”

- Rachel Hansen

My Name

Camp Magic

The moment I had waited six years for had finally arrived. At the prime age of ten, I knew that I wanted to be a camp counselor at Camp Nan a Bo Sho. I enjoyed every summer as a camper and spent every moment not at camp wishing I was there. When it was my time to be a Counselor in Training (CIT), I was ecstatic. It was my time to shine, my time to make a name for myself.

Camp Nan a Bo Sho put me in my element. Whenever I was there, it was like a weight was lifted off my shoulders. With the summer sunshine shining on my face, a campfire with s’mores and happy songs was ignited in my soul. I had a spring in my step, a bigger smile, and was free to be the real me. I was fortunate enough that my best friend and I could experience such a lovely place together every summer for a grand total of eight years.

Without a doubt, I can say that I have met some of the most remarkable people I know at Camp. The funniest person I know, the most wholesome person I know, and the most thoughtful person I know all crossed paths with me at my beloved Camp NABS. It was almost as if good people were drawn there.

I marvel at how beautiful such a moment, group of people and place could be. There is nothing more gorgeous than meeting people and thinking, *Hey, this person is worthy of my precious time and energy.* What I regard as exceptionally special is when that feeling is reciprocated. The bonds you make with someone at summer camp can never be broken... even if someday we all drift apart and become just memories and nostalgic feelings, those experiences are something no one can replace or forget.

Camp Nan a Bo Sho is the one place I found a group of people that are more than friends—they are my family away from my family and always will be. Being comfortable enough to be one hundred percent yourself around a whole group of people and them feeling the same way is the formula to being unconditionally happy. Summer camp is an undeniable factor in the equation that is my happiness. I firmly believe in camp magic because no place on this earth sparks as much joy and coincidentally brings together the people that make me happiest. Disney World has nothing on summer camp.

Apprehension

All the counselors had fake names that they earned by doing something memorable during their hiking trail. This added to the camp magic. As a camper, I idolized my counselors.

Puddle was my first counselor, and I adored her. I suffered from the disease that plagued all sleepaway camps (homesickness), and she helped me through it. She was so sweet and caring. When I became a counselor, I often thought to myself, “how can I be like Puddle?”

Pipes was my counselor during my second year. I confessed a secret to her that I was afflicted to share. She comforted me and made sure I was okay. Pipes was also hilarious, a genuinely wonderful counselor that would one day be the assistant to my boss.

Honk, I looked up to her because I witnessed her diffuse challenging encounters between my peers. I aspired to be as cool and collected as her. She also made me feel special, which I’ll never forget because, as a kid, I was generally quiet and would get swept aside in the chaos.

Puddle got her name because she woke up in a puddle when she was on her camping trip. Pipes got her name because she was a fantastic singer. Honk got her name because she had a cold during her trip and couldn’t stop coughing and sneezing. When I was a camper, we called her “Mama Goose.”

I always wanted to be a counselor to give other people the same experience I had at Camp: pure joy. People are crucial to the experience. Without the counselors, Camp would just be a place, not a home. Even during my first year as a homesick kid, I comprehended the magnitude of the effect that counselors had on their campers.

I waited six years to get my name. I spent a significant amount of time contemplating what I would do to get my name. My counselors told me not to force anything because, as a kid, you’d wish for specific names that sounded cool. I wanted my name to come to me naturally and

authentically. However, I was anxious due to being so excited and desperately wanting a name that embodied me. Only time would tell, and the wait was exhilarating.

Preparation

Trail pack was always my least favorite part of trail. It was necessary, of course, but tedious. After loading up the ginormous trail bags, getting on the bus was more rewarding than gathering up all the supplies. Oh, and of course, we didn't pack any marinara sauce, which was crucial for at least two of our meals. However, what really prepared us for our impending journey wasn't trail pack. It was Devotionals.

Devotionals—or more commonly known as “Devo”—were designed to bring campers together. We unpack who we are by discussing our deepest fears, our most significant flaws, our home lives, and all the other things that flow beneath the surface. When you first meet someone, you only know a drop of that person's ocean of what makes them who they are. This Devo, in particular, changed my life because it was when I found the courage to speak up about my mental health.

In the Chapel, my counselors hung up categories on the wall like education, ability/disability, sexuality, religion, body, family, ethnicity, gender identity, and more. They would read prompts like “what is your biggest insecurity?” and you would stand by the label on the wall that corresponded to the prompt. After everyone settled in their spot, anyone would be free to share why they chose that spot if they felt comfortable. Needless to say, it was a heavy and emotional night.

One of my fellow CITs was frequently abrasive and blatantly mean. I often found myself having little patience for her because I never understood how someone could act in such a way towards others. After this night, I realized it was because she was hurting on the inside. There was so much more than what met the eye. I believe she also learned a lot after listening to each of our stories.

Our counselors created such a comfortable environment that several people came out as part of the LGBTQ community. The love and comfortability that came from a group of almost strangers is something I still marvel at. Being in a place where you can be authentic and indubitably yourself is rare. Heartbreakingly, many campers do not get this feeling when they are at their house. To me, this is what makes Camp a home.

When I fell asleep that night, I was at peace. It was as if a couple puzzle pieces of my soul fell together in place. It was what I needed to prepare for who I always wanted to be and to finally be named.

“Bippity Bop Stippity Stop!”

The bus ride to our hiking destination was just as exhilarating as a field trip in elementary school. Although it was frowned upon, someone even got their name on the bus ride there. We gave it time to marinate, but Yankee was the first person to be named. There were lots of “Yankee for Sheriff” election signs up in people’s yards, and she kept saying, “Jane for Sheriff!” whenever she saw them.

The coolest name came next—Rapheeki, as in Rafiki from the *Lion King*. We built a fire, and he decided to take the char from the rocks and mark our foreheads, just as Rafiki did to Simba. There was no doubt that would be his name once his moment occurred. We all cheered because he was the first officially named CIT. It was like the stars aligned for him, and all of us were elated. My name actually was born around this moment; we just wouldn’t realize it until the next day.

I was deeply content. Fearful of the tics during our long hikes and the fish that would nibble my toes when it was my turn to filter water, but happy. I got to watch my dearest friends get named!

We worked hard setting up the tents and cooking our food from scratch. Unfortunately, we couldn’t try out the infamous “Gato Gato,” which was the ever-so-interesting combination of pasta with marinara sauce and peanut butter(?) because the other trail stole our portion of marinara sauce! My counselor Gerr claimed it was immaculate, but I was skeptical. One of my fellow CITs, Nara, actually got his name from his passion for the marinara sauce that we were missing out on.

That night we did a heart-warming Devotional. We all sat on the waterfront of our campsite and did the “affirmation” DEVO. We all took turns and said something nice and heart-warming about everyone in the circle. It took us two hours to complete. It made me cry that so many people had such genuine compliments to share with me.

One friend, Canns, told me that it made him so sad that someone as bright as me could feel so much pain. I’ll never forget that. It has stuck with me for the last three years because,

during that time in my life, I would often suffer in silence, and his words showed me that I was seen and that I was valued. One of the things that I loved most about Camp was that I always felt like I mattered. It was my place to make others feel seen and valued too. That night I went to bed with a smile on my face.

The next day we hiked several miles. When we stopped to make trail sandwiches—tortilla, peanut butter, jelly, salami, cheese, and trail mix—we contemplated names.

“What was that thing you said last night, Annika?”

My heart rate probably escalated. I stayed calm and collected, for sure.

“Oh!” I chewed my trail sandwich, in which I didn’t chicken out on *any* of the ingredients, “Well, when we were building a fire, we’re not supposed to use logs bigger than our forearm, and Mehki grabbed a log that was massive, so I said, ‘Bippity bop stippity stop!’”

“I think that’s it!” Everyone collectively nodded.

“Bip?” I was grinning. It was like my heart was on fire.

“That name is so perfect for you!”

“Yeah! Short and sweet, just like you!” Someone else chipped in.

I couldn’t stop smiling. I had dreamed of this moment for six years, and it finally arrived. The name came to me naturally, and it felt so *me*. Bip was me, and I was Bip. It felt like the world stopped around me just for this to happen.

I couldn’t wait to tell my best friend, Ava, who was on the other trail. It was rather devastating we couldn’t get our names together like we always dreamed of, but as the French say, *c’est la vie!*

Bubbly Bip

While being a camp counselor at Camp Nan a Bo Sho, I took on the roles of friend, co-worker, chef, mother, and teacher. As I watched my campers go out of their comfort zones each week, I felt so proud. I got the privilege of fostering a home at Camp for my campers, just as I had always dreamed.

As I continued my journey to be a counselor, I got the “Bubbly Bip” award. I always wanted to put my best self forward, and it felt good to know that my efforts made an impact on the camp community. I couldn’t be more thankful to have such a wonderful place to call home and have met such a lovely group of people.

Anissa Schoenberger

“During the course of this semester, Anissa has shown great determination to create the intricate story you're about to dive into. With their attention to detail and their elaborate world building, Anissa consistently showed up to writing lab appointments with new material--whether that was additional writing in the story, expanding upon documents dedicated to plot and character, and even designing a map of its fantasy world. Anissa has such a keen eye for detail and has taken pointers from the conversations we had during sessions above and beyond expectation, committing to storytelling despite our unfavorable pandemic circumstances. Enjoy their fantastic tale!”

- Theresa Yonash

The Mystery of Odron

| TWO YEARS PRIOR AT THE CAVE OF ODRON |

“Where is she? Where’s my mom!?” The young girl stood near ten other individuals. Neither one of them having the heart to tell her that her mom passed away. Whisked away by an unforeseen event. Everyone looked to the ground, extremely saddened by what happened. Nettie was everyone’s best friend. The one who even led the small country they were from, Uswon.

Uswon was once led by the one that kept the peace in the country, though when everything became too much for them, they passed it on. Almost none of the new residents of Uswon remember Amari being their leader. It was so long ago, all of the citizens who remembered either moved far away or sadly passed away.

“Carlyn, honey, your mother, she uh-” Even Amari, a great friend of Carlyn’s family couldn’t tell her. Amari felt like it was their fault. They let down the Moore family, so Amari lied. A vow that Amari had promised never to do, when they were ruling and when they passed their rulership on to a new hope. Though that’s what they did. They only hoped that no one told Carlyn that they were lying. “She sadly ran away. Her being a ruler was too much for her. She told me a couple days ago while we were planning to come here, that she was going to run. Though Nettie never told me that she was going to leave you.”

Carlyn started to cry even more and Amari just held her in their arms. Amari cried alongside Carlyn too. Soon everyone was crying and they joined into a huge group hug. One that seemed to last for an eternity, but in that moment everyone there needed it. If anything was to be kept the same in the country of Uswon, it was to be everyone’s friendship and their wish to keep Carlyn safe. After all she was the youngest.

| 2 YEARS LATER - THE HAPPENSTANCE |

Someone one day might look at the country of Uswon and think whatever came of that place. Well Amari can tell you. After that day where Nettie had passed, the world became gloomy. What was once a flourishing village and land, it eventually became one that if you didn't pass by quickly, a lot of terrible things would happen to you. Whether it be, being held for ransom, for murder, or just to kidnap, everyone knew to avoid the village. Afterall, it was overtaken by a crook, someone who tried to destroy everything that Amari and Nettie had worked to build. Someone who had a vendetta towards the two. Though this new ruler, no one had ever seen or heard of before, they only knew there was a new ruler because they started placing their own people around the village to destroy everything.

Past that day, everyone avoided the headquarters that once held the ruler. They were in fear that they would actually see Nettie running around the place being her old goofy self. While everyone avoided the building, Carlyn avoided it the most. Everyone else at least left their blessings at the front of the headquarters, Carlyn ran away almost immediately after her mother's death. She settled alongside Aspen. Aspen and Carlyn were the best of friends and the only one that stood by Carlyn the whole time. The other residents just wanted to move past and Carlyn didn't, she wanted to find her mother and Aspen joined her. No one has even heard from them in years.

Now Forrest and Astra, despite being twins, both led very different paths that led them to deal with their own adventures and almost never speak to each other. Forrest generally dealt with dark magic, taking from the unstable energy surrounding Uswon, Astra was generally dealing with light or green magic, taking from nature and the stable energy surrounding Uswon. Many of the residents believe that Forrest was the one to curse the adventuring party and essentially kill Nettie. With this many believe that Astra is the one to be able to find Nettie. Since Astra is the one that deals with the light magic, they believe that she is able to find where Nettie went or if she had even died. The pressure surrounding this led Astra to go into hiding where no one could find her and Forrest to go find the place with the most negative energy. No one has been able to find them in two years, they haven't even heard if they are safe.

August and Sawyer eventually settled in a nearby village, one that was far enough away to keep them safe, but close enough to be able to watch Uswon and know that everything would

be okay. Even though the two of them both knew nothing would be okay. August once was held for ransom where their twin sister had to rescue them. Sawyer, the twin sister, was almost held for ransom until Amari rescued them. It seemed Uswon had successfully fallen and there were no remnants of its former glory left.

The one who felt the most heartbreak happened to be Amari. They could not just let the place they ruled for years go to shambles. They worked hard to build that place up from nothing and strived to make it a place where everyone just had to visit once in their life. Though, now with their best friend passing away and Uswon falling apart to the new unknown leader. Amari had no idea what to do. Their life had already fallen apart the day that Nettie passed, and now it fell apart again. Amari didn't know if they should run or stay and try to keep the place safe. Deep down they knew that there was no point anymore. How could just one person keep a village safe after the new leader destroyed it? So Amari ran. Amari had no idea where to go or what they were doing. Eventually they found a house in the mountains. One that was complete with a farm and a house with semi-decent plumbing. That's where the story begins.

“Hello girlies, how are you doing?” Amari asked their animals. It was around six in the morning, just in time to feed the cows, goats, and chickens before going off to take their next adventure. The cows nuzzled up to their owner just like they had done every morning. Amari's bond with farm animals, really any animals at all, was astonishing. There was almost no getting to know Amari with the animals, it was almost as if they had already known them for their entire life. That was just Amari's gift, animals just knew they could trust them, it made getting eggs and milk from the animals that much easier.

With this morning's breakfast received, they went to fetch the mail. They were not expecting a ton, just the occasional letters from old friends asking how Amari was doing. Amari generally read them but never responded. They felt there was no point. What had to be said to them was already said. There was no point in repeating themselves. Though today there was a letter that stood out to them. A letter from someone they haven't heard from since the incident. A letter from Carlyn. Why would Carlyn be sending a letter?

Quickly getting into the house and setting everything down, Amari looked at the letter and just wondered. *Should I actually open this? What if it's fake?* Eventually against their better judgement, opened the letter.

Hello Amari,

I hope this letter finds you well. I haven't talked to you in awhile and I wanted to see how everything is going! It's been two years now since my mother disappeared and you're the first person I wanted to talk to since then. Aspen and I are doing well, we haven't made much progress since we left. We got stuck in a mental block for a while. We ventured and found a village and these nice villagers have been assisting us with resources we need and giving us a place to work. In return, we are helping them with daily tasks around the village and also gathering resources for them.

You may be wondering, why did I send this letter to you just to tell you about what has been happening. Well I need to tell you about something. Someone or something came to me in a dream and I just knew I had to reach out to you. I know you are stubborn, but you need to reach out to everyone. In order for us to find my mom, we all need to work together. I know you all may think she's dead, I have thought that too for quite a while, which stopped us venturing, but I just know that she's still alive. I just have a feeling.

I don't know where everyone has moved to or ended up at, but do please hurry. There's still a chance to save her.

With love,

Carlyn Moore

Amari scoffed at the end of the letter. Does Carlyn really believe that Amari would ever get everyone to join back? They moved to get away from Amari. They left Amari alone to try and fend for their village alone. As much as they wanted to burn the letter they received, they didn't. This was the first hearing from Carlyn in two years. How could anyone get rid of this letter? Amari put it on the kitchen table and started on some breakfast, fresh eggs and toast, a classic.

| ONE WEEK AGO - OUTSIDE THE VILLAGE OF ABRAR |

The dreams were starting to get to Carlyn. Each and every time she was awoken to cold sweats and her head pounding. Aspen was starting to get worried, it used to only happen once

every three months. Now it's happening almost every day. Aspen kept begging Carlyn to get some help, at least visit the village's medic. Carlyn kept denying, that was until last night.

Last night was different, all the night's before the dreams were about Nettie going away. Each time in a different way, one night was getting killed by magic, another was falling into the voidless pit. Last night however, seemed more like a message. Like Nettie was calling out to her, but just couldn't quite get there.

The dark color of the night surrounded all around Carlyn. Though there was a warm light coming from the right of her. Not knowing what to do, she went towards the light. Carlyn didn't know why, she knew never to go towards the light, but it seemed like it was calling to her. That she just had to go near it to see what was going on.

When Carlyn finally got close enough to the light to see through it, the color changed to a dark red. It seemed she was somewhere completely different than before. Correction, she knew it was somewhere new because Nettie was now in the room. Carlyn could see Nettie's mouth moving, but no sound was being made. Carlyn could tell that she was just repeating the same three words however. Get. The. Others. Well crap, how was she supposed to do that now?



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